

**“A skilled surgeon presiding at the birth of a new culture”:
Christopher Lasch on the Politics of Post-Industrial Society**

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Introduction: The Age of Fracture as a Crisis of Political Ideas:

Only when the descriptive writer triumphed over the ideologue did understanding struggle to the surface.¹

-Christopher Lasch, 1965

Christopher Lasch's intellectual career was a long search for the words to make sense of his time. He sought very much to be the descriptive writer in a time when past ideologies, past modes of political understanding and analysis had exhausted their ability to explain the realities of contemporary life. For Lasch, this loss of words was primarily a political problem. Political history since the early-nineteenth-century has been in fact and in imagination a conflict between conservatism and liberalism, or, more broadly, progressivism. Conservatism, understood in the Burkean sense as prioritizing order through the cultivation of tradition, stability, and continuity within existing institutions, confronted liberalism, or the left: the party of change and transformation. The left sought the liberation of individuals from the constraints of preference and prejudice, in search of a rationally ordered community. If it was this conscious self-recognition as ideological opponents that circumscribed the Western political imagination starting in roughly 1789, then it was this just this dynamic that Lasch saw unraveling across his intellectual career, from the 1960s to the 1990s.² Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight it appears now that much of Lasch's social and political thought revolved around what he would finally say in 1991: "the ideological distinctions between liberalism and conservatism no longer stand for

¹ Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 124.

² The common characterization of Lasch's political thought treats him as a left-wing critic of American liberalism, although very little has been written on his notion of the breakdown of liberalism and conservatism. See Andrew Hartmann, "Christopher Lasch: Critic of liberalism, historian of its discontents," *Rethinking History* 13 (2009): 499-519.

anything or define the lines of political debate. The uselessness of the old labels and the need for a reorientation of political ideas are beginning to be acknowledged.”³

Although this insight so often estranged Lasch from his contemporaries and led many to consider him the “black sheep” of his time, this essay argues that one of Lasch’s most important contributions to late-twentieth-century intellectual history was his discussion of the breakdown of liberalism and conservatism as coherent ideological narratives and as markers of political confrontation. Indeed, the last several decades of “postmodern,” or, to use Lasch’s terminology, “post-industrial” history have in fact seen the dissolution and fracturing of this historical imagination, the sense of history as a clash between conservatism and liberalism. As Tony Judt wrote in 2007,

For two centuries following the French Revolution, Western political life was dominated by a struggle pitting left against right: “progressives”—whether liberal or socialist—against their conservative opponents. Until recently these ideological frames of reference were still very much alive and determined the rhetoric if not the reality of public choice. But in the course of the past generation the terms of political exchange have altered beyond recognition....⁴

Such is the motive of re-situating Lasch as an essential thinker in late-twentieth-century intellectual life, one whose writings very much presaged Judt’s notion of the crisis of political ideas. Moreover, Lasch’s life-long and iconoclastic “reorientation of political ideas” was the effort of an intellectual seeking to navigate what he understood to be a historically transformative moment in United States history and will be the focus of this inquiry.

Intellectual history does not always present a linear progression, a process of steady accumulation in which thinkers and traditions build successively upon each other. Rather, there are distinct ruptures in time, conditioned by events, social processes, and transformations, that

³ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 22.

⁴ Tony Judt, “The Wrecking Ball of Innovation” in *When the Facts Change* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 307-308.

fundamentally alter the ways we organize our thoughts and perceive the world around ourselves. With this in mind, it would be difficult to exaggerate the degree to which Lasch thought of himself as living through such a moment of rupture. Indeed, we need only listen to the voice of the protagonist of his unpublished novel, *The Life and Times of a Libertine*, to understand Lasch's conception of his own moment and of his role therein as a critic: "I see myself then—I hope without illusions, with neither false modesty nor false pride—as a skilled surgeon presiding at the birth of a new culture."⁵ This "birth of a new culture" was for Lasch the result of the full absorption of daily life within the bureaucratic structures of post-industrial capitalism. It was this transformation, with enormous political and cultural ramifications, that Lasch struggled to dissect throughout his intellectual career.

It was first and foremost as a critic and analyst of post-industrial culture and society that Lasch would become one of the United States' most iconoclastic public intellectuals. Moreover, Lasch sourced the crisis of political ideas, the breakdown of conservatism and liberalism as coherent ideological markers, to the decades-long development of the United States into a post-industrial society. Historian J.D. Hoeverler provides the common distinction between an "industrial" and a "post-industrial" society as the transition from a predominantly manufacturing-based economy to a service-oriented one, a new social structure wherein the "service economy" becomes almost synonymous with the new economic order... organized around communications and the dissemination of knowledge."⁶ Hard-and-fast distinctions between an industrial and post-industrial society are, however, the obsessions of sociologists and social theorists. Indeed, Lasch's interest in the political and cultural dynamics of a post-industrial

⁵ Christopher Lasch, "The Life and Times of a Libertine," *The Baffler*, No. 20, 2012, Accessed March 1, 2016, <http://thebaffler.com/ancestors/life-and-times-of-a-libertine>.

⁶ J. David Hoeverler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 1-2.

United States was in many respects a critical response to one such attempts at theoretical overreach, namely the writings of the famed Harvard Sociologist, Daniel Bell. Lasch, by contrast, saw in the post-industrial turn a culmination of a fluid process of sophistication and rationalization. For Lasch, “post-industrial capitalism” was a rather amorphous phrase, beyond simply signifying the point at which the capitalist division of labor was obsolete given the transferring of substantial elements of the labor pool away from productive industries. By invoking “post-industrialism,” Lasch was referring to a broad array of processes, the effects of which he saw fully manifesting themselves across his life: the steady bureaucratization of American society, the incorporation of all aspects daily life within the industrial system, the full submersion of the individual within mass culture, and the rising phenomenon of “technologically obsolete” workers. Lasch’s notion of the exhaustion of once coherent nineteenth-century ideological narratives—Marxism, Liberalism, and Conservatism, for example—arose out of his obsession with these processes.

Daniel Rodgers’ recent history has made evident that Lasch’s career did indeed straddle such a transformative moment in United States intellectual history.⁷ However, this essay argues that Rodgers’ narrative the so-called “postmodern” turn is incomplete without a discussion, through Lasch, of the breakdown of nineteenth-century political ideas. That being said, Rodgers has nimbly captured the mutations in intellectual and political life that guided the country across the last third of the twentieth century, from roughly the early-1970s onwards. It was a period characterized by a general “fracturing” of ideas and of metaphors of society into smaller and smaller units of reference. While public discourse in the immediate postwar period sought to grasp the social whole and embed the individual and economic life within an entanglement of

⁷ Daniel Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

social metaphors, the 1970s and 1980s saw the unraveling of those discourses. Rodgers' general thesis is that "the axis of the regrouping in the last quarter of the century was a reformulation, in idea and imagination, of concepts of 'society.'"⁸ What was the content of this reformulation?

Across the intellectual field, Rodgers writes,

One heard less about society, history, and power and more about individuals, contingency, and choice. The importance of economic institutions gave way to notions of flexible and instantly acting markets. History was said to accelerate into a multitude of almost instantaneously accessible possibilities. Identities became fluid and elective. Ideas of power thinned out and receded. In political and institutional fact and in social imagination, the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s had been an era of consolidation. In the last quarter of the century, the dominant tendency of the age was toward disaggregation.⁹

Such is Rodgers' characterization of the changing terms of debate and discourse that bound together American intellectual life. New market theories, following the global recession of the 1970s, preached the autonomy of the private economic actor, unburdened by social webs and necessities. This dovetailed with the languages of poststructuralism and postmodernism that erupted out of comparative literature departments, nurtured by the latest trends in continental theory: hard and fast identities, conceiving of the individual as embedded in norms and history, gave way to "conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire."¹⁰ This seismic shift in United States intellectual history spanned the gamut of ideas, from historical consciousness to personal identity, from economic theory to the relationship between the individual and the community.

By re-centering Rodgers' narrative around Lasch, this paper argues that the "age of fracture" ought to be understood as part of a broader crisis and fracturing of political ideas such as liberalism and conservatism. Rodgers himself acknowledges that Lasch was an essential early

⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁹ Ibid, 5.

¹⁰ Ibid, 3.

interpreter of this process of “fracturing.” Lasch attributed this fracturing of discourses of the “social” to a “character crisis.” He argued that the modern American individual, drowning in the bureaucracies of post-industrial capitalism and uprooted by mass culture, disposed of a fundamentally altered personality structure.¹¹ We were supposedly now “therapeutic,” “narcissistic,” or “survivalist,” singly intent on achieving momentary psychological solace, and could therefore not conceive of a social world outside of ourselves. For Lasch, the therapeutic, survivalist self indicated the resurgence of an unbridled American individualism, which found a friendly home in the counter-cultural left of the 1970s and the return of free-market ideology in the 1980s. Although Rodgers is correct to dismiss such a single-minded explanation for the fracturing he describes, he does affirm that Lasch, as a primary interpreter (and vociferous critic) of this rupture, is likewise an essential thinker for making sense of this moment. Rodgers, regrettably, gives scant attention to Lasch beyond discussing the latter’s notion of a “character crisis.” However, Lasch’s psychoanalytic critiques and his interest in the mutations taken by modern individualism were part of a much larger body of political thought. Indeed, this essay will situate Lasch’s discussion of the “character crisis” back within his career-long reflection on the political mutations caused by the steady bureaucratization of the United States’ social and economic structures: the full flowering of post-industrial capitalism.

Rodgers’ downgrading of Lasch’s importance is in keeping with the latter’s often controversial reception in his own time. Lasch was a lonely observer of postwar American life. Indeed, to be a descriptive writer in a moment of transition is often to incur the wrath of one’s contemporaries. “I came off, as usual, a curmudgeon, a killjoy, full of bile and spleen,” Lasch remarked, regarding a 1993 article in the *San Francisco Examiner* that appeared a year before his

¹¹ Ibid, 6.

death from cancer.¹² If there is perhaps one point of agreement on the thought and criticism produced by Lasch between the 1960s and 1990s it is that of its particularly probing, contrarian character. Graduating from Harvard College in 1954, Lasch continued to Columbia for his PhD in history where he was a favorite of such scholars as Richard Hofstadter and William Leuchtenberg.¹³ Though he began his intellectual life as a historian, ultimately settling at the University of Rochester by 1970, Lasch would hardly confine himself to academic writing. Rather, he sought to fill the role of the generalist for whom each and every aspect of contemporary cultural and political life bore relation to the social whole. It was therefore in the public realm, as a social and cultural critic, that Lasch would gain national attention and often scorn. Indeed, Lasch's intellectual temperament bore witness to the idea that in order to truly observe and describe one's time, which he considered the essential functions of the intellectual in modern society, one must be alienated and estranged. In a particularly apt description, the historian David Courtwright calls him the "American Diogenes."¹⁴

Lasch's rabid pace of writing and his remarkable breadth of interest were the marks of a thinker seeking to dissect a fundamental transition in American social and cultural life. He was above all an essayist. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Lasch could never part from the essay as a written form. Appearing most frequently in *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *Partisan Review*, and *Salmagundi*, Lasch's essays covered such disparate subjects as the lives of early twentieth-century bohemian radicals, contemporary films and novels, the psychology of American individualism, and United States foreign policy. His essays revealed his broad and

¹² Blake, Casey and Christopher Phelps, "History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch," *Journal of American History* 80 (March 1994): 1332, Accessed November 10, 2015, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/224937549?accountid=10226>.

¹³ For biographical information on Lasch I have relied heavily upon: Eric Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010).

¹⁴David Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics In A Liberal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 195.

unique conception of the function of criticism. In Lasch's hand, the critical essay was foremost an act of description and dialogue through which he sought to illuminate his moment through a weaving together of the seemingly banal aspects of contemporary life. Lasch's 500-page magnum opus, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, compiled a diverse array of essays on topics ranging from the Boston school busing riots to Calvinist theology. In such works as *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*, Lasch attempted to diagnose the psychological effects of life in mass society. For example, Louis Malle's 1981 film, *My Dinner with Andre*, about a reunion of two old friends in New York, was in his view indicative of the survivalist mentality that life in post-industrial society enforced upon individuals. The merging of subject and object, spectator and spectacle, in modernist theater and mass sporting events were the public manifestations of the "narcissistic personality," the reigning psychopathology of post-industrial America. Lasch spared no aspect of American culture from critical consideration. However, behind his incisive writings was a heartfelt empathy, a desire to bring into public consciousness what he saw as the increasingly anarchic quality of daily life, and the lingering impression that his fellow intellectuals lacked the language to truly apprehend their time. "We deplore or laugh at those who try to arm themselves against the apocalypse," Lasch wrote in his 1984 book *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, "but we arm ourselves emotionally against the onslaught of everyday life."¹⁵

It was out of these social and cultural mutations, sourced to the post-industrial turn, that Lasch lost faith in the political ideologies and alignments of his time. For Lasch, the fracturing of discourses of the social, whether in the hyper-individualism of the counter-cultural left or in the return of market ideology under Reaganite pseudo-conservatism, revealed that prevailing modes

¹⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1984), 95.

of political discourse had expended their capacity to serve as guides for constructive action. While the United States' social structure decayed across the 1970s and 1980s, right and left obsessed over the possibilities of limitless technological change and disruption and the hope of limitless self-exploration and freedom from social bonds. Moreover, an essential context for Lasch's departure from the political spectrum was his lament over what Howard Brick has termed "The Great Reversal" of the so-called "post-capitalist" vision in American thought.¹⁶

Always a dissenter, Lasch's career was a long search for what he considered a viable radical tradition, beyond liberalism and conservatism. Indeed, what he regretted most was what he considered the fracturing of left-wing political ideas. This frustration was the basis of his opposition to the counter-cultural left of the so-called "Culture Wars," as the debates over gender and sexual identity and school curricula have become known in the American political lexicon. The rise of the counter-cultural left bore witness, according to Lasch, to the general fragmentation of the left and progressivism as a whole. "What if we reject," he wrote in the preface to *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, "the premise behind the whole discussion, that industrialism fosters political and economic progress? What if we reject the equation of industrialism with democracy and start instead from the premise that large-scale industrial production undermines local institutions of self-government, weakens the party system, and discourages popular initiative?"¹⁷ This was the core sentiment animating Lasch's iconoclastic antimodern stance that flowered from the late 1970s onwards. Offering a broad critique of the idea of historical progress, Lasch sought a distinctively populist and neo-luddite direction for radical politics.

¹⁶ Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 220.

¹⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 41.

My discussion of Lasch's dismissal of the political and ideological spectrum begins with his disillusioning experience as a 1960s radical left-wing intellectual. During those formative years, between the late-1960s and mid-1970s, Lasch's faith in the left was first unsettled, setting of his lifelong search for a new politics. Lasch's understanding of the post-industrial turn as presenting a crisis in the left as a historical and political phenomenon will be the subject of the first chapter of this essay. This conditioned Lasch's departure from the full spectrum of American intellectual life starting in the 1970s, which will be the subject of chapter two. This chapter explores Lasch's critiques of both the cultural radicalism of the left and the resurgent conservative movement, situating the "character crisis" and Lasch's sense of the collapse of legitimate authority within his broader understanding of the crisis of political ideas. Finally, in the third chapter, I will discuss the intellectual tradition, beyond liberalism and conservatism, which Lasch hoped to cultivate. He sought a politics that would part from the progressive ideologies of the nineteenth-century, combining a neo-luddite opposition to the supposedly inexorable demands of the industrial division of labor and technological development and a populist aversion to bureaucratic centralism and cultural radicalism.

I. Post-Industrial Society and The End of the Left:

The history of American radicalism, in any case, is largely a history of failure...Radicalism in the United States has no great triumphs to record; but the sooner we begin to understand why this should be so, the sooner we will be able to change it.¹⁸

-Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*, 1969

Lasch's understanding of the exhaustion of political ideas began in the aftermath and very much in the shadow of the events of 1968. That year saw the transatlantic climax of New Left radicalism, which provided the language and symbols for the counter-cultural left that Lasch would oppose throughout his career. Likewise, that year saw the beginning of a long period of reaction and subsequent invocations of "silent" majorities by the right. "Why do we find ourselves," Lasch asked in his 1969 book, *The Agony of the American Left*, "in an unprecedented crisis in our history, without a program for change?"¹⁹ Lasch's experience in those trying years, between roughly 1968 and 1973, lead him to question the meaning, if not even the existence, of the left. He came to realize that the left was unsettled primarily by the transformation of the United States into a post-industrial society. That the post-industrial turn spelled the obsolescence of radical opposition—the need to replace capitalist industrialism by a socially organized system of production—as Lasch's primary interlocutor, Daniel Bell, suggested was a prospect that the Lasch found absurd. Rather, Lasch came to realize that the ideological make-up of radical opposition, as inherited from the nineteenth-century, was entirely untenable in the post-industrial world, therefore demanding a major intellectual renovation.

Lasch's sense of the fracturing of the left in post-industrial society was, ironically, a radical re-reading of Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in*

¹⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), viii-ix.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, vii.

the Fifties.²⁰ Attempting to grasp the significance of “the social changes in the America of the fifties...a decade marked by extraordinary changes in the class structure, particularly in the growth of the white-collar class and the spread of suburbia; by the ‘forced’ expansion of the economy, which belied earlier predictions of stagnation; by the creation of a permanent military establishment and a bedrock defense economy,”²¹ Bell offered his own understanding of the political significance of the post-industrial turn. What Bell was advancing was a supposed divorce of “ideology” from politics. “Ideology,” as an “all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality...a set of beliefs, infused with passion” that “seeks to transform the whole of a way of life,” “ideology,” as “the conversion of ideas into social levers,” had ended.²² By declaring the end of “ideology,” Bell was offering a eulogy for radical political ideas such as Marxism, whose unity of theory and practice proved entirely untenable in a complex, bureaucratic world. More broadly, by declaring the “end of ideology,” Bell meant that the possibility for a full eclipse of capitalism had become impossible, perhaps even undesirable. He wrote,

few serious minds believe any longer that one can set down “blueprints” and through “social engineering” bring about a new utopia of social harmony. At the same time, the older “counter-beliefs” have lost their intellectual force as well. Few “classic” liberals insist that the State should play no role in the economy, and few serious conservatives, at least in England and on the continent, believe that the Welfare State is “the road to serfdom.” In the Western world, therefore, there is today a rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues: the acceptance of a Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism. In that sense, too, the ideological age had ended.²³

²⁰ See Dennis Wrong, *The Modern Condition: Essays At Century's End* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 192-193. Speaking of the similarities between Bell's “End of Ideology” thesis and Lasch's 1991 book *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, Wrong states: “Although he may not appreciate the comparison, there are striking similarities between Lasch's general argument and that of Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology* nearly forty years ago... Bell may have overestimated the stability of the transitory consensus of the 1950's and failed fully to anticipate the brief revival of radicalism in the 1960's, but he was right about the long-run trend.” Likewise, see John Summers' article, “Daniel Bell and *The End of Ideology*” from the Spring 2011 issue of *Dissent Magazine* for his reflections on the lingering influence of Daniel Bell's *End of Ideology* and his analysis of the similarities and differences between Lasch's and Bell's thought.

²¹ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 13.

²² *Ibid*, 400

²³ *Ibid*, 402-403.

According to Bell, the development of the United States into a post-industrial society meant that the comforting political assurances of “the ideological age” had expended their capacity to legitimately explain contemporary political life. The idea of a “new utopia of social harmony,” the telos of the left since 1789, was debunked not only by the catastrophic events of WWI, WWII, and the Holocaust, but also by the ability of western societies to reform themselves. The explosive economic growth of the immediate postwar years, which ushered in a new economic structure decentered from productive industries and increasingly reliant on the services sector, communications, and consumption, had essentially provoked a rush to the political center across the post-industrial world. We had entered into an age of technique and technicity. Although capitalism needed to be accepted for its efficiency, the increasing sophistication of the country’s social structure suggested that the managerial and knowledge-producing classes, as opposed to the self-interested bourgeoisie, would increasingly wield power. Bell would continue this argument in his 1973 work, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, describing a new form of social organization wherein it would be the “new class” of experts, managers, and technicians who would form the political elite—an elite that was, by its very nature, supposedly non-ideological. What was needed was calm, well-tempered management, the acceptance of welfare reforms, a mixed-market economy, and the institutionalization of labor representation. In short, capitalism’s ability to effectively organize the distribution of goods and services needed to be pragmatically accepted, albeit with the intervention of the state.

The explosions of the 1960s entirely debunked Bell’s understanding of the “end of ideology,” correctly understood by radicals like Lasch as a eulogy for politics as such. As Bell’s book was first going to print in 1960, the momentary calm that had settled over American political life in the late 1950s was itself beginning to give way to a new period of political unrest.

Less than a decade later, the country was engulfed in protest and its supposedly durable political structures seemed on the verge of collapse as student protesters occupied universities across the country and as riots engulfed the nation's cities from Detroit and Newark to Los Angeles. Against the pragmatic liberalism taken up by the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies and exhorted by Bell and a wide range of other intellectuals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and John Kenneth Galbraith, the New Left formed in the 1960s. For this generation, coming of age in the late-1950s and 1960s, the liberal consensus appeared overly reliant on alienating bureaucratic management, imperialistic in its waging of a global Cold War, suicidal in its acceptance of nuclear armaments as a defense policy, and overly cautious in its efforts to roll back the segregation and structural inequalities facing African-Americans. Groups such as the Students for a Democratic Society, whose "Port Huron Statement" is often seen as the founding document of the New Left, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers, and a host of Marxist and Third World inspired revolutionary organizations bore witness to a new period of left-wing militancy.²⁴

For Lasch, the rise and fall of the New Left bore witness to two facts: that there was a deep need for radical politics and that, paradoxically, radicalism found itself in a state of drift and crisis. Even though his turn to radicalism coincided with the formation of the New Left, Lasch was primed to look on the new movement with suspicion. Partially, this is due to biographical reasons. Born in 1932, Lasch came of age in what Irving Howe referred to as the "age of conformity."²⁵ Lasch gained political consciousness in the 1950s, when the possibility of radical change seemed hopeless in the stultifying climate of the early Cold War and in the

²⁴ Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 222-236.

²⁵ See Irving Howe, "The Age of Conformity" in *Steady Work: Essays In the Politics of Democratic Radicalism, 1953-1966* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1966).

aftermath of the full-disclosure of the crimes of Stalinism. He judged with suspicion those elements of the New Left that relied too heavily upon the revolutionary dogma of the past. Likewise, he criticized those movements whose program, relying on what he considered symbolic and cultural forms of revolution, revealed a therapeutic form of revolt. American radicalism, Lasch lamented in his 1965 book *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type*, tended to betray its psychological origins by devolving into a “religion of experience,” a personal revolt against bourgeois culture.²⁶ Nevertheless, Lasch was unabashedly a radical by the mid-1960s.

More tellingly, however, Lasch was suspicious of many elements of the New Left because he was keenly aware of the impact of the post-industrial turn. One of the new radicals in revolt against the “end of ideology,” Lasch reflected in 1969,

It is clear now that the years of the cold-war consensus were only an interlude, a period of brief political quiescence marking the end of one stage of capitalist development and the beginning of another. The political issues and alignments of industrial society, the issues that dominated American politics from the end of the nineteenth century to the Second World War, have indeed become obsolescent. But we can see now that commentators of the fifties and early sixties made the mistake of equating the obsolescence of certain political issues, peculiar to industrial society, with the obsolescence of all politics. Post-industrial society, however, generates new tensions peculiar to itself. It contains sources of conflict which cannot be divorced from the nature of the system; and these in turn give rise to a revival of ideology—that is, to political arguments in which both sides do not agree on the same premises.²⁷

Lasch accepted that the post-industrial turn had fundamentally destabilized the political alignments that had characterized American political life since the nineteenth century, but he would not accept Bell’s contention that the social transformation entailed the end of “politics” as such. The problem, according to Lasch, was nevertheless a historical one. The bureaucratization of American life and the transition from a predominantly industrial to a post-industrial economy destroyed the classical left, but not the necessity for radical politics.

²⁶ See Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

²⁷ Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*, 174

Lasch's 1969 book, *The Agony of the American Left*, was therefore a radical re-reading of *The End of Ideology*. Lasch offered neither an embrace of political centrism nor a tacit acceptance of capitalism, but an obituary for the left as presently constituted. The root of Lasch's skepticism arose from his realization that, because of the increasing sophistication of the United States' social structure, the mass-based radical movements of the early twentieth century had ceased to exist. He lamented, "the deeper explanation of the present crisis of radicalism... lies in events that happened in the early part of this century. It lies in the collapse of mass-based radical movements which grew for a time and then aborted: populism, socialism, and black nationalism."²⁸ These movements steadily acclimated themselves to the industrial system. A broad-based socialism, Lasch writes, was incorporated into that system, and hence neutralized, through the accommodation of large labor organizations by the welfare state. Likewise, the absorption of agricultural production into the capitalist market and the expansion of the nation's large metropolises had destroyed the populist movement, which could have been the basis for a broad-based rejection of industrialism. The steady rationalization of economic activity, the incorporation into the industrial system of all aspects of cultural and economic life, fractured the mass radical movements that characterized early twentieth century American politics. These were the forces that had given the birth to what Lasch's mentor, Richard Hofstadter, deemed the great "age of reform" that defined American politics from the 1890s through the 1940s.²⁹

If Lasch read these transformations, the steady acculturation into bureaucratic-industrial life by former reservoirs of dissent, as something of an "end of ideology" it was in the negative and not the positive sense. He did not see these developments as necessitating the rule of management and technique, with the pragmatic acceptance of capitalism. Rather, the spread of

²⁸ Ibid, viii.

²⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

bureaucratic modes of organization—the crux of the problem in Lasch’s mind—crowded out the ability to politically apprehend social problems. As *The Agony of the American Left* went to press in 1969, the high tide of New Left radicalism appeared to Lasch to have passed and the book’s essays and title reveal that Lasch was already in critical engagement with his fellow radicals.

Moreover, Lasch blamed what he saw as an increasingly fragmented left for failing to capitalize on the protests and instabilities that shook the country during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The mass-based radical movements that had prospered in the opening decades of the twentieth-century—populism, socialism, and black nationalism—splintered into a panoply of various interest groups and movements: student organizations, a variety of socialist cells, groups for women’s liberation, movements for black power, and the “counter-culture.” Though these movements revealed that Americans were rejecting the “end of ideology” and the consensus politics that surrounded it, their disorganized and fractured nature betrayed their inability to form a coherent opposition. It was this failure that would propel Lasch’s interest in the political and cultural dynamics of the post-industrial turn. Reflecting in 1969 on the tumultuous years just past, Lasch wrote, “the experience of the New Left already refutes one of its principal tenants, that a revolutionary movement has no need of theory because theory will spring spontaneously out of the daily struggles of the movement.”³⁰

Lasch therefore turned his attention to the “post-industrial” problem out of his desire to explain the critical situation in which the left found itself. Moreover, if Bell had failed to advance a proper conception of the significance of the post-industrial turn, it was Lasch who would attempt a more thorough description of the new ground. Indeed, the specter of post-industrialism hangs over much of Lasch’s thought from the late-1960s onwards. An awareness of the new

³⁰ Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*, 212.

ground and the limitations imposed by these social transformations was essential, according to Lasch, in order for the left to properly organize an oppositional movement. Speaking of Bell's *The End of Ideology*, Lasch wrote in 1973, "this work...is full of insights that remain to be absorbed and put to full use—insights, indeed, which in many cases remain even to be understood."³¹

Despite his insistence that the United States' emergence as a post-industrial society was an enormous transformation, Lasch found Bell's understanding of it lacking in coherence. Although he was fully aware that the idea of the working class as a revolutionary group was a figment of the intellectual's imagination, Lasch came increasingly to rely upon the neo-Marxist tradition in the early 1970s. Lasch therefore found Bell's contention that the post-industrial turn presented the eclipse of ideological, self-interested politics absurd. In a growing intellectual dialogue between the two thinkers, Lasch wrote a biting review of Bell's 1973 book, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.³² Paraphrasing Bell's argument, Lasch stated, "the central features of this new society are usually seen to be the ascendancy of technique, the subordination of the market to bureaucratic controls, and the growing influence of the scientific and technical elite."³³ Lasch found Bell's contention that the non-ideological "new class" could increasingly wield political power, as opposed to the interested rule of the bourgeoisie, lacking in any evidence. "Bell's concept of post-industrial society lacks any theoretical rigor," Lasch concluded, "it consists of little more than a series of astonishingly casual assertions, themselves

³¹ Christopher Lasch, "On Richard Hofstadter," *The New York Review of Books*, March 8, 1973, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/articles/1973/03/08/on-richard-hofstadter/#fn-16>.

³² See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³³ Christopher Lasch, "Take Me To Your Leader," *The New York Review of Books*, October 18, 1973, accessed October 28, 2015, www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1973/oct/18/take-me-to-your-leader/?pagination=false&printpage=true.

imprecise and often contradictory. The central terms of the argument—meritocracy, the ‘technical elite,’ the subordination of economics to politics—are so slippery that they elude close analysis.”³⁴ What Lasch saw coalescing in Bell’s argument was the political justification of bureaucratic management and expertise, covering what was nevertheless the maintenance of capitalist social relations.

Perhaps the only point where Lasch would agree with Bell was the idea that the post-industrial turn presented a crisis for anti-capitalist politics. Paradoxically, this occurred just at the moment when capitalism had proven itself to be anachronistic by the transferring of large portions of the labor pool away from productive industries. Lasch concluded in *The Agony of The American Left* that “the United States is a society in which capitalism itself, by solving the problem of capital accumulation, has created the material conditions for a humane and democratic socialism, but in which the consciousness of alternatives to capitalism, once so pervasive, has almost faded from memory.”³⁵ The paradox was that a post-industrial United States had exhausted the need for the capitalist division of labor while fostering the illusion that no such transcendence was possible or would occur. This for Lasch was the true, negative meaning of the “end of ideology.” It was in light of this contradiction that Lasch would depart from the entire political and ideological spectrum in the 1970s and 1980s. The fracturing of the anti-capitalist left set off his search for a new, antimodern politics.

Lasch’s negative conception of the post-industrial turn, as spelling a crisis of the left, is evident in his own attempt to theorize the new ground. In 1972, Lasch established his own

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*, 212.

position in the essay “Toward a Theory of Post-Industrial Society.”³⁶ On the one hand, Lasch recapitulated the positive prognosis of the transition to a post-industrial society, saying that the social structure distinguishes itself as “the point where scarcity is no longer a major social problem—that is, when the industrial system has developed the capacity to satisfy all basic human needs.”³⁷ Lasch provided first a summary of the key institutions such as education and military expenditure and the new classes that make up the new social structure. Describing the countries’ changing social make-up, Lasch saw a declining but still important industrial working class, a growing “white collar proletariat” of office workers, an increasingly irrelevant classical middle class, and an expanding “lumpenproletariat” of technologically obsolete workers. Above these developments, a “new class” of managers and technicians, commanding the welfare state and multinational corporations, held political and economic power.

Resulting from the post-industrial turn, Lasch realized, was a crisis of specifically left-wing political ideas. Indeed, what Lasch spends the majority of the essay discussing is the political dynamics of this new ground, which revealed broadly a trend towards the depoliticization of social problems. First, he notes that “post-industrial society contains many mechanisms that inhibit the political expression of underlying social conflict—that is, prevent those conflicts from assuming a political form.”³⁸ In other words, internal to the new social structure was the trend towards depoliticization: “the tendency of political grievances to present themselves as personal grievances...the substitution of psychology for politics, and the pervasiveness of the managerial mode of thought help prevent conflicts from coming to the

³⁶ Christopher Lasch, “Towards a Theory of Post-Industrial Society” in *Politics in the Post-Welfare State: Responses to the New Individualism*, ed. M. Donald Hancock and Gideon Sjoberg. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 36-50.

³⁷ Ibid, 36.

³⁸ Ibid, 46.

surface and contribute to the illusion that ideology has exhausted itself.”³⁹ Endemic to post-industrial society therefore was a crisis of politics and political ideas. The new setting created the impression that political confrontation was a thing of the past: it deferred political questions to the intervention of the “new class” of managers and experts and it fostered the illusion that “cultural politics” was the primary content of political life. Over and above these issues, however, was the still glaring contradiction that the capitalist system of production and distribution had outlasted its necessity, but seemed durable and necessary: “for most people, post-industrial capitalism appears to represent the furthest limits of social development.”⁴⁰ Political consciousness fractured in post-industrial society, Lasch regretted. It was this dynamic more than anything that led, in his view, to the splintering of the left among a variety of separate interest groups, spelling the extinction of the mass-based radical movements so characteristic of early twentieth century American politics. Unmoored by the increasing sophistication of the United States’ social structure, the left, Lasch argued, found itself in crisis by the early-1970s.

Lasch reservations about the state of the left in the early-1970s would grow into the early stages of his departure from the political and ideological spectrum. Indeed, the critical turning point in Lasch’s intellectual development were the years following the high-water mark of New Left radicalism in the late 1960s. Indicative of Lasch’s drift was the essay, “Is Revolution Obsolete?” where he began,

Probably no other word has been more absurdly inflated by the debasement of political language than ‘revolution.’ Even if we eliminate the more obviously fraudulent uses—in which its appearance alerts us precisely to the absence of important change (‘revolutionary new styles in swimsuits’; ‘revolutionary advances in pollution control’)—we are still left with many different kinds of counterfeit. Such phrases as “the world-wide revolution of modernization,” such allegations as that ‘in advanced industrial societies,

³⁹ Ibid, 46.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 46.

permanent revolution is a fact' deceive us doubly; first by assimilating the idea of revolution to the category of any 'unintended, incoherent change' extending over a long period of time, and second by prejudging an important issue about which it is essential to make no *a priori* assumptions at all: Are modern times really revolutionary? Or is modern society in some ways remarkably resistant to change?⁴¹

Lasch realized that "progressive" spirit, the domain of the left since the late eighteenth-century, had become a constitutive element of post-industrial society. This was best exemplified by the rabid pace of "modernization," a politically neutralized idea of progressivism that subordinated all aspects of daily life to the horrors of the capitalist division of labor, technological change, and bureaucratic organization.

The left, Lasch realized, found itself in a state of vertigo: in a society of "revolution," what did "revolution" mean for the left? Indeed, the ostensibly "conservative" forces of society, Lasch realized were the primary advocates of change. "In our own time," Lasch continued,

the ruling class has broken the last ties to its own cultural traditions and has imposed on society a technological anticulture characterized by its ruthless disregard for the past. The agent of the new anticulture is the bulldozer, which destroys familiar landmarks, liquidates entire communities, and breaks down every form of continuity. Under these conditions the idea of revolution as a sharp, sudden, and total break with the past loses the meaning it had in societies on which, for all their restless movement, the past still lay as a dead weight. "Revolution" today may represent, among other things, the only hope of preserving what is worth preserving from the past, including man's natural habitat itself; but if that is the case, it is time that the nineteenth-century idea of revolution is drastically revised or abandoned altogether.⁴²

The left was no longer the party of "revolution." Yes, as the party of dissent, it implicitly relied upon some concept of "revolution," or a fundamental break from present social relations.

However, the left's monopoly on change and progressivism had been coopted by the ruling "new class" whose "technological anticulture" dominated political life across the post-industrial world.

Lasch's "reorientation of political ideas" arises out of this blurring of historical identities.

⁴¹ Christopher Lasch, "Is Revolution Obsolete?" in *The World of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 103.

⁴² *Ibid*, 118.

Lasch's awareness of the crisis of the left in post-industrial society is even more evident through a consideration of the thinkers to whom he would turn starting in the 1970s. Most indicative of Lasch's drift from the left was his attraction to the coterie of German philosophers and theorists known as the Frankfurt School.⁴³ That the intellectual tradition to which he would turn was a group of predominantly Jewish émigrés, who, fleeing the Nazi regime in the 1930s, would find themselves in a state of uneasy exile in a strange United States, gives one an indication of the deep sense of disillusionment that Lasch found himself in by the early 1970s.

What Lasch found attractive in this group's thought was their philosophical critique of the left's historic association with modernization and "modernity." More broadly, these thinkers realized that the faith in man's rational mastery of his own nature and the natural world around him were the primary philosophical underpinnings of capitalism. Coalescing as a coherent intellectual movement in the 1930s, the group's thinkers predicted nothing short of the breakdown of the Enlightenment tradition in post-industrial, or state capitalistic society. Such was the subject of the school's central text, and one of the works that would exert the greatest influence on Lasch: *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.⁴⁴ The self-implosion of the Enlightenment was to be found in the degradation of reason as transcendental consciousness into technique and managerial efficiency,

Reason as the transcendental, supra-individual self contains the idea of a free coexistence in which human beings organize themselves to form the universal subject and resolve the conflict between pure and empirical reason in the conscious solidarity of the whole. The whole represents the idea of true universality, utopia. At the same time, however, reason is the agency of calculating thought, which arranged the world for the purposes of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation. The true nature of the schematism which externally coordinates the universal and the particular, the concept and the individual case, finally turns out, in current

⁴³ For a history of the Frankfurt School, see Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Eric Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 225.

science, to be the interest of industrial society. Being is apprehended in terms of manipulation and administration.⁴⁵

It was this dual nature of reason, as both transcendental consciousness and calculating thought, which contained the driving cause of the Enlightenment's self-destruction in industrial society. The fragmented nature of industrial society, the rationalization of work and thought into separate and distinct tasks, effectively crowds out the liberating aspects of reason. What Lasch would embrace in the idea of Enlightenment, the search for the "supraindividual self [containing] the idea of a free existence in which human beings organize themselves," contains nevertheless the germ of its own collapse into reason conceived as calculation, technique, and self-interest. The locus of this degradation, Adorno and Horkheimer concluded, was to be found in the rise of state capitalism, a social structure very similar to Lasch's conception of post-industrial society.⁴⁶ The philosophical critique of the Enlightenment that Lasch inherited from these thinkers was more broadly an indictment of the left and the progressive conception of history that had buttressed left-wing politics since the nineteenth century. Moreover, Lasch realized that the failure and self-destruction of the Enlightenment entailed likewise a crisis of the political movement the Enlightenment gave birth to: the left.

Beginning with the publication of *The Agony of the American Left* in 1969, Lasch came to realize that the left was in a state of drift and crisis. He located the crisis of the left to the United States' emergence as a post-industrial society, which had destroyed the mass-based radical movements characteristic of the early-twentieth-century. This likewise fueled his interest in such Frankfurt School theorists as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer from whom Lasch came to understand the breakdown of the left as part of a broader eclipse of the Enlightenment,

⁴⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.), 65.

⁴⁶ See Friedrich Pollock, "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations" in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 71-94.

modernist tradition. This experience of disillusionment, arising from his reflections on the political dynamics of a post-industrial United States, would lead Lasch to depart from the ideological spectrum across the last two decades of his life. Lastly, Lasch's understanding of the collapse of the Enlightenment would inform his distinctively antimodern politics that flowered from the late-1970s onwards.

I. The Politics of Anticulture: Disorder as Order and Adaptation as Radicalism

One of the most important developments of recent years is that the ruling class in advanced countries has largely outgrown its earlier dependence on general culture and a unified worldview and relies instead on an instrumental culture resting its claims to legitimacy, not on the elaboration of a world view that purports to explain the meaning of life, but purely on its capacity to solve technological problems and thereby to enlarge the supply of material goods.⁴⁷

-Christopher Lasch, 1973

Isolated and without a broader intellectual and political movement, Lasch set himself to social and cultural criticism from the mid-1970s onwards. The portrait of American society that he developed, and one he held for the remainder of his life, was of a country in a downward spiral of social decay. American cities were collapsing under the weight of economic recession and the flight to the suburbs. Technological change and deindustrialization had resulted in a swelling number of discontented, "technologically obsolete workers." Any semblance of what he would consider a common culture, built around enduring and participatory traditions and institutions, was leveled by the increasing dominance of mass culture. Indeed, post-industrial capitalism was eviscerating the institutions undergirding American society. The family, the place where young Americans ideally first interact with a form of legitimate authority, found itself in a neutered state as the social stability that buttressed it ceased to exist in a world of constant change and "modernization."

⁴⁷ Christopher Lasch, "Is Revolution Obsolete?" in *The World of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 109.

It was the political unreality that abetted such a situation that Lasch failed to accept and understand. Left-wing radicalism, following its halcyon days in the late-1960s, had become in his view simply a “counter-cultural” revolt against an increasingly anachronistic bourgeois culture. With the advent of the so-called “Culture Wars,” the left’s vision of fostering collective action towards a genuinely democratic polity had become simply a politics of therapeutic individualism that sought to adapt the individual to the maelstrom of post-industrial capitalism. To even speak of a conservative revival was likewise absurd, in Lasch’s opinion. The ruling elite founded legitimacy quite simply on its ability to “enlarge the supply of material goods.” This was the weather vane that dictated the fates of American politicians. Conservatism, a politics that hitherto sought the preservation of order and stability through the cultivation of tradition and a unified “world-view” within enduring institutions, was groundless. It cannibalized those very same institutions through the return of free-market ideology in the Reagan years and the dream of permanent technological change and disruption. Whether of the left or right, Lasch abhorred the politics of anticulture, which offered in his view no hope of cultivating a deep and lasting community among individuals.

Lasch’s departure from the left arose primarily out of his reflections on contemporary American individualism. For Lasch, the left’s urge to make the “personal” into a “political” question revealed a retreat from what he considered genuinely critical politics. Lasch had long been interested in the cultural inclinations of American radicals. Indeed, the 1965 book that first catapulted Lasch into the public eye, *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type*, was a meditation on the tendency of American radicalism to confuse the “personal” and the “political.” The all-encompassing nature of social institutions and bureaucracies, coupled with the left’s failure to structurally transform social relations, led to what was in his view the

inversion of political radicalism as a form of lifestyle. For their cultural inclinations, the bohemians of the 1910s and the counter-cultural movements of the 1970s betrayed the fact that no substantive critique of society was possible. Rather, cultural radicalism showed simply a desire to escape from the stultifying cultural climate of the bourgeois family and dominant modes of cultural conduct, which had lost their power of attraction in mass society.

Paradoxically, those very symbolic revolts, the “liberationist” tendencies of radicals, were manifestations of bourgeois individualism itself in its supposedly decadent stage, without the genuinely utopian inclinations inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century conceptions of individualism. Lasch picked up this line of argument in his 1974 collection of essays, *The World of Nations*. “The revolt against capitalism, racism, and the oppression of women becomes identified with a revolt against culture,” Lasch lamented, “or worse, the revolt against culture becomes a substitute for the revolt against capitalism, racism, and sexual exploitation.”⁴⁸

Dismayed by the drift of the New Left, Lasch came to understand these mutations in American individualism as part of a broader historical shift in the formation of personality, abetted by the shattering of cultural unity in post-industrial society. Philip Rieff’s 1966 psycho-historical work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, provided Lasch with the theoretical framework for describing this transformation. In the counter-cultural revolt of the 1970s, Lasch interpreted what Rieff described as the culmination of a several-centuries long transition between a culture of religiously-centered personality formation and an individualistic, “therapeutic” one centered on the desires and psychological needs of individuals. “The death of a culture,” Rieff wrote, “begins when its normative institutions fail to communicate ideals in ways that remain inwardly

⁴⁸ Christopher Lasch, “The ‘Counter-Culture’” in *The World of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 194.

compelling, first of all to the cultural elites themselves.”⁴⁹ It is crucial that Rieff wrote “the death of *a* culture.” What was passing, at an ever-increasing pace under the weight of the technical “anticulture” of post-industrial capitalism, were past notions of personality formation arising out of the Judeo-Christian traditions of selfhood. Tragic notions of the self as fallen and corrupt gave way to a new ideal of the self as the product of individual desire, devoid of context and history. This process of fragmentation resulted in what Rieff identified as a hyper-individualistic, “therapeutic” ethos: “we believe that we know something our predecessors did not: that we can live freely at last, enjoying all our senses—except the sense of the past—as unremembering, honest, and friendly barbarians all, in a technological garden of Eden...in our recovered innocence, to be entertained would become the highest good and boredom the most common evil.”⁵⁰ This “loss of a sense of the past,” highlighted by the growing generational rift made so evident in the youth protests of the 1960s, provoked Lasch’s interest in the family.

The first public indication of Lasch’s dismissal of the political-ideological spectrum was his controversial 1977 study of the family, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*. Lasch understood, following Rieff, that the family had a particularly important purpose in the development of personality. Like religion, Lasch argued that it was through the mediation of families that individuals absorb normative cultural values, the “dialectical expressions of yes and no” that Rieff discussed as the foundation of a common culture.⁵¹ Likewise, the “family” was a central source of continuity between generations, young and old. More than anything else, the rise of the “counter-culture”—understood as the personal revolt against bourgeois culture—revealed in Lasch’s mind that post-industrial capitalism had entirely failed to foster the

⁴⁹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 4-5.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 4.

conditions that were conducive to a healthy society. These conditions would enable the internalization of inherited values such that they appear not as an imposition from above, but as a natural continuity between generations and as part of the natural order of things.

However, it was the classic, bourgeois conception of the family—as a “haven in a heartless world”—that was increasingly untenable in the bureaucratic structures of post-industrial society. During the nineteenth-century, before the family had been fully absorbed within industrial life, Lasch argued that it could legitimately serve as a so-called “haven in a heartless world,” a momentary source of respite from the public world of competitive individualism. Likewise, Lasch recalled that the family was, before the extension of the industrial division of labor, the home of much of what had now become reified as public, economic activity. The pre-industrial family functioned as the locus of both the acculturation of individuals into social life and as a place of economic production. Even worse, the traditional bourgeois ideology, the distinction between the “public” and the “private,” had been effaced by the full extension of industrial techniques to the domestic sphere. This was, in Lasch’s mind, the natural culmination of the capitalist division of labor. Capitalism’s socialization of production had replicated itself in the domestic sphere through the intrusion of therapists, the “helping professions,” and social workers, resulting in what he termed the “socialization of reproduction.”⁵² Moreover, Lasch claimed that the family was by the 1970s a broken institution, one that had lost the normative cultural functions of earlier times.

Lasch’s divergence from the left beginning in the mid-1970s arose primarily from his ambivalence towards its emphasis on cultural issues such as divorce, abortion rights, and curricular standards. He looked on with suspicion at those elements of the post-1960s left that

⁵² Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), xv.

saw in family life and traditional cultural institutions the sources of reaction and oppression. Indeed, in Lasch's mind the "patriarchal" family had long since been effaced by the full extension of industrial techniques into family life. The counter-cultural revolt against the bourgeois family therefore presented a form of mute criticism. In its attack on traditional cultural institutions such as the family, the counter-cultural left was simply replicating and exacerbating the onslaught of the capitalist market and technological change. Against this direction taken by the left, Lasch argued,

culture cannot be regarded as a matter of individual 'life-styles.' It is a collective creation, itself deeply influenced by the ways in which society organizes the production of material needs. A society that leaves production to 'private enterprise' will get a culture to match, one characteristic of which is precisely the tendency to see culture as the product of private choice.⁵³

The left's turn towards stressing questions of what Lasch deemed "life-style" choices, or a revolt against the family, appeared to be a retreat from the true content of political confrontation. Even worse, it was indicative of a convergence between market ideology and the left: the urge to break free from cultural traditions dovetailed seamlessly with the market's abundance of choice. This convergence presented another chapter in the breakdown of nineteenth-century ideological narratives. The defense of capitalism by those ostensibly identified as "conservatives" perpetuated what they regretted as the cultural collapse into nihilism and hedonism. The revolution in "life-style" by so-called progressives presented a marketization of the self. Lasch's argument was particularly shrewd. Beyond the apparent intensity of the "Culture Wars," he saw a retreat from politics, a banalization of American public life, and an ideological convergence between left and right.

⁵³ Christopher Lasch, "The 'Counter-Culture,'" in *The World of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 187.

To feminists and others on the left, Lasch could not conceive that there were structural elements of American bourgeois culture that were themselves inherently oppressive or exclusionary. Another trenchant critique that feminists such as Michèle Barrett, Mary McIntosh, and Juliet Mitchell launched against Lasch's defense of the family was his a-historical and seemingly nostalgic idealization of the nineteenth-century family. "Lasch's conception of the family," Barrett and McIntosh wrote in *New Left Review*, "is extremely tendentious... Lasch's conception of 'the family' is quite explicitly the bourgeois model of the family characteristic of nineteenth-century capitalism."⁵⁴ Lasch was providing, in "an elegiac tone," a longing for what was both a thoroughly "authoritarian" institution and a mythic and idealized one at best.⁵⁵ Was the family ever and for whom, they asked, a so-called "haven in a heartless world?" Lasch also seemed to ignore the horizontalist tendencies of such socialist-feminists as Juliet Mitchell. This was the concluding note of Mitchell's critique of *Haven in a Heartless World*. "From its inception until today," Mitchell wrote, "many feminists have argued not simply for the end of the family but for, in whatever kin or communal form it occurs, an equality of reproduction with production: producing people should be as important as producing things."⁵⁶

By contrast, Lasch rather stubbornly maintained that the true sources of the anarchic quality of everyday life were to be found in the industrial division of labor, whether in the corporate office or the factory. Mistaking the source of oppression in traditional culture, cultural radicals diverted their attention from the industrial-capitalist infrastructure and attacked the remnants of bourgeois culture, which were themselves increasingly anachronistic in mass society. Rather, Lasch argued that "it is precisely a collective decision to create a more humane

⁵⁴Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, "Narcissism and the Family: a Critique of Lasch," *New Left Review* 135 (September-October 1982): 39. See also: Juliet Mitchell, "Erosion of the Family," *New Society*, July 27, 1978, 199-200.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 38

⁵⁶ Mitchell, "Erosion of the Family," 200.

environment—as opposed to personal hedonism—that the industrial system as presently constituted cannot tolerate.”⁵⁷ The industrial system, Lasch claimed, can tolerate a radicalism of irreverent individualism, the desire to self-create and explore, to be free of standards of Victorian morality. Indeed, it enforces this logic, this rush to the personal, thereby undermining effective resistance against it.

Lasch interpreted the fracturing of the New Left into the cultural politics of the 1970s as even further indications of the general exhaustion of the left in post-industrial society. The progressive impulse inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth century that had placed its hopes on a general restructuring of social relations was dissolving into a form of lifestyle. Radical politics had become a therapeutic form of self-help that at its core sought accommodation with the bureaucratic structures of post-industrial life. As part of the broader change in personality discussed by Rieff, the liberal individual of the “ideological age” had become the “therapeutic” individual of mass society. Lasch lamented, “people hunger today not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security.”⁵⁸ The left’s turn towards making the “personal” into the “political” reflected this change in personality structure. “Having displaced religion as the organizing framework of American culture,” Lasch declared, “the therapeutic outlook threatens to displace politics as well, the last refuge of ideology. Bureaucracy transforms collective grievances into personal problems amenable to therapeutic intervention.”⁵⁹ What Lasch would term the politics of therapy, of outmoded “liberationist” tendencies, was a form of post-ideological politics. In its embrace of cultural politics, the

⁵⁷ Christopher Lasch, “The ‘Counter-Culture’” in *The World of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 188.

⁵⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

“counter-cultural” left accepted the premise of Daniel Bell and other theorists of the so-called “end of ideology.” Their emphasis on culture and life-style revealed that no direct challenge to the capitalist division of labor was possible.

Even more indicative of the crisis of radicalism, according to Lasch, was the reification of left-wing thought in the academy as a form of elite taste. Injecting himself into the ongoing debates over curricular standards and the changes in the humanities spawned by the Culture Wars, Lasch challenged both academic conservatives like Allen Bloom and what Lasch and critics like Russell Jacoby termed the pseudo-radicalism of the post-structuralist and post-modernist theorists.⁶⁰ “The right and the left share another important assumption,” Lasch stated, “that academic radicalism is genuinely ‘subversive.’”⁶¹ The invasion of chic French post-structuralist theory as the dominant paradigm of the academic left effectively closed the academy off in its own world. Academic “radicalism,” Lasch suggested, was blinded since the late 1970s by an obsession with “power” that it had essentially abdicated any hope of reaching a broader public. As Lasch saw it, radical academicism and cultural politics had reified as forms of elite taste, new markers of modern authority that served not as genuine critical discourses but as rootless cultural products and signifiers. “Identity politics has come to serve,” Lasch would conclude in 1994, “as a substitute for religion—or at least for the feeling of self-righteousness that is so commonly confused with religion.”⁶² Further, the professionalization of radicalism flourished easily in an increasingly corporatized American university. Lasch therefore rebuked thinkers like Bloom who saw in the dissemination of French theory and the rise of the academic

⁶⁰ See Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of the Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) and Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

⁶¹ Christopher Lasch, “Academic Pseudo-Radicalism: The Charade of ‘Subversion’” *Salmagundi* Fall 1990-Winter 1991, 33.

⁶² Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 17.

life the sole cause of the crisis of the academy. “It is corporate control, not academic radicalism, that has ‘corrupted our higher education,’” Lasch maintained.⁶³

The latent subtext of Lasch’s writings on American individualism and cultural radicalism was a conception of the modern American individual as a “post-political” type. Rebuked for theoretical overreach in such works as *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch was more cautious when he discussed the “survival mentality” in *The Minimal Self*. The specter of nuclear wars, environmental breakdowns, and the competitive brutality in corporate bureaucracies meant that the demands of daily existence had crowded out social, political questions such that life had become simply a struggle for psychic security and well-being. “Both time and space have shrunk to the immediate present,” Lasch wrote, “the immediate environment of the office, factory, or household.”⁶⁴ Lasch suggested that the degree to which individuals must invest in psychological security, an understandable result of the pressure of bureaucratic, mass life, reduced one’s ability to act as a political subject.

If the American political subject was a post-political type, then the ruling “new class” was likewise an entirely new phenomenon in modern history. Devoid of intentions to govern through the articulation of a unified “world-view” that tempers political authority with a positive articulation of cultural unity, the “new class,” Lasch claimed, “evolved new modes of social control, which deal with the deviant as a patient and substitute medical rehabilitation for punishment.”⁶⁵ This “new class” presented “paternalism without a father:” it replaced politics with managerialism and understood dissent as a form of psychological deviance.⁶⁶ The

⁶³ Ibid, 33.

⁶⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, 96.

⁶⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, 218.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 218.

reimagining of politics as management had entirely suffused the language of American political discourse, Lasch argued:

the infiltration of everyday life by the rhetoric of crisis and survival emasculates the idea of crisis and leaves us indifferent to appeals founded on the claim that some sort of emergency demands our attention. Nothing makes our attention wander so quickly as talk of another crisis. When public crises pile up unresolved, we lose interest in the possibility that anything can be done about them. Then too, cries of crisis often serve merely to justify the claims of professional crisis managers, whether they traffic in politics, war, and diplomacy or simply in the management of emotional 'stress.'⁶⁷

Politics in the post-industrial age, Lasch understood, functioned less as an ideological clash between liberalism and conservatism and increasingly as a tragic and unending dialectic between therapy and crisis.

Lasch was, however, careful to distance his criticism of the erosion of authority from that of the nascent conservative movement in the late-1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the so-called conservative critique of the welfare state arose, Lasch realized, “out of [an]... idealization of old-fashioned individualism” that “refuses to acknowledge the connection between [the erosion of authority] and the rise of monopoly capitalism.”⁶⁸ Indeed, Lasch realized that conservatism was itself breaking down as a coherent ideological narrative. Lasch sourced the root causes of this breakdown to the crisis of the family, recognizing that the family was ideally an individual’s first encounter with a form of legitimate, justified authority. The “socialization of reproduction” outside the family had however, rendered that authority entirely illusory. The family had become entirely enmeshed within the maelstrom of post-industrial capitalism, its educative and rearing functions long appropriated by public schooling and therapeutic intervention. Moreover, Lasch extended his discussion of the decay of the family as a source of legitimate authority to a general

⁶⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, 64.

⁶⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, 232.

breakdown of legitimacy in post-industrial society. Without a tenable grounding for the creation of legitimate and enduring institutions, Lasch realized that conservatism was meaningless.

Lasch was therefore not fooled when the right reestablished its footing with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Superficial deference to traditional morality and institutions served only to mask a newly radicalized pro-market ideology bent on the rollback of the welfare state, the liberalization of trade, and the strengthening of the corporate elite. Indeed, it was absurd to Lasch that the Reagan revolution even identified itself as a party of conservation and tradition. Ostensibly the party of “law and order” and of strong social authority, the conservative right’s stated goals were undermined by its continued embrace of capitalist industrialism: “authorities can promise neither the security of inherited customs and social roles, the kind of security that used to prevail in preindustrial society, nor the opportunity to improve one’s social position, which has served as the secular religion of egalitarian society.”⁶⁹ We must take Lasch seriously when he says that it was the “explanatory power” of the old nineteenth-century ideologies that were increasingly irrelevant. What does conservatism really mean, he asked, when the so-called conservative party embraces the single-driving force, capitalism, that has undermined traditional institutions? Conservatism in the United States, according to Lasch, was by the 1980s simply a signifier that had lost any connection with its traditional content.

Beyond the breakdown of liberalism and conservatism, Lasch argued the post-industrial turn had resulted in a tragic convergence of left and right. Radicalism of the left became simply a religion of limitless individualism devoid of the promise of substantive political change and the creation of a common culture. Anticultural politics of the right meant simply the embrace of free-market ideology and the dream of total technological domination, coupled with superficial

⁶⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, 204.

deference to traditional values. The core of this convergence was a faith in limitless growth and opportunity, as he would argue in his 1991 magnum opus, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*. From its dominant position in the academy, the radical left preached a doctrine of limitless personal development, opportunity, and autonomy from social structures and restrictions. This was simply the reverse side of the same ideological coin as the right's embrace of unlimited technological disruption and economic growth.

Conservatives such as Roger Kimball, the editor of the *New Criterion*, were understandably dismayed by Lasch's declaration of the obsolescence of conservatism. In an essay on Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven*, Kimball took issue with Lasch's discussion of the waning sense of "limits" across the ideological spectrum, a cornerstone of the latter's notion of the breakdown of conservatism. More broadly, Kimball claimed that Lasch's anti-capitalism was simply "Marxist habits of thought outlasting a commitment to the dogma."⁷⁰ Recapitulating the standard neo-conservative defense of capitalism, Kimball regretted that "while [Lasch] persists in attributing almost demonic power to capitalism, the truth is that capitalism is primarily an engine for creating wealth, not, à la Marx, an ideology designed to oppress and corrupt the unsuspecting."⁷¹ Kimball seemed to miss that Lasch's anti-capitalism expressly denied the Manichean elements of Marxist ideology and instead rested on the conclusion that no genuine social order could establish itself on a social system predicated on "creating wealth" through technological change and development. Lasch's opposition to capitalism was therefore arguably genuinely conservative, unless one identifies conservatism simply as the preservation of the status quo.

⁷⁰ Roger Kimball, "The disaffected populist: Christopher Lasch on progress," *The New Criterion* (March 1991). Accessed March 26, 2016. <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-disaffected-populist--Christopher-Lasch-on-progress-5433>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Those on the left understandably have a difficult time absorbing Lasch's intellectual development from the mid-1970s onwards. In his review of *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*, Marshall Berman expressed the dismay felt by many on the radical left when he wrote, "what Lasch is expressing here is a generalized hatred for modern life...the venom is so bitter that it tends to dissolve everything else and make the book come across less as a critical study than as an act of war."⁷² Lasch, one of the left's most revered intellectuals in the late-1960s and early-1970s, seemed to be taking his critical distaste of capitalist society out on its critics and enemies. To highlight simply the "venom" in Lasch thought, however, ignores the degree to which behind his "jeremiads" was a profoundly humanistic understanding of the need for a unified and mass-based political opposition to confront the ravages of industrial life. Lasch concluded his 1973 collection of essays, *The World of Nations*, with a deeply human cry:

It is only... when we find ourselves imprisoned in our private cars, marvelously mobile but unable to go anywhere because the highways are choked with traffic; when we find ourselves surrounded by modern conveniences but unable to breathe the air; provided with unprecedented leisure to fish in polluted rivers and swim at polluted beaches; provided with the means to prolong life beyond the point where it offers any pleasure; equipped with the power to create human life, which will simultaneously destroy the meaning of life—it is only, in short, when we are confronted with the contradictions of individualism and private enterprise in their most immediate, unmistakable, and by now familiar form that we are forced to reconsider our exaltation of the individual over the life of the community, and to submit technological innovations to a question we have so far been careful not to ask: is this what we want?⁷³

For Lasch, the unreality of American political life and the obsolescence of liberalism and conservatism arose out of what he deemed to be their respective indifference to this anticultural maelstrom. Across the intellectual spectrum, Lasch lamented, radicals and conservatives alike opted for the "exaltation of the individual over the life of the community." The right's embrace

⁷² Marshall Berman, "Family Affairs" review of *Haven In A Heartless World: The Family Besieged* by Christopher Lasch, *The New York Times*, January 15, 1978, 20.

⁷³ Christopher Lasch, "The Limits of Cultural Laissez-Faire" in *The World of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 307.

of free market ideology perpetuated that which the left sought not to confront through a mass-based radical opposition, but to simply adapt the individual through a revolution in life-styles. A new politics, Lasch hoped, that confronted this malaise would be radical, representing the last legacy of the liberal tradition. It would also, for its commitment to create enduring cultural ties and communities, be in many respects genuinely conservative.

II. The New Politics of Antimodernism

This inquiry began with a deceptively simple question. How does it happen that serious people continue to believe in progress, in the face of massive evidence that might have been expected to refute the idea of progress once and for all?⁷⁴

-Christopher Lasch, 1991

As discussed in the first chapter of this essay, Lasch's intellectual trajectory was sealed by his experience as a disillusioned left-wing intellectual in the aftermath of the explosions of the 1960s. Seeking to explain what he understood to be the critical situation facing left-wing politics following the failure of the New Left, he turned his attention to the social and cultural dynamics of the United States' development into a post-industrial society. Lasch's inquiry into post-industrialism conditioned what was his full departure from the political and ideological spectrum over the last two decades of his life. Lasch concluded that classic, nineteenth century ideological narratives were obsolete as guides for apprehending contemporary politics. It must be remembered, however, that Lasch was always a dissenter and a radical, in search of a new political tradition that he hoped to cultivate. "If I seem to spend a lot of time attacking liberalism and the Left, that should be taken more as a mark of respect than one of dismissal," he said in an

⁷⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 13.

interview in 1994, “you don’t bother to argue against positions that aren’t worth arguing with.”⁷⁵ Moreover, Lasch’s career long obituary for the American left was by no means an obituary for radical, oppositional politics itself. Lasch knew, however, that this new politics would dispose of an ideological make-up entirely unrecognizable from nineteenth century narratives of the clash between liberalism and conservatism. Described by Ronald Biener as a brand of “left-wing conservatism,” it would be more appropriate to label Lasch’s politics a distinctly new form of antimodern leftism.⁷⁶

A particularly prescient observer of American politics, Lasch was obsessed by the rightward drift of the working class in the aftermath of 1968 and following the climax of New Left radicalism. His antimodernism arose very much from his realization of the gulf that had erupted between radicals in the New Left and the American working class. This, Lasch lamented, was a fundamental mark of the failure of the American left. In “Towards a Theory of Post-Industrial Society,” Lasch observed,

Faced with mounting tensions and threats on every side, the working class will increasingly demand the solution of problems that the existing order cannot solve. In trying to satisfy their demand for the restoration of “law and order,” the authorities will face a growing rebellion among students and blacks. The working classes themselves represent a potentially revolutionary threat to the system, insofar as the demands they make cannot be met under existing institutions. Given the absence in the United States of a Socialist movement that can articulate the democratic values implicit in those demands (even the demand for “law and order”), the working classes will become increasingly a force for reaction. In either case the emergence of political consciousness among them will contribute to the polarization of post-industrial politics.⁷⁷

Therefore, it is essential to understand that Lasch’s turn to populism was inextricable from his realization that the right-wing populist backlash posed a fundamental problem for the American left. In the absence of a genuine alternative to cultural radicalism, Lasch realized “the working

⁷⁵ Blake, Casey and Christopher Phelps, “History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch,” *Journal of American History* 80 (March 1994): 1311.

⁷⁶ Ronald Biener, *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit: Essays on Contemporary Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 139.

⁷⁷ Lasch, “Towards a Theory of Post-Industrial Society,” 46.

classes will become increasingly a force for reaction.” A constituency that in countries with a cohesive socialist movement would be firmly under the sway of the left, the American working-class would increasingly fall victim to the right’s claims to represent the interests of “law and order.” Lasch’s affinity to cultural traditionalism no doubt explains his sympathetic view of the working-class’ attraction to “law and order.” Not only did the cultural radicalism of the New Left present a therapeutic form of revolt against bourgeois culture, Lasch claimed that the excesses of its irreverently individualist brand of radicalism estranged the movement from the broader American public. “The issue of ‘law and order’ has recently become prominent in national and local elections,” Lasch observed amid Richard Nixon’s second presidential bid in 1972, “instead of seeking to understand its origins, many radicals—along with most of the liberals—interpret the need for order as an incipient fascism.”⁷⁸ Lasch argued that the cultural radicalism of the New Left revealed a disavowal of common culture, justifying in the eyes of working-class Americans the right’s claims to represent the interest of “law and order.”

Out of this bind, Lasch argued that the left’s only long-term hope was through the formation of an alternative and distinctly left-wing brand of populism. This occurred, likewise, at a fundamental turning point in the historiography of American populism. In seeking a left-populist politics, Lasch was therefore in revolt against his former mentor, Richard Hofstadter. Following such texts as Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, *The Age of Reform*, and the essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” populism had been understood in the immediate postwar period as a furious right-wing backlash against the secular and modern culture of the eastern elite.⁷⁹ Hofstadter’s story of the “progressive” era in American politics

⁷⁸ Christopher Lasch, “Is Revolution Obsolete?” in *The World of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 163.

⁷⁹ See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, Vintage Books, 1955), and Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style

placed the populist movement as an initial “revolt against modernity” that was eventually co-opted and rationalized by establishment politics. This avowedly elitist historical interpretation of the populist moment had been unsettled such that, Lasch observed in 1973, populism could now appear as “a more appropriate answer to the crisis in American society than the radicalism of the sixties.”⁸⁰ Indeed, what Lasch came to see in Hofstadter’s denunciation of populism was the denial of so-called “ideological” politics that buttressed the centrist liberalism of the Democratic Party and its embrace of capitalism.

Sensing the fracturing of the New Left in the 1970s, Lasch was therefore primed to see in populism an opportunity to restore the mass-based radical movements of the early twentieth century. A new left-wing radicalism, Lasch realized, would have to adopt the once discarded language of populism. “A new populism,” he wrote in 1973,

might be expected to appeal not only to those directly victimized by economic injustice but to students and intellectuals who are tired of the old ideological wrangles of the left and seek relief in a broadly based reform coalition in which theoretical niceties are subordinated to practical results. The populist revival reflects more than the growing impatience of the ‘average American;’ it also reflects the disillusionment of many leftists and ex-leftists. Clearly the new populism is one of several candidates hoping to inherit what remains of the new left, others being woman’s liberation, the ‘counter-culture,’ and some form of socialism.⁸¹

Heavily influenced by neo-Marxist theory in the early-1970s, Lasch was not yet willing to rule out the possibility of a broad-based socialist movement. He was likewise willing to recognize the parochialism that afflicts populist politics. However, growing increasingly weary of the left’s counter-cultural turn, Lasch would from the mid-1970s onwards increasingly shift towards populism, which was further abetted by the historiographical re-imagining of the movement

in American Politics” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

⁸⁰ Christopher Lasch, “Populism, Socialism, and McGovernism,” in *The World of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 163.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 163.

advanced by Lawrence Goodwyn in 1976.⁸² Populism emerged, thereafter, as an egalitarian and participatory form of radical politics and not simply a “revolt against modernity,” as Hofstadter understood it.

Indeed, Lasch sought a very broad conception of populist politics. “Populism, as I understand it,” he reflected 1994, “was never an exclusively agrarian ideology.”⁸³ Rather, Lasch understood it as first and foremost a radically egalitarian political creed. His route to populism likewise had philosophical underpinnings, derivative of the critique of the Enlightenment tradition and progressive historical interpretations that he inherited from the Frankfurt School.⁸⁴ Populism distinguished itself as a radical politics without a faith in historical progress, one that rejected the supposedly inevitable march of the industrial division of labor and the trend toward larger units of political organization. It implied a neo-luddite opposition to technological determinism and the capitalist-industrial division of labor. Moreover, populism did not seek simply the democratization of consumption, which was the basis of Lasch’s disavowal of social democracy and the welfare state. Rather, populism envisioned the individual’s dual role as producer and citizen. In terms of political practice, therefore, populism was radically localist, demanding an active role of the citizen in public life. Finally, Lasch saw populism as a culturally conservative form of radicalism, one that for its determination to maintain traditional institutions such as the family would preserve the basis for an enduring and legitimate form of social authority.

⁸² See Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁸³ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 4.

⁸⁴ That Lasch arrived at populism through the Frankfurt School, the tradition par excellence of elitist modernist philosophy, was a fascinating historical twist that deserves much more attention than provided in this essay.

Lasch's iconoclastic coupling of anti-capitalism with cultural traditionalism earned him the scorn of a number of Social Democratic thinkers. This was also a rejection of his increasingly antimodern outlook as Lasch came to view the bureaucracies of the "therapeutic" welfare state and the multinational corporation as, respectively, historic dead-ends. The welfare state, Lasch seemed to suggest by the late-1970s, offered no fundamental departure from capitalism. For its commitment to equalizing economic outcomes, it was certainly preferable to the free-marketism of the American right, but it did not seek to undermine or dismantle the industrial division of labor. Writing in *Dissent Magazine*, Dennis Wrong detected a nascent authoritarianism, or, even worse, a latent strand of fascism in Lasch's coupling of cultural traditionalism and anticapitalism. Though not fully sympathetic with the counter-cultural left, Wrong took note of the wide swath of the American left that Lasch took objection to:

What is questionable is Lasch's weird amalgam of all the groups he dislikes—capitalists, corporation executives, bureaucrats, New Left students, psychotherapists, humanistic psychologists, educational radicals, hippies, and feminists—on one side—confronting on the other side, well, its not quite clear just whom: presumably, a few radical intellectuals of Lasch's kidney and perhaps the workingman resentful of "middle-class liberalism that has already destroyed his savings, bused his children to distant schools, undermined his authority over them, and now threatens to turn even his wife against him."⁸⁵

To Wrong, Lasch seemed to put no stock in the movements on the left that were in fact still active. Even more worrying was Lasch's pairing of populism with cultural traditionalism: "there have been popular radical movements affirming traditional values before. 'Fascism' was the name they were known by between the two world wars."⁸⁶ This was in many respects a justifiable criticism: popular anti-capitalism in the interwar periods animated both the far left and far right. However, Wrong's criticism must be complicated by the fact that Lasch's turn towards populism was very much in response to the right-ward drift of the American working-class in the

⁸⁵ Dennis Wrong, "Bourgeois Values, No Bourgeoisie? The Cultural Criticism of Christopher Lasch," *Dissent Magazine* July 1979, 313.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 312.

aftermath of the 1960s. As always, there is a very fine line between attempting to fully understand a phenomenon and accepting it.

Lasch's search for a new politics beyond the reified positions of liberalism and conservatism gained a substantial political outlet through his association with the journal, *democracy: a journal of political renewal and radical change*.⁸⁷ Edited by the prominent political theorist Sheldon Wolin between 1981 and 1983, the mood of the journal was very much a product of the crisis of political ideas that Lasch was addressing across his career. Published during the first three years of the Reagan presidency, the journal sought to give a "historical and theoretical understanding" of what these thinkers imagined to be a drastic turn in American society. Across the journal's three years of publications the target was the frightening reality that "we have been hypnotized for so long by the ideology of economic and technological progress that we have scarcely noticed that, politically we have become a retrogressive society, evolving from a more to a less democratic polity and from a less to a more authoritarian society."⁸⁸ What the magazine sought to correct was the dearth of genuinely political language to apprehend the present historical moment. Against the ideology of technological development and economic growth, "society," or the interests of democracy, needed a new form of discourse to oppose the relentless march of development.

Wolin realized that it was primarily left-wing politics that found itself in a state of crisis. The perspective offered by the journal was therefore the effort to rethink the nature of political and ideological confrontation in the post-industrial world. In an issue appropriately titled "Modernism and its Discontents," Wolin noted the shifting political alignments. "'Left' and

⁸⁷ This journal has regrettably received no historiographical attention by intellectual historians.

⁸⁸ Sheldon Wolin, "Why democracy?" *democracy: a journal of political renewal and radical change* January 1981, 4.

‘progressive,’” he wrote of the now obsolete markers, “became virtually interchangeable terms, so ‘conservative’ and ‘antiprogressive’ were widely regarded as synonymous. These historical identities, there is reason to believe, are now in the process of realignment. The left’s historic monopoly on change is being successfully challenged and conservatism is emerging as the party of progress.”⁸⁹

Out of this blurring of historical identities, the journal offered from the beginning an anti-technological form of radical politics. Lasch wrote in the first issue,

The underlying principles of industrial civilization—the separation of planning from execution of tasks, of living from working, of expertise from experience—continue to find almost automatic acceptance, even by the Left, as part of the inexorable march of historical progress. Anyone willing who calls these principles into question is accused of wanting to turn back the clock to the days of the cottage industry. But what if industrial civilization should prove to have been itself an aberration in the course of history, not its climax? Future developments may show that industrialism was a step fundamentally in the wrong direction, the mounting costs of which mankind can no longer afford. Is it still too soon to consider how some of our mistakes might be undone?⁹⁰

Lasch critiques of technological determinism entailed therefore a fundamental theoretical departure from the Marxist and Socialist traditions of the left, which in his view accepted the idea of inevitable technological change. Lasch’s denunciation of economic and industrial progressivism was likewise nurtured by his growing appreciation of the environmental movement. There were fundamental limits, Lasch realized, to the idea of permanent economic expansion and the extension of high living standards. By contrast, the Marxist and left-wing interpretation of history, Lasch realized, had recognized in the capitalist division of labor, and in the socialization of production through industrialization, the price that needed to be paid for a socialist future. Lasch therefore drew an identity between capitalism and Marxism, insofar as they both accepted the liberating benefits of technological progress, development, and the ideal

⁸⁹ Sheldon Wolin, “From Progress to Modernization: The Conservative Turn” *democracy* (August 1983), 10.

⁹⁰ Christopher Lasch, “Democracy and the ‘Crisis of Confidence,’” *democracy: a journal of political renewal and radical change* (January 1981): 39.

of a future of economic abundance. Marxism and capitalism, moreover, were both ideologies predicated on the belief in historical progress through material accumulation and technological development.

Lasch, by contrast, adopted a romantically categorical rejection of industrial development, seeing in the incessant march of technological change and rationalization an inevitable fragmentation of experience entirely antithetical to cultural life. An essential basis for his staunchly antimodern opposition to technological change was the foundational 1976 text, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, by Harry Braverman. Braverman aimed to provide a historical understanding of the changing role of labor in the economic and productive process, from the rise of capitalism in the late eighteenth century to its post-industrial or monopoly stages in the mid-twentieth century. His story, which likewise informed Lasch's aversion to the intrusion of experts and social workers into the family, was of the steady degradation of work as labor became increasingly subjected to rationalization and technological processes. In the era of "monopoly capital," industrialized forms of labor had replicated themselves even beyond the factory, necessitating the rabid rate of efficiency demanded in corporate offices and bureaucracies. "The progressive elimination of thought from the work of the office worker," wrote Braverman, "thus takes the form, at first, of reducing mental labor to a repetitious performance of the same small set of functions. The work is still performed in the brain, but the brain is used as the equivalent of the hand of the detail worker in production, grasping and releasing a single piece of 'data' over and over again."⁹¹ A radical politics, Lasch realized, could not stop simply at increasing the workers' share of productive surplus, which social democrats prioritized. Rather, it was exactly the de-humanizing and alienating aspects of the industrial

⁹¹ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 319.

division of labor that needed to be opposed, not simply capitalist ownership. Understanding labor to be a constitutive element of the human experience, Lasch knew that a genuinely radical politics would demand the re-organization of labor such that work was not simply a means to consumption, but a means to fulfillment itself.

It was therefore the legacy of the Luddites that the journal embraced. Most exemplary of this reconsideration was a tripartite collection of articles by one of Lasch's former doctoral students, David F. Noble, titled "Present-Tense Technology." Noble indicted the left's historic association with a progressive or deterministic conception of technological change. Indeed, Noble laments what had become a consensus around the need for modernization, encompassing both the left and right. What this consensus took for granted, Noble claimed, was the necessity of removing decision-making power from the point of production and placing it the control of external management. It was the opposite impulse, the desire to preserve decision making power at the locus of production, that forced Noble to highlight the legacy of the Luddites, the group of British artisans inspired in the early nineteenth century by the mythical figure of Ned Ludd to resist industrialization. "The Luddites," Noble recalls,

Did not believe in technological progress, nor could they have since the alien idea was invented after them, to try to prevent their recurrence. In light of this invention, the Luddites were cast as irrational, provincial, futile, and primitive. In reality, the Luddites were perhaps the last people in the West to perceive technology in the present tense, and to act upon that perception. They smashed machines.⁹²

It was for their ability to conceive of technology in the "present" that Noble celebrates the Luddite legacy. They more than any other social group realized the inherently antagonistic relationship in which they stood relative to industrialization as it first occurred in the beginning of the nineteenth-century in Northern England. They had, however, been retroactively cast as opponents to an idea conjured up after their revolt: "technological progress."

⁹² David F. Noble, "Present Tense Technology: Part One" *democracy* (February 1983), 14.

The romantically antimodern inclinations of *democracy* did, however, earn the journal criticism from more sanguine thinkers on the left. Critics such as George Shulman, writing in the journal's pages in 1983, derided what he termed the "pastoral" mode animating the magazine.

"Pastoral premises about work," wrote Shulman,

Not only mystify the reality of community and deprive democrats of an essential constituency, but also create an image of modernization that turns us away from sources of renewal in the modernizing present. Is the factory system simply the graveyard of revolution, as writers in the journal have often implied? Or could modernization have created a situation in which the collective action of workers and the mass production of public goods could extend political power and equality while enriching the quality of life?⁹³

Criticism of the nostalgic tone was certainly justifiable given the total disavowal of modernization that pervaded many of the articles in the journal. The journal's antimodernism and its complete rejection of the industrial division of labor seemed entirely divorced, according to Shulman, from the realities of contemporary politics. This nostalgic tone was indicative, according to Shulman, of an attitude of "patrician resentment of modernity"⁹⁴ that he saw across the journal's articles on technological change and mass culture.

However, Shulman's criticism of the anti-progressive thrust of the journal identified what was in fact the leading theoretical innovation of the journal: the articulation of a radical politics without a faith in progress and hence beyond liberalism and conservatism. Indeed, the core of Lasch's departure from the progressive left was the identity he drew directly between capitalist-industrialism and progressivism, whether economic or cultural. Likewise, not immune to charges of nostalgia and the imagination of a romantically idyllic past, Lasch was himself obsessed by the subject of nostalgia in American culture. Many of his writings from the 1980s question the status of history in the American imagination. Lasch feared that progressivism had become engrained in the American psyche, to the detriment of critical thinking. As the reverse side to a

⁹³ George Shulman, "The Pastoral Idyll of *democracy*" *democracy* (August 1983), 50.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 45.

near-universal faith in technological progress, Lasch suggested that a cult of nostalgia had emerged throughout American culture. Such was the subject of his 1989 essay in *Salmagundi*, “Counting by Tens,” in which he dissected the rising phenomenon of “decadism” in popular consciousness. The habit of seeing history as a succession of decades and generations, Lasch wrote, “[reduces] history to style, to fluctuations in public taste, to a relentless progression of cultural fashions in which the daring breakthroughs achieved by one generation become the accepted norms of the next, only to be discarded in their turn by a new set of styles.”⁹⁵ The universalization of progressivism in American culture resulted, Lasch argued, in an amnesic outlook on past and present. “Our faith in material progress,” he continued, “combined with a reluctance to confront the unsolved issues of the past, makes it hard to remember historical events accurately, but it doesn’t expunge their memory altogether. What it does is to make it impossible to recall them except through a ‘soft, golden haze.’”⁹⁶ Seeing history through the “soft, golden haze” of nostalgia, Americans were unable to perceive the damage wrought by technological change and development, which held an unquestioned status across the political spectrum.

Implicit in Lasch’s and the journal’s critique of progress was a series of extremely perceptive questions. What claim does the left have on “progress” in a broader culture defined by its progressiveness and an obsession with technology as the *deus ex machina* of history? What value does the “progressive” outlook and interpretation of history have for dissenters and critics when the march of capitalism has over the centuries been the single driving force of change? Populism’s categorical rejection of industrial development and bureaucratic centralism, by

⁹⁵ Christopher Lasch, “Counting by Tens” *Salmagundi* No. 81 (Winter 1989), 57. www.jstor.org/stable/40548015. Accessed December 29, 2015.

⁹⁶ Christopher Lasch, “Counting by Tens” *Salmagundi* No. 81 (Winter 1989), 57. www.jstor.org/stable/40548015. Accessed December 29, 2015, 59.

contrast, formed the groundwork of the true radical movement that Lasch hoped to cultivate. Indeed, it was the old, antimodern political ideas like populism that needed to be considered, after having been abandoned in lieu of the progressive traditions such as Marxism and Socialism. “A radical movement,” Lasch wrote in *democracy*, “capable of offering a democratic alternative to corporate capitalism will have to draw on traditions that have been dismissed by twentieth-century progressives and only recently resurrected both by scholars and by environmentalists, community organizers, and other activists. It will have to stand for the nurture of the soil against the exploitation of natural resources, the family against the factory, the romantic vision of the individual against the technological vision, localism over democratic centralism. Such a radicalism would deserve the allegiance of all true democrats.”⁹⁷

Although without a religion throughout his life, Lasch’s antimodernism and his yearning for the “romantic vision of the individual against the technological one” were indications of his increasing interest in religious thought as an antidote to the idea of progress. The emancipatory, consumerist ethos, as the highest conception of the good life, had in his view become universal in American culture, reflected by the left’s embrace of the counter-culture. “I believe that young people in our society,” he wrote in 1989 on a reflection of the decade just passed, “are living in a state of almost unbearable, though mostly inarticulate, agony.”⁹⁸ As a moralist, Lasch would embrace such Calvinist theologians and Transcendentalist philosophers as Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Beyond its value as a source of community and tradition, Lasch appreciated the language of self-denial that pervaded Calvinist

⁹⁷ Christopher Lasch, “Democracy and the ‘Crisis of Confidence,’” *democracy: a journal of political renewal and radical change* (January 1981): 40.

⁹⁸ Christopher Lasch, “The I’s Have it For Another Decade” *The New York Times*, December 27, 1989, A23.

and Transcendental thought. Discussing Edwards' critics in *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, Lasch wrote,

Unable to conceive of a God who did not regard human happiness as the be-all and end-all of creation, they could not accept the central paradox of Christian faith, as Edwards saw it: that the secret of happiness lay in renouncing the right to be happy.⁹⁹

It was precisely the inability to deny "the right to be happy" that Lasch, following Rieff, detested in the therapeutic mode.

More telling is that Lasch's embrace of Calvinist theology arose from his awareness that progress and modernism had themselves congealed as secular religions. After years of silence, Lasch and Bell again exchanged letters in the early-1990s over the meaning of the end of ideology. "In one's older years," Bell wrote to Lasch in May 1991, "one returns to the unresolved perplexities of one's youth."¹⁰⁰ Lasch replied: "you say that "ideology is a feature of 'modern times'"; but it's the concept of ideology, I would argue, that's modern—the heart of which is the claim that science for the first time penetrates the veil of illusion."¹⁰¹ To be modern, Lasch insisted, is to embrace the binary opposition between science and ideology. At its core is the hope that through industrial development, rational planning, and the spread of technological developments society could be free from past superstitions. Rather, Lasch always believed that it is impossible to escape ideology. What is most pernicious is that some ideologies consider themselves "modern" and hence post-ideological. "The central issue in discussions of ideology," Lasch wrote,

Is whether it can be avoided or neutralized in some way. A condemnation of ideology in the name of science (however broadly science is defined) holds out the possibility that ideology can be overcome. A condemnation of ideology in the name of religion, on the

⁹⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 248.

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Bell to Christopher Lasch, May 15, 1991. Christopher Lasch Papers: Box 7b, Folder 16.

¹⁰¹ Christopher Lasch to Daniel Bell, 20 June 1991. Christopher Lasch Papers: Box 7b, Folder 16.

other hand, recognizes its inescapability even while deploring its pretensions. “All human knowledge,” Reinhold Niebuhr writes, “is tainted with an ‘ideological’ taint. It pretends to be more than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be infinite and ultimate knowledge...” The scientific assault on ideology offers a cure that is worse than the disease itself, since it lends added plausibility to premature claims of finality.¹⁰²

The left, ever since its inception in the late eighteenth-century, had been the party of “science” as opposed to “ideology,” or religion. The new politics of antimodernism and Lasch’s embrace of religious thought arose from his realization that there is no escape from “ideology.” Indeed, it hoped to recognize the damage wrought upon individuals and communities across the past centuries by progressivism in the name of the escape from “ideology,” the most pernicious form of which was the supposedly apolitical nature of technological change.

Not simply a critic, Lasch’s life-long engagement with the movements and ideas of his time gave birth to a vibrant body of political thought, an arresting narrative of the fracturing of the left coupled with an answer to that important question: what is to be done? Aware that liberalism and conservatism “no longer define the lines of political debate,” Lasch’s answer was in populism, whose combination of radical egalitarianism, democratic localism, and neo-luddism seemed to be the last possibility to successfully re-create the mass-based radical movements of the early-twentieth century.

Conclusion: Christopher Lasch in the Long “Age of Diminishing Expectations”

The eye-catching nature of the title of Lasch’s 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, seems to have overshadowed the perhaps more telling subtitle: “American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations.” Beyond its encyclopedic account of the mutations in United States

¹⁰² Christopher Lasch to Daniel Bell, 2 May, 1991. Christopher Lasch Papers: Box 7b, Folder 16.

intellectual life since the 1970s, the other indispensable advancement made by Daniel Rodgers' history is the claim that the last roughly four decades ought to be understood as part of one larger historical moment. Nevertheless, struggling under what is perhaps a certain nostalgia for the 1980s and 1990s, the popular historical imagination cordons off these decades from what was in fact one coherent time period. In the long run, however, social change and decay have a habit of correcting for faulty memory. Indeed, the withering of discourses of the "social" that Rodgers described mirrored intellectually what has been in reality a full scale gutting of the United States' social infrastructure. Moreover, our selective memory prevents us from seeing what has been for the majority of Americans one long period of austerity, or, to use Lasch's terminology, one long "age of diminishing expectations."¹⁰³

It was the political unreality underlying such a situation that Lasch could not abide, provoking his interest in the political and cultural dynamics of the United States' emergence as a post-industrial society. In the aftermath of the explosions of left-wing dissent in the late 1960s, the left fractured into an array of varying interest groups and movements. The triumph of the therapeutic mode in the post-industrial age, Lasch claimed, entailed a downsizing of left-wing vision. Unable to conceive of the prospect of a general restructuring of social relations, the meaning of left-wing politics fractured into various cultural radicalisms. As the form of radical politics engendered by an "age of diminishing expectations," the redefinition of radicalism as lifestyle suggested for Lasch the general exhaustion of the left and progressive conceptions of history as a whole. The fracturing of the left did not suggest, however, a triumph of conservatism. In fact, Lasch understood that conservatism had itself devolved into an explicit embrace of capitalist industrialism, a social disorder that eviscerated any claims to represent the

¹⁰³ See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

preservation of order, stability, and continuity. The politics of anticulture presented for Lasch the last gasps of the modern understanding of political history as a clash between conservatism and liberalism.

Across the last four decades of post-industrial history, deindustrialization and technological disruption have entirely altered the face of American society. To even speak of anything called “conservatism” across these decades of technological “progress” would be absurd. Echoing Lasch, the left’s claim to represent progress and historical change has been entirely unsettled across this period. Lasch realized that we need a new language to grasp the political mutations caused by this historic shift. His discussion of the breakdown of liberalism and conservatism as coherent ideological narratives can in many respects serve as a building block for this reconstruction.

Long in dialogue with Daniel Bell, across his career Lasch appropriately corrected Bell’s claim of the “end of ideology” and instead spoke of the exhaustion of certain ideologies. Ideologies are historical, Lasch realized, but ideology is not. He therefore set himself to the task of reconstructing a political vision, beyond liberalism and conservatism, for a post-industrial United States. A genuine democratic politics, Lasch hoped, would come to rely upon the populist and neo-luddite traditions of modern history. Indeed, these movements appealed to Lasch because they were themselves unidentifiable along the liberal-conservative spectrum. Radically democratic for their insistence upon local control and autonomy, populism and luddism were likewise in many respects traditional for their opposition to progressivism and technological change. It was these forgotten traditions that Lasch hoped to resurrect. Indeed, the discourse of contemporary politics reveals the salience of much of Lasch’s writings. We live in what can only be described as an age of populism—of the right and, thankfully, increasingly of the left as well.

Appendix: The Published Works of Christopher Lasch

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The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

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