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Limits and Hope: Christopher Lasch and Political Theory

BY JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

“LIMITS and hope,” wrote Christopher Lasch, “these words sum up the lines of the argument I have tried to weave together.” Lasch insisted that much of what makes up “the texture of daily life” is an “experience of loss and defeat,” and he went on to cite Orestes Brownson, “Are there no calamities in history? Nothing tragic?” With these words in mind, I want to take up the challenge Lasch’s work presents to political philosophy, an enterprise that has often defined itself as an “anti-tragedy” that recognizes precious few limits to human projects and generates unwarranted optimism rather than hopefulness. With notable exceptions, of course, political philosophers in the great tradition have seen as their task a way to secure and to solidify a set of arrangements that would insulate a polity—if not each and every individual within it—from the experience of loss and defeat. If we just do it right, the argument goes, a polity may come with a many lifetimes warranty. Such projects requires a person of a certain sort—a human nature appropriately modified, even denatured (if you will) and prepared, in Rousseau’s words, to substitute “justice” for “instinct” in the heart of man himself. (I say “man” advisedly, for it is not always so clear where women fit in the great scheme of things as articulated in Western political thought—but the gender question is not, for the purpose of this essay, the most interesting and important one.) By contrast “historical consciousness” of hope with limits embodied in the writings of Christopher Lasch

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offers a necessary and vital corrective to the “philosophical consciousness” as embodied in the great tradition of Western political thought.¹

A few preliminary words to situate Lasch before I turn to what lessons he might bring to contemporary political thought. Lasch’s voice is peculiarly American. Unlike the work of so many academic writers whose prose appears to have emerged out of a generic container of some sort, Lasch’s prose style and his thoughts and his roots were American. Although he turned to Freud and certain Freud commentators and made suggestive forays into the roots of Christian thought at the end of his career, his concerns were primarily, if not exclusively, American as were the bulk of his sources. What made Lasch fascinating was his ongoing attempt to crystallize an American counter-tradition, those voices that were not caught up in the dominant story America likes to tell about herself—a story of optimism and unboundedness and the arrogance that all too often accompanies such triumphalism.

The optimistic, progressivist teleology in its specific American incarnation that Lasch challenged holds that the more we change, and the more we have, the better things are bound to become. Lasch’s insistence on limits, by contrast, speaks a recognition of human vulnerability and finiteness as well as does his insistence that an ever-expanding culture of productivity must eventually spiral downward into a terrible cultural entropy. For the more we produce, the more we consume; the faster we run, the sooner we will exhaust ourselves and the natural world upon which we depend. How, then, would Lasch urge us to cultivate that upon which we depend? What habits of mind must we construct and cherish in order that limits be acknowledged and a genuine rather than a false and illusory political hope be kept ever fresh?

Take one brief example as a lead-in to a longer meditation on limits and that hope that can emerge only within an awareness of limits: Lasch shocked many people when he delivered himself up of the view that divorce should be made very difficult, if not more or less forbidden.² This prompted cries of outrage from a num-

ber of the participants in a published forum. What Lasch's critics failed to understand was that the point he was here making, in his characteristically forthright style, was that perhaps we Americans should have greater patience learning to live with our choices and that we might, in fact, discover—with persistence—that a huge choice like whom to marry might not have been such a mistake after all. We need to judge relationships over the long-haul, a narrative rather than a snapshot. For he feared that Americans had lost a sense of perspective and persistence. That we had become quick on the trigger and short on the ability to realize that the current moment will not last forever; that, perhaps, the habit of living with one another over time, over the long haul, will build layer upon layer of attentiveness and respect that current unhappiness and inconvenience cannot even imagine. And it is only patience that sustains marriages, communities, and even polities. In our avid enthrallment with the beckoning green light at the end of Daisy's dock in Fitzgerald's classic we denude ourselves of the textured richness of what it means to endure. That this is a lesson well lost on the vast majority in a culture as driven and individualistic as our own was a recognition not lost on Lasch: it helps to account for his occasional gloominess about our prospects, moments when he lost sustaining hope.

Lasch was searching for secular sources that would offer occasion for the stories of human sin and redemption, the coming to grips with evil in oneself and the world generally, the possibilities of grace, awe, and hope found in religion or, to be more precisely, in the Christian narrative. His turn to Freud can be understood, in part, in this way. For Freud is a thinker who restlessly and ceaselessly insisted on limits to enlightenment, limits to projects of self-transcendence, limits to what finite and mortal human beings can do confronted with the great and inexorable force of necessity. Lasch was offended by the sleight-of-hand pulled by certain cultural "Freudians" (Marcuse comes to mind) when they tried to turn Freud into a totem of "liberationism." They did this by radically altering Freud's texts, for example, substituting "scarcity" for Freud's "necessity," as if "necessity," for Freud, was primarily an

economic category. But it was not. It was the great and inexorable goddess of Fate in the ancient Greek sense. Fatedness, recognition of our status as mortals, was not something that could be overcome with a superabundance of goods of every kind and a growing superfluity and optimism. For Freud, this sort of thinking represented an illusion and a dangerous one at that. Unsurprisingly, then, Lasch's Freud was the Freud who reminded us, over and over again, that we were limited and mortal and that while there might be defensible grounds for hope there were no good grounds at all for optimism.

A number of issues have been put on the table: limits and hope, loss and defeat, fate and necessity, particular commitments and universalistic aspirations. Let me now turn directly to "Lasch vs. Political Philosophy." It is a fascinating story. If Lasch is right—and there seems little doubt to me that he is—that alienation "is the normal condition of human existence," much of Western political thought becomes a beguiling and often masterful exercise in articulate self-deception.³ In our dominant religious narratives, human beings are compelled to renounce the "comfortable belief" that the world is made for our convenience or cut to our design. But the political philosophy story, or at least one dominant and continuing motif that helps to constitute this tradition, offers comfort or a cure for the malign hand that fate has dealt us all, including the sure and certain knowledge of our own deaths.

Consider, for example, Plato's great *Republic*. Here we find an unmatched articulation of an architectonic schema for the perfectly righteous or just city, a world in which "public-spirited men rule for the common good."⁴ Consider the unabashed ambition of the project—it requires that the rulers take "the dispositions of human beings; as though they were a tablet... which, in the first place, they would wipe clean. And that's hardly easy." The Guardians of the ideal Republic, then, must quite literally remake human nature. To this end, children over the age of ten are best banished as their dispositions are already formed within the old order. To this end, such a powerful, all-encompassing bond

between individuals and the city must be created that all social and political conflict disappears, discord melts away, and the state comes to resemble a “single person.” To this end, women (for the ruling class) are in common and children have no relationship to their particular mother—they, too, are “in common.” If a strong, particular loyalty develops it threatens to undermine single-minded devotion to the city and its purposes. On and on.

Now we know what Plato feared and what his ideal city was intended to cure: a world of division and discord; a world in which human purposes are not of a piece; a world in which our human “nature” itself is the big problem for, too often, we are overtaken by the baser rather than better parts of that nature. We must, therefore, work to expunge all that is base in order to attain the pure gold of a harmonious order. Hoping to insulate the world and the individual against conflict, at least in this ideal city “in speech,” Plato moves in the direction Lasch warns against: he invites a world of overreach and grandiose and the all-encompassing ambition that accompanies it in unscrupulous hands. One characteristic of Plato’s ideal city is its timelessness: once created it should continue to work perfectly; once humans (or a sufficient number, at least) are appropriately denatured, they will see to it that the best laid schemes of the philosopher are enacted.⁵

To be sure, Christians thinkers like Augustine and hard-nosed politicians like Machiavelli recognized, each in his own way, the limits to human deed-doing. Augustine insisted that we recognize that the City of Man can never be a City of God and if we try to make it such it will more likely turn into a living hell. Machiavelli gave fortune (*Fortuna*) a big role to play in his world of luck and adventure and power plays. But even Machiavelli cannot avoid a clarion call for a great prince to rescue “bella Italia” from her division and travail. Once we get to the early modern “social contract” theorists the gargantuan tasks political philosophers assign themselves begin again. Consider Thomas Hobbes, who paints an unbearably bleak picture of human beings in the state of nature where life is “nasty, brutish, and short.” He seeks a cure through a heroic project of bringing order—as absolute as possible—to

bear against wild and dangerous disorder. Only when we have deeded to an absolute Leviathan—that “mortal God,” in Hobbes’s words—the power to “name all the names,” to command and it will be done—then and only then is there a cure for our nightmarish condition.

Or what of John Stuart Mill, he of the apparently sweetest reason? Mill, too, seeks an end to the seductive allure of “Instinct,” the “worst” rather than the “better” part of human nature. Backing off from a totalizing and absolute utopia, Mill nonetheless traffics in the very optimism Lasch chastens. He tells us that optimism is well placed given the spreading rationalization of human society. He assures us that human relationships, properly denuded of dangerous emotion, can be uplifted to the sphere of rationalistic understanding. Reason must triumph; indeed, the very “apotheosis of Reason” must come to reign, besting the “degrading” and “pernicious” idolatry of “false worships”—the world of tradition, religion, “Instinct.”⁶ Mill paints a particularly unflattering portrait of all male and female relationships throughout all of human history, for they derive only from an “odious” deal having an “odious source,” brute sensation and the rule of force. Cleansed and purged of this odium, the rule of “perfect justice” will one day come to prevail in gender and in all matters.

Mind you, the problem here isn’t the search for reform or a recognition that all is not what it ought to be in gender relations or race relations or the overall ordering of social arrangements. The problem is two-fold: First, the philosopher portrays the world as he knows it, or the world as it has become, or the world as it has always been, in the most dire and dismal possible way. All is tainted and odious. Or chaotic and dangerous. Or unjustifiable on some universal standard of reason. Second, he goes on to proffer a cure—a great System (Hegel comes to mind), an ideal city, a progressivist teleology in which rationalism or classlessness triumph and the world is burnished and made brand new. It is the combination of excessive harshness about “the past” and excessive optimism about “the future” that combines to make political philosophers suspect from a Laschian point of view. Interestingly

enough, one of the great political thinkers of the twentieth century—Hannah Arendt—would agree.⁷ Arendt noted that too much of political philosophy traffics in axioms that are self-confirming. By contrast, the truths that really matter politically—facts and events—“are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories... produced by the human mind; they occur in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing more permanent than the admittedly relative permanence of the human mind’s structure.”⁸

It is our inability to come to grips with our “human condition,” including the fact that our minds themselves constitute limits to total knowledge and understanding, that we would deny. Hence the ease with which so many rush to embrace an aspiration to transcend all limits and that makes so much political philosophy at once grand and, in some profound way, delusory. Let’s take a look, then, at what a non-delusory coming to grips with the human condition might offer us. I will zero in on just one theme—shame—a concern Lasch took up from time to time. It may seem odd to introduce shame at this point but, in fact, there is a deep rationale at stake. For shame is a limit—a limit to self-exposure, a limit to a compulsion to disclose, a limit to the brutal and unseemly things of which human beings are capable. To say that it is difficult to mount a defense of shame in our increasingly shameless world in which all distinctions between things public and private are eroding rapidly is to understate. But let me begin.

I want to draw into the discussion at this point a thinker of whom Lasch was not, I believe, aware but one whose work is quite sympathetic to Lasch’s credo of “limits and hope.” In his difficult text, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the anti-Nazi Christian martyr, the theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, notes that at times “it may have been the business of Christianity to champion the equality of all men; its business today will be to defend passionately human dignity and reserve.”⁹ I think it was Lasch’s view that human dignity and reserve needed their champions today, perhaps more than ever. The necessary horizon for framing and helping to contain and to maintain that dignity and reserve is shame or, in Bon-

hoeffer's words, our awareness of our own division, our recognition of our own propensity towards evil. In his meditation on the Fall, Bonhoeffer argues that shame comes into existence in a "world of division." If we pretend to a primordial wholeness that no longer exists—or try to create one through grandiose philosophies that know no limit—we fall into a form of self-idolatry; we make believe that we are pre-lapsarians, that we are once again innocents in the Garden, that we have known no evil. Self-declared innocents are more likely drawn to optimism rather than drawn to that hope linked to recognition of our estrangement and our need for faith and fellowship.

But evil will have its due, Bonhoeffer argues. It is our task to prevent it from having its day. With this Lasch would concur. Central to that task is a recognition of limits to human self-striving and self-overcoming. Shame is not "good in itself," Bonhoeffer insisted. Rather, shame "must give reluctant witness to its own fallen state." From its division, humankind covers itself. Man "without a limit, hating avidly passionate, does not show himself in his nakedness."¹⁰ The human being hates this limit. He—and she—would overcome it. Rather than witness to our fallen state we are too easily seduced by arrogant anthropocentrism and by a totalist politics that promises a Garden beyond good and evil as its culminating point.

Both Bonhoeffer and Lasch insist that we enter the public sphere through a stance of rectitude rather than one of yearning for "the restoration of lost unity," in Bonhoeffer's powerful phrase. It is our recognition of this "in between"—a world in-between self-concealment and self-revelation—that permits us to engage the public world without being consumed by it. For should politics claim the totality of us, that is a claim based on a unity we have lost; it is a claim that promotes violent impositions, often in the name of progress. Transgressing the barrier of shame is a way to deify man and this is the route to nihilism. Bonhoeffer notes, and indicts, an "unrestrained vitalism" and it was precisely such a force Lasch detected in American worship at the altar of progress.

When those aware of the barrier of shame speak of “necessity” or “fate,” they write out of sorrowful recognition. They recognize that human action is always fraught with peril and irony, always performed in a kind of “twilight.” Small wonder that so many philosophers have wanted us to step out of the cave into the glaring, iridescent light where all is revealed and limits and shame are no more. But ethics or “the ethical” mark boundaries—boundaries of shame and shamelessness; boundaries of public and private; boundaries of intimacy and publicity. Political thought that respects such boundaries must, then, come to grips with limits in a way that a disrespectful barrier-overturning philosophy will not and cannot. It was Lasch’s characteristic habit of mind to locate where the greatest dangers might be found and, in light of the vagaries of a time and place, to ponder what might be coming if we continued on our present course. In this way, he believed, we might acknowledge our fearfulness without falling into cowardice, and we could articulate hope without capitulating to false optimism.

Lasch recognized that no single school of thought or tradition offered a “panacea for all the ills that afflict the modern world.” But a tradition worth mining helps us to ask “the right questions.”¹¹ Such a tradition draws us away from “fantasies of omnipotence” into a more complex world. One strong characteristic of Lasch’s work—and his work has become for us now part of a tradition to call upon as our own—is his incisive determination to make distinctions: to sift, divide, and separate. In other words, Lasch’s work taken as a whole provides an exemplary instance of that faculty Hannah Arendt called the most important of all political faculties of the human mind: the ability to make judgements. As with shame, judging is in bad odor at present. We associate judging with “being judgmental,” with not being nice to people and upsetting them and invading their “comfort zone,” of all things. But minus judgement we are incapable of acting with resolve and purpose.

As Arendt made very clear, to evoke prejudice and to make a judgement are two very different human possibilities; indeed, the

more we proliferate prejudices, the less capable we are of making judgements. Judging—in the sense of making discriminations and assessments, calling things by their real names, means—one must not shirk from truths that many will find unpalatable. Lasch, like Arendt, had very little use for those who treat adults as if they were children and spoon-feed them nonsense. For Arendt, the faculty of judgement consists in “thinking the particular” and through this concrete act and engagement reaching for more general conclusions and truths.¹² Following through on this claim leads, then, to an emphasis on judging. That judging is at something of a nadir among us—even as shamelessness is ever more triumphant—is of a piece with the diminution in the civic and personal affairs of men and women I believe Lasch detected in America’s story as she enters the next century.

To say that Lasch feared we had lost our moral bearings is to understate. I wish that he had spent more time rummaging about in the underpinnings of his conclusion. But that wasn’t his way. If he had, I believe he would have detected the wholesale—or nearly so—abandonment of the faculty of judging or discerning at work in late twentieth century American culture. The “victimization ideology” rampant at present is but one example. But this craze, with its insistence that it is wrong to make moral judgements, gestures towards something truly alarming: the possibility that we might, as a society, no longer generate the sorts of human beings who can recognize what judging—or shame—is all about and what we are called upon to do, or not to do, in light of our faculty of judgement and our awareness of shame. I am here suggesting that judging involves our whole nature—it isn’t just icing on the cake of self-identity. Judging makes it possible for us to make our way with some firmness of purpose and thought rather than simply lurching from one situation to the next, so much flotsam and jetsam on the surging sea of cultural freneticism.

One persistent way in which Lasch was perhaps not so much misunderstood as understood all-too-well by those who accused him of nostalgia and priggishness and harshness and “Puritanism,” that all-purpose bugaboo, was his stalwart resistance to

quasi-therapeutic subjectivism of the “I’m okay, you’re okay,” variety. This, for Lasch, was a cop-out, a way to stop forming and expressing moral judgements altogether. This strange suspension of specific moments of judgement goes hand-in-glove, of course, with an often violent rhetoric of condemnation of whole categories of persons, past and present—that all purpose villain, the Dead White European Male comes to mind. This is, of course, a rotten deal all the way ‘round, a way to promote and to deepen the worst trends and tendencies of our increasingly tawdry time. Ruling that “anything goes” means that what will go is our ability to assess what is going on: of this Lasch was convinced and he saw that this was not a matter to be adjudicated on the level of pure thought, no matter how clever, but on the streets and in the homes and neighborhoods of America.

Perhaps this is the point to remind us of Tocqueville’s warnings about “What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear” by way of situating Lasch’s work in a longer train of observations on America. Tocqueville’s worst-case scenario has quite a bit to do with judging or, better put, no longer being able to discern the better from the worse, the excellent from the mediocre, slavishness from self-responsibility. Democratic despotism, according to Tocqueville, would have a “different character” from the tyranny of the Old World. “It would be more widespread and milder; it would degrade men rather than torment them.”¹³ What Tocqueville saw was citizens withdrawing into themselves, circling around one another in pursuit of “the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls.” The exercise of free choice becomes rarer, the activity of free will occurs “within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties.”

The words Tocqueville uses to describe this state of things are “hinder...restrain...enervate...stultify.” Losing over time the “faculty of thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves,” these citizens “slowly fall below the level of humanity.” Now Tocqueville, no more than Lasch, talks about the collapse of the faculty of judgement in a specific sense, or the rise in instances of shameless in a

quite concrete way, but these, surely, are at stake in the judgements each made, in his very different time and place, about America's perils and possibilities. Each would insist that knowing shame and being capable of judgement are central to, indeed constitutive of, a democratic capacity for self-governance. Each helps us to disentangle, analyze, separate, discern and, in so doing, locates us in the heart of a world of others—not apart but among our fellow men and women. The conviction of Lasch, Arendt, and all those who stress both our finitude and our capacity for judgement is that, from the complex processes of discernment, we will come to a recognition of limits that generates generous and decent hope. Arendt insisted that hope was the source of our capacity to act. Optimism may drive us but it invites unwarranted certainty and, over the long run, is a recipe for cynicism. That contemporary American culture generates cynicism about its own civic affairs and almost delirious optimism about its economy is a recipe for both recklessness and failure. But hope, ever fresh, kindles anew that spirit that, at its best, renews democracy and the human spirit.

Notes

¹Obviously, this tradition is not cut from one piece of cloth. But the attempt to “cure” the universe and to protect a body politic from what Lasch might call the “ravages” of time is a powerful and oft-repeated theme.

²This in a Harper's Magazine forum.

³Cited from “The Illusion of Disillusionment,” from “The Soul of Man Under Secularism,” *Harper's Magazine* (July, 1991, pp. 19-22), p. 21.

⁴I here draw upon my discussion from *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 20-41). The text in question is, of course, Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

⁵There are those who claim Plato was being ironic about this whole business. I am not interested in that debate. Suffice it to say that many, including myself, take the text at its word and ponder what sort of world it invites and what sort of world it aims to cure.

⁶Here, too, see *Public Man, Private Woman* (pp. 127-148) and, as well, my essay, “What's Love Got to Do With It?” an essay on Mill against the passions in *Salmagundi* #114-115 (Spring-Summer 1997): 166-181.

⁷I do not mean to suggest that she would agree wholeheartedly with my irreverent tweaking of thinkers she much admired but that she would concur with the dangers I locate in the tradition of political philosophy she herself revered.

⁸Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Beyond Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968, 227-264), p. 231.

⁹New York: MacMillan, 1971, p. 12.

¹⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall/Temptation* (New York: MacMillan, 1959), p. 78.

¹¹Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 532.

¹²This appears in the fragment on "Judging" left incomplete at the time of her death. See *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1978), pp. 257-258.

¹³Cites are from the one-volume edition of *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 691.

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