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Author(s): Fred Siegel

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THE AGONY OF CHRISTOPHER LASCH

Fred Siegel

"We fed the heart on fantasies/It's grown brutal from the fare."
— Yeats

Jeremiads declaiming our depravity, decline from republican virtue, or, more recently, psychological "sicknesses" are staples of American culture. What then distinguishes Christopher Lasch's pronouncements of damnation from a host of others that have appeared recently? Why have Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977) and *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) rushed to the head of this parade, becoming required reading at the White House and attracting coverage from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People*? The answer, in part, lies in the way his fresh-sounding arguments about the decline of the family, paternal authority, and genuine individualism are linked to that hoary and perennial danger, Big Government. Here is old wine in an attractive new bottle. Cries about the decline of virtue and true individualism sound hackneyed when they come from an avowed conservative, but when a man of the left, who also takes great pains to insist on the importance of history, talks about narcissism as something new and terrible we are inclined to listen.

While Lasch has attracted a large new audience, his old readership, the veteran radicals of the 1960s, reared on his criticisms of Cold War liberalism and beguiled by his exposition of an antiauthoritarian Socialist tradition, feel betrayed. With a few exceptions they have mourned the old Lasch, the author of *The New Radicalism in America* (1965) and *The Agony of the American Left* (1969), and have tried to bury his new arguments about the need for order and authority within the family and, by extension, within society at large. While some critics have tended to caricature his discussion of the family, they are certainly correct in seeing an almost Victorian longing for a heroic strength of character, or at least stability of character, as informing *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism*.

New admirers and detractors alike, however, have failed to see the strong continuities between his earlier and recent essays. Lasch's contentions about patriarchy, feminism, the cult of experience, and the dangers of social engineering which have made him the white crow of the American left were

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already fully developed in his first major work, *The New Radicalism in America*, although they were presented there without any of the Freudian trappings he has recently adopted. Then and now Lasch presented an intriguing blend of elitist and anarchist sentiments, a "Tory manner and radical principles" redolent of that cantankerous foe of modernity, the radical libertarian Albert J. Nock.

Both the praise and criticism of Lasch have been focused on the political surface of his books without examining the assumptions that inform them. In *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism* Lasch presents himself as a guardian of tradition standing watch against the sirens of sweet mindlessness. Appalled by the way contemporary culture reduces ideas to opinions and dissolves intellect into emotion, he insists on the integrity, indeed the ruthlessness, of the intellect as a guide through the swamps of feeling. Lasch is convinced that the false egalitarianism of opinion and emotion rationalizes the life-sapping mediocrity of middle-class and bureaucratic America. The question is whether there is a significantly new truth in Lasch's critique and, if so, whether his arguments are based on a solid intellectual footing. For when Lasch's account of narcissism is placed in the context of the corpus of his writings, the historical bases and intellectual solidity of his arguments become suspect. If two of the prime characteristics of narcissism are a subservience to the mood of the moment and a failure to take ideas seriously, Lasch himself displays the condition he criticizes.

America's damnation, as described in *The Culture of Narcissism*, is foreshadowed in *The New Radicalism in America*, Lasch's seminal and even brilliant effort, in which he is torn between hostility to bourgeois society and distaste for its critics. Written at the time of the celebrated estrangement between the "vulgar" Johnson and the intellectuals, Lasch's characterization of the intellectuals as a distinct social type had an immediate resonance. The book opens in the late nineteenth century with the very arguments about the collapse of patriarchy which are at the core of *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism*. The problem, as Lasch saw it, was that for the emerging intellectual of late-nineteenth-century America, "life in respectable families no longer seemed merely boring and pointless; it gave off an atmosphere of actual decay." Repelled by the enervating world of middle class gentility and unable to find comfort or guidance in religion, this "new class" of intellectuals, typified for Lasch by Jane Addams, saw themselves as outside the conventional bounds of society and came to identify with the outcasts—the poor, immigrants, blacks, and Indians. This new class, according to Lasch, found in the sensual vitality of slum life the "experience and purpose they were looking for in their own lives." Devouring

this experience with a Jamesean fervor for experimentation, they plunged into the life of slum communities to try to reform them. But in submerging themselves, they lost the capacity for an intellectual perspective detached from that effort. In Phillip Rahv's terms, they were intellectual redskins who embraced the swirling energy of America while they rejected the merely intellectual as a pale-faced mask of middle class hypocrisy.¹

While most other writers had hailed the altruistic efforts of the new class, Lasch saw that reform solved the personal problems of the new class only at the cost of drying up the very experience they revered. For once in the slums their eagerness "to cannalize aberrant passions, to substitute the carrot for the whip, provided a rationale for a kind of coercive social engineering, a philosophy of adjustment." The rest, for Lasch at least, was history; what followed was the smooth society of corporate capitalism and the conformity of the Cold War.

Lasch's attitude toward the "new class" was ambivalent. On the one hand he shared the new class's contempt for American middle class life; on the other, he saw that despite claims to altruism their politics were an extension of their personal compulsions. This tension ripples through Lasch's discussion of Randolph Bourne. Lasch clearly admires Bourne as an uncompromising critic of bourgeois morality, but he is uneasy with Bourne's indulgent worship of youthful self-expression. He notes that "in the conventional sense Bourne had no politics at all. His politics remained largely an extrapolation from his own emancipation from the cultural stagnation" of his home town (*New Radicalism*, p. 81). With Bourne, as with Addams, Lasch penetrated the idealistic rhetoric of generational rebellion and, in a striking passage which builds on the insights of David Reisman, Lasch places Bourne's rebellion as the precursor of what would become a stylized pattern: "even 'rebellion' no longer accurately described the relations of young people whether delinquent or merely beat to American society, because their gestures of rebellion have long since lost their meaning and have become instead gestures of conformity to the culture of their contemporaries." And he goes on to argue that "with the decay of older transmitters of cultural continuity—particularly the family and the school—the culture of contemporaries claims young people . . . by default" (*New Radicalism*, p. 69).

Freedom from the constraints of tradition allowed Bourne the unhindered pursuit of self-expression, but it also led to an intense and almost obsessive concern with constructing the personal relations needed to replace the older, abandoned family ties. This concern with the conditions of friendship, which in some ways foreshadowed the personal-relations psychologizing of post-World War II America, led in part to Bourne's redefining politics to include the private realms of childhood, education, and sex which had previously

been reserved for arts and letters. By making what had been private political, Bourne and others extended politics and thus government "into the most intimate areas of existence." To say (as Bourne did) that politics was of no use unless it could improve the very tone and quality of peoples' lives was to argue in effect that "every aspect of existence was ultimately a question for political decision" (*New Radicalism*, p. 90). Here was the interventionist seed whose malevolent flowering Lasch would portray in *Haven in a Heartless World*.

Even before the 1960s slogan "the personal is political" took hold, Lasch foresaw the danger of collapsing the private realm into the public:

. . . every emotion, it appears, had been subtly politicized. Friendship, once an ideal in itself, could thrive now only in the context of larger expectations. The private and the public blended imperceptibly together . . . Private pursuits came to seem sterile and unproductive unless vested with political meaning; while politics . . . came more and more to serve as a screen not as a forum for the resolution of competing interests, but as a screen on which men's inner ambitions and secret fears were most vividly projected. The politics of the conflict of interest when it did not give way altogether, came to be increasingly overwhelmed with the politics of fantasy (*New Radicalism*, p. 227).

Here was the basis for a politics which would cast no shadows.

The New Radicalism in America was a devastating critique of American generational rebellion, with its confusion of the personal and the political, its exaltation of sexuality and the cult of experience, its displaced religious energy, and its hidden motives for identifying with the poor. Who, then, more than Lasch, should have been capable of criticizing effectively the romantic excesses of the New Left? As Alfred Kazin put it in reviewing *The New Radicalism*, "the whole point of his [Lasch's] biographical method is to refute the older and more usual thesis that the new radicals were more sensitive than others to social outrage." As a man of the left on political and social issues, Lasch should have been in the forefront of the effort to sort out the confusions between the therapeutic mock politics of public display and the legitimate politics of public protest. But Lasch remained largely silent on this problem during the heat of battle, while others on the left, like Irving Howe, spoke out at the risk of generational isolation.

While Lasch remained strangely silent, middle-of-the-road liberals and conservatives writing for magazines like the *Public Interest* assimilated his ideas about the self-serving quality of reformers into their critiques of both the New Left and the Great Society. By the late 1970s, when Lasch openly expressed his criticisms of the New Left, the cultural conservatism he shared with the *Public Interest* writers (now called neoconservatives) was expressed

in parallel concerns about the decline of authority and the dangers of big government. Lasch had become the left counterpart to the neoconservative chorus. But by then some of Lasch's worst fears about the close connection between the desire to do good and the desire to control had been realized as many of the radicals of the sixties had become the welfare bureaucrats and government social engineers of the seventies. Here then, in Lasch's refusal to speak out about his own ideas, was one of the signal intellectual failures of the 1960s.

The treason of the intellectuals figures prominently in all of Lasch's writing. Presenting himself as an American Julian Benda, Lasch concludes his praise for the French intellectual Jacques Ellul by suggesting that "because Ellul does criticize the left, and because he denies the primacy of politics, many radicals will regard him as a traitor to their cause." Lasch goes on to warn, however, that "the real betrayal . . . is the radical intellectuals' subordination of their own work to political passions (*The World of Nations*, p. 293). But in Lasch's own writing of the late sixties, collected in *The Agony of the American Left*, he confined his criticism of cultural radicalism to some occasional asides. Instead of extending his *New Radicalism* analysis to a new wave of generational rebels against middle class culture, Lasch passionately enlisted in the cause.

In the *Agony* and other writings of the period, Lasch's arguments are peppered with references to the then fashionable cries about the imminence of fascism in America, but nowhere is his subservience to the passions more clearly spelled out than in his unstinting and uncritical praise for Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967). Lasch's au courant ardor for Cruse's pronouncements on black politics led him to act out the treason of the intellectuals even as he denounced it. His long essay on Cruse failed to note Cruse's own version of the cult of experience nor did it hint at the book's rancid anti-Semitism.

Cruse argued that a Jewish-Communist-Zionist conspiracy had foisted a sterile rationalism on Harlem's black intellectuals. This, to quote Cruse, "allowed a bona fide cultural movement, which issued forth from the social system as naturally as a gushing spring to degenerate into a pampered and paternalized vogue." The power of the Jews was such that, according to an extraordinary statement by Cruse, "the Zionists . . . during a period when German Jews were really and truly helpless against the German genocidal assault, were able to launch a uniquely successful movement in America for the aid of these European Jews . . ." (pp. 12, 491). Was this a cruel joke? It was no joke to Lasch, for apropos of the age of hype, he concluded the introduction to *The Agony of the American Left* by pronouncing Cruse's *Crisis* one of the landmarks of twentieth-century social criticism.²

Lasch's account of campus radicalism and the potential for a new majority built around the university was another concession to the mood of the times. For a brief moment it appeared that those who thought of themselves as men of taste and vision could play a leading role in politics. Lasch built on that appearance to insist that: "the basis for a new politics going well beyond 'radical liberalism' already exists. . . . The immediate constituency for a radical movement, it is clear lies in the professions, in sections of suburbia, in the ghetto and above all in the university, which more than any other institution has become a center of radicalism" (*Agony of the American Left*, p. 201). He acknowledged the romantic and nihilistic tendency of students; but suggested that they could be disciplined through the creation of a revolutionary party which would curb these tendencies and provide "theoretical direction." To his credit, however, he insisted that repression was self-defeating and that the left had to be concerned with the defense of civil liberties, if only in self-defense, for he went on to warn that "the petty-bourgeois are already preparing . . . for an American version of fascism" (*Agony*, p. 207). In *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism* the danger of fascism persisted, but now the roles were reversed and it was the intellectuals and university types who were engineering a new version of fascism, paternalism, while the little people were standing firm as a bulwark against an overweening government.

Although Lasch showed a reluctance to question the motives of student radicals while taking their ideas very seriously, he explained the politics of anti-Communist intellectuals almost entirely in terms of their "hidden" motives while refusing to engage in all but the most cursory discussion of their ideas. In the closing sections of *The New Radicalism* he tries to bring his account of the intellectuals as a social type up through the thirties and into the Cold War. Bypassing virtually all of the major intellectual debates of the period, he argues that Cold War intellectuals like Niebuhr and Hook became enmeshed in (what I agree was) a disastrously blind anticommunism because they fell prey to a pragmatic and hard-boiled view of the world. These intellectuals, he goes on, eschewed their roles as independent beacons of intellect out of a need to be part of America. Unable to stand the isolation of a critical posture, they too revelled in the cult of experience which allowed them to join the American celebration. Having "exposed" their petty motives, Lasch, pointing to the fearsome consequences of the Cold War, can then proceed to dismiss their ideas without ever examining the events of the thirties and forties that these and other thinkers were responding to. But finally what is most striking about Lasch's argument is that he merely asserts this motivation; he gives no evidence for it.

Lasch's work, whether it concerns the collapse of patriarchy or the growth of Cold War liberalism, has been marked by a studied unwillingness to take either ideas or politics on their own terms. Rather he has chosen at first to sociologize and now to psychoanalyze the figures he has studied. Such a method clearly bore fruit in analyzing someone like Jane Addams, who was not primarily an intellectual, but can such an approach do justice to someone like Sidney Hook? Is it really possible to talk about Hook's anticommunism without discussing his philosophical critiques of Leninism or the impact of the Moscow Trials? And what of Phillip Rahv, that spokesman for the intellect, that paleface among palefaces? Does the cult of experience explain why, after opposing fascism but refusing to become part of the cheering section for America during World War II on Socialist grounds, Rahv opened the postwar era with his own anti-Communist crusade? Or what of Dennis Wrong, whose critique of Cold War consensus sociology and Freudian revisionism Lasch was to adopt as his own: can his anticommunism be explained without reference to the events and ideas, even if mistaken, of the period?

In the preface to the *Agony*, Lasch approvingly quotes Paul Goodman on the task of the intellectuals. The young, Goodman says, "are honorable and see the problems, but they don't know anything because we have not taught them anything" (p. vii). This is precisely the problem of Lasch's reductionism. By avoiding the ideas and events of the thirties and forties, he misses the chance to deal with the moral and political dilemmas of that period, which, if studied, might have helped provide the New Left with a sense of the complexity and moral ambiguity of political action it so sorely lacked. He might have asked, for instance, how it was that intellectuals who shared Hook's hatred of Russia and even borrowed a great deal of Hook's critique of Leninism—as have many non-Communist leftists—were able to maintain their balance in the postwar years while Hook drifted off into a frozen hatred.

Would the New Left have been as vulnerable to the malign metastasis of the Leninism and Maoist sects if its mentors had challenged their reflexive posture of a simple anti-anticommunism? Isn't such a reflexive posture what, in Lasch's own view, intellectuals like himself are there to guard against? What if people like Lasch had, along with their critiques of the Vietnam War and American imperialism, discussed, if only in a minor key, the question of when it was proper to break with the American Communist party over the issue of Stalinism? Hold the answer aside. I would suggest that such a discussion would have posed a number of crucial moral and political questions about means and ends which could not have helped but

mature the New Left intellectually. And what better way would there have been to approach the theory Lasch is so heartily in favor of, but which was never achieved, than by coming to grips with the sophisticated theories of men like Hook and Niebuhr, instead of dismissing them out of hand only later faintly to recapitulate their arguments.³

With his most recent books, *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch has returned with operatic pitch to the dangers of social engineering and the worship of society—what Paul Goodman called sociolatry—first enunciated in *The New Radicalism in America*. The new twist is that he has adopted the orthodox Freudian insistence on the unavoidable conflict between culture and instinct to buttress his earlier views and flay the student radicals of the sixties. Now at a safe distance, he attributes their failures not to any intellectual errors on the part of their mentors but to the unsuccessful resolution of their Oedipal problems, an oblique way of suggesting that they lacked the character to carry out the hopes Lasch had invested in them.

Lasch insists in orthodox Freudian fashion that the unconscious represents an inaccessible domain untamable by social blandishments. It becomes the saving remnant, the untamed proletariat of the mind which stands as the source of future regeneration.

In effect Lasch has drawn upon the Freudian notion of never-ending instinctual conflict in order to define a limit to the utopian fantasizing about a conflict-free world common to both student radicals and the psychologists of personal adjustment and the smooth society. Without recognizing it he has rediscovered the arguments about man's finitude, defined as original sin, made by the hated Niebuhr at the end of another period of utopian fantasizing. In an essay on Freud, Niebuhr noted the way Freud's concepts about the irreconcilable conflict between instinct and culture served as the functional equivalent to his own theological conception.⁴

Lasch insists on psychic conflict, but he sees little tension in the social realm. Viewing the social weal from a rationalist perspective he insists on a holistic (and thus deductive) view of American society. Insofar as the society at large is capitalist, he insists that this capitalist content spreads like the ripples of a dirty pond polluting all its constituent parts, which must also be capitalist. Thus Lasch is able to assert that the purpose of virtually all American sociological theorizing about the family has been unintentionally to aid the growth of an omniverous bureaucracy, both public and private, whose aim is to crush the possibility of personal autonomy and hence potential opposition to the capitalist juggernaut.⁵

Lasch achieves this harmony of intentions by moving through his "evi-

dence" with a present-minded perspective which denies the integrity of the past. In discussing the sociologist Charles H. Cooley, for instance, he turns Cooley's late-nineteenth-century arguments about the interpersonal nature of reality into an account of twentieth-century sociological rationalizations for industrial capitalism. Cooley's communal sociology evolved out of his desire to heal the wounds of a small-town America whose individualist and religious heritage was being depleted by the social impact of industrialization and the onslaught of science. By reading Cooley's motives backward from what Lasch sees as the pernicious consequences of his argument, Lasch is able to dismiss Cooley without noticing that Cooley's work was a response to the very same crisis of authority in a disenchanting world which Lasch himself is trying to come to grips with. Cooley elevated society to the status of a godhead because the earlier sources of authority, traditional religion and natural law, had been corroded by what Lippmann would later call the acids of modernity, acids whose seepage began well before the arrival of Lasch's Oedipal crisis.

Stripped of its Freudian jargon Lasch's account of narcissism is a reworking of the time-honored debate initiated by Tocqueville about how it was possible for the American democrat to be at the same time an outspoken individualist and characterless conformist. Lasch cites Tocqueville but never acknowledges the paradox. Instead, like David Reisman before him, he insists without evidence that once upon a time we were a nation of rugged individualists but that genuine individualism has been lost as the twentieth century has turned us all into other-directed narcissists. But what was so important about Tocqueville is that he saw that the extremes of individualism and conformity coexisted simultaneously as complementary components of America's democratic culture.

Lasch insists that the narcissists can be distinguished from earlier versions of the American individualist by their child-like vacillation between withdrawal and a sense of personal worthlessness and grandiose visions of power and omnipotence expressed in an identification with celebrity. But as Quentin Anderson has pointed out in *The Imperial Self* (1971) it is this alternation between the passive and the hyper-assertive which characterizes the American personality in the writings of Emerson, Whitman, and Henry James. Anderson suggests that Emerson saw the individual American as "not so much conscious of his rights, of his liberty, and of manifold opportunities as he is frozen before a spectacle so inclusive as to require an extravagant personal assertion, an identity founded on an equally inclusive personal claim." Rather than being something new the worship of celebrity is the product of a culture of democratic equality where larger-than-life figures are needed to fill the space between man and god.

If, as Lasch insists, the narcissist is a product of corporate capitalism and the welfare state, why is this narcissistic personality so much more pronounced in America than in Europe? Are the Europeans "rugged individualists"? Writing nearly a century ago the latter-day Emersonian, John Dewey, contended that for Americans "the universe has no existence except as absolutely realized in an individual, that is except in self-consciousness." "Psychology," he said, "is the democratic movement come to consciousness."⁶

Dewey, recognizing the diversity of American society and democratic insistence on personal authority, called for a common mode of approaching problems, the "scientific method," as a way of bringing people together. He thought that if people could not agree on outcomes they could at least be brought to agreement on process. Lasch, who is every bit as American as Dewey in his preoccupation with the individual, proposes to replace Dewey's scientific man with a new hero steeled in Freudian tough-mindedness. And, like Freud's predecessor Nietzsche, who railed on about how only the heroic individual could avoid being suffocated by Christian charity, Lasch thinks that only the tough-minded Freudian who is willing honestly to endure the inevitable conflicts of life will be able to escape from being smothered by a paternalistic government which promises to end all conflicts. Surveying the vast therapeutic apparatus created by well-meaning governmental reformers, Lasch is at one with Nietzsche and his American disciple, Albert J. Nock, in believing that "wherever the state ceases, the man who is not superfluous really begins: there begins the song of the necessary one, the unique and irreplaceable melody." In America the gentleman of taste and standards like Lasch becomes an anarchist of sorts. Unable to impose his values on a philistine society, he retreats from it and denies the legitimacy of its authority.

Adrift from society, Lasch's approach to intellectual history sets him adrift from the past. In *The New Radicalism in America* Lasch dismissed Henry Adams's quest for legitimate authority as the complaint of a failed aristocrat, but what is to prevent the reader from applying the same kind of sociological perspective to Lasch's own work? Following Lasch's approach there would be no more reason to pay any attention to the substance of his ideas than he paid to that of Henry Adams: what would be important would be his motivations and the consequences of his writing. Using his own method, *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism* would have to be dismissed as refractory projections of personal agonies. Similarly, his celebrity at the White House, his trip to Camp David, and the interview in *People Magazine* would indicate that Lasch's arguments were aimed at achieving the kind of political acceptance isolated intellectuals are known to crave.

Lasch is not the first for whom the taste of freedom has turned to ashes.

The sources of this agony, which John Diggins describes as “power without authority, knowledge without truth, society without spirit,” are as real as the phototropic students for whom “all is relative” and whose sense of time is measured by their digital watches. Yet Lasch’s ahistorical indictment (which is without measure or proportion) curiously exhibits the very culture of narcissism he decries. By relentlessly contextualizing the arguments of earlier thinkers he has cut himself off from the intellectual authority of the past even as he echoes its ideas.

Professor Siegel, Center for Labor Studies, Empire State College, State University of New York, is the author of “The Paternalist Thesis: Virginia as a Test Case,” Civil War History 25, no. 3 (September 1979) and of the forthcoming The Way We Were: America Since World War II.

1 See the essay “Paleface and Redskin” in Phillip Rahv’s *Image and Idea* (New York: New Direction Books, 1957). For Rahv the paleface and the redskin were symbolized by the “antipodes” of Henry James and Walt Whitman.

2. Cruse’s account of black Jewish history is probably best encapsulated in the way Cruse opened his discussion of black-Jewish relations after the Civil War with an approving quotation from the renowned expert on nineteenth-century American history, Feodor Dostoyevsky: “in America, in the Southern states, they [the Jews] have already leaped *en masse* upon the millions of liberated Negroes, and have already taken a grip upon them in their, the Jews own way, by means of the semi-eternal ‘gold pursuit’ and by taking advantage of the inexperience and vices of the exploited tribe . . . the negroes have now been liberated from the slaveowners, but that will not last because the Jews, of whom there are so many in the world, will jump at this new little victim” (p. 477).

3. An alternative might have been to discuss the way liberals who placed their faith in both government by law and a higher political rationality negotiated their politics when Stalinist lawlessness became apparent but while Russia still represented the hope for a “rational” economy in the 1930s.

4. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Human Creativity and Self-Concern in Freud’s Thought” in *Freud and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Meridian Books, 1967).

5. Lasch has taken Hofstadter’s sophisticated ideas about an American consensus and reduced them to a picture of total domination. See Lasch’s foreword to the 1973 edition of Richard Hofstadter’s *American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

6. Quentin Anderson, “John Dewey’s American Democrat,” *Daedalus* 108, no. 3 (Summer 1979).