

THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES AND THE BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY

(CHRISTOPHER LASCH)

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Christopher Lasch died before this, his last book, was published, twenty-six years ago. Lasch was a man out of time, a refugee leftist who nonetheless refused to embrace what passed for conservatism in the post-Communist false dawn, the main feature of which was idolatry of the invisible hand. No surprise, his message was rejected by its intended audience, America's intellectual class. Now, however, every one of the problems with our society he identified has grown monstrous, far beyond the power of any dragonslayer to kill. Thus, this book is, at least now, less prescription and more an intellectual history of how we failed as a nation.

Many on the modern Right (and some on the Left) think this book is important; it's often mentioned, at least, which is why I read it. But I don't think it is actually an important book. Most of what Lasch discusses here had been discussed for quite some time on the Right. His clever use of José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* as a parallel is muddled, rather than insightful, even if it probably has caused the book to be remembered more than it would be otherwise. Those on the Right who today discuss this book, as in a recent exchange between Nathan Pinkoski and Rod Dreher (in which Pinkoski is the more insightful, and accurately, if delicately, diagnoses Dreher's usual inability to follow his own premises to their inevitable conclusions), aren't really discussing Lasch's book. Rather, for them, his book is a ghostly talisman, proof that the descending arc of America is, in fact, descending.

Moreover, *The Revolt of the Elites* feels cobbled together. No doubt Lasch's impending death, to which he glancingly refers in his Acknowledgements, contributed to this feel. Several of the chapters are reprints of stand-alone articles that had already appeared, and are only obliquely related to the putative main theme of the book. One chapter, for example, attacks the early nineteenth-century educational ideologue Horace Mann, which, while it is interesting enough, doesn't really say anything about today. The reader's main emotion upon completing the book is therefore not a feeling of integrated insight, but simply sadness

for a time when an author, and his then-readers, could optimistically believe the monsters could be kept shut in their cave, if we only worked hard enough. I have not read some of Lasch's other well-regarded works, such as *The Culture of Narcissism* or *The True and Only Heaven*, but those are probably more unified in theme; they are longer, at least, and seem more focused. I'd start with those if you want to explore Lasch.

But I read this book, and here we are today, so let's make the best of it. We can get something out of it that we can use for the future. For Lasch, democracy meant not so much majority rule as it meant a society that enabled all to fully participate. The "betrayal of democracy" about which he was concerned has many elements, none of them directly connected to electoral politics, but all dictated by our ruling class. The strongest chapter is the first, one of only two new writings done for this book, also titled "The Revolt of the Elites."

That title, of course, is a direct response to Ortega's famous book, now nearly a hundred years old, which I have earlier analyzed at some length. Contrary to what is often assumed, Ortega was not making a point about economic or social class. His "mass men" were those, of any socioeconomic level, who refused to acknowledge, seek, and demand excellence, instead exalting mediocrity. Such mass men were, in his eyes, increasingly coming to dominate the upper reaches of society, and crowding out the elites, those who sought and insisted upon excellence and whose actions revolved around duty and obligation. (Among the worst of mass men, for Ortega, were so-called experts who thought a narrow expertise in one area qualified them to be leaders of society; during the Wuhan Plague, his excoriation of such mass men has proved particularly prescient.)

In Ortega's time, the 1930s, though they had lost ground, the elites were still mostly in charge, but the mass man was gaining fast. Lasch's claim is that by 1995, as Ortega had feared, the mass man had captured the elite stratum of society. But I think Lasch, unlike Ortega, introduces concepts of class into the idea of the mass man, conflating socioeconomic class with elite status, essentially identifying the elites as what would later come to be called the "professional-managerial elite." Despite beginning with Ortega, Lasch spends little time on excellence in the sense Ortega used it, and much more on the political divisions and stupidities the new elite has introduced to America. As a result, the

attempted parallel ends up more confusing than enlightening to the informed reader.

Lasch, accurately enough, attacks a long list of elite-dictated corruptions of American society. The control of wealth by an ever-smaller slice of Americans. The decline of real wages among the non-elite. Women being driven into the labor force and the consequent deleterious effects on family and children. Assortative mating and geographic sorting by class, both causes of the erosion of organic community. The elite turn to a globalized culture, with concomitant contempt for the average American. Credentialism and putative meritocracy, with the resulting pushing-down of anyone not able to seize a rung of the ladder, the destruction of any feeling of obligation, and again the erosion of organic community. The arrogance of the elites, the opposite of aristocratic pride with a corresponding sense of duty. Every single one of these problems has become dramatically worse since 1995; nothing has been done, or for that matter attempted, to reverse any of these problems, or their social consequences—which for Lasch are, most of all, the erosion of citizen participation in the life of the nation.

Narrowing his first chapter, the second chapter examines social mobility through this prism of elite corrosion. Both Right and Left have seen social mobility for decades as desirable, but Lasch shows how it is misunderstood, with deleterious consequences for democracy. He offers a sociological and historical examination of the concept in American life, with the goal of showing that social mobility is a relatively recent focus of our ruling classes. Until quite recently, in fact, the American ideal was not rising up through the class structure, but succeeding within one's own community and frame. Most of all, this meant becoming a proprietor, rather than a wage laborer—not someone who had an independent living, but someone who combined a small amount of capital with his labor, and who, in the American conception of democracy, had the opportunity "to mingle on an equal footing with persons from all realms of life, to gain access to larger currents of opinion, and to exercise the rights and duties of citizenship." This was the American conception, proudly distinct from what Americans saw as the limited and segregated European way of political and community life. Class as dictated by monetary resources was less important than this form of opportunity and participation, and this conception largely

prevented elite contempt for the population at large. The ideal was the classless society—to be sure, an ideal that would never be reached, but an aspiration for all Americans.

According to Lasch, education of the populace is crucial to such wide social participation—but not the type of education on offer today, initiated by the Progressives at the turn of the twentieth century, designed to offer social mobility in its new, modern sense. Those able to benefit from the new programmatic education did not form a classless society—quite the opposite, since social mobility allowing entrance to the elite actually reinforces the presence and dominance of that elite, rather than eroding social distinctions. This has made our society “highly stratified and highly mobile,” in the words of Wendell Berry that Lasch quotes. “[T]he concentration of corporate power, the decline of small-scale production, the separation of production from consumption, the growth of the welfare state, the professionalization of knowledge, and the erosion of competence, responsibility, and citizenship have made the United States into a society in which class divisions run far more deeply than they did in the past.” For Lasch, “the most important choice a society has to make” is “whether to raise the general level of competence, energy, and devotion—‘virtue,’ as it was called in an older political tradition—or merely to promote a broader recruitment of elites.” Of course, in the twenty-first century virtue is in very short supply among all segments of American society—but I think there is far more virtue outside the elites than inside the elites, and it should be possible to cultivate it, such that it thrives, once our current elites are entirely removed and replaced with a new elite that assists all levels of society.

If democracy, in Lasch’s sense, is no longer really democracy, does it deserve to survive? Lasch asks this question directly in another chapter, and offers an ambiguous answer. He seems to say that if certain trends continue, democracy does not deserve to survive. Unfortunately for us, those trends are precisely those that have exploded to nightmarish proportions since 1995—the cult of the victim; the belief that hewing to the standards of supposedly privileged groups is a sign of oppression (“a recipe for universal incompetence”); widespread inefficiency and corruption; widening inequality; and “the deterioration of our country’s material infrastructure.” “Formally democratic institutions do not guarantee a workable social order.” A misplaced compassion (which I

identify with, though Lasch does not, excessive feminization) pervades social relations, destroying the quest for excellence through the creation of double standards, which are “a recipe for second-class citizenship.” Despite the claims of some that institutions make a democracy work, Lasch says it is actually civic virtue that makes a democracy work—and we’ve been living off civic virtue borrowed from the past. Instead of civic virtue, we get demands for tolerance coupled with a rejection of universal standards, and we get demands for unearned respect of every person, no matter how meager his accomplishments or how great his failings. Once again, all these things have gotten far worse, along the same axes identified by Lasch.

While Lasch’s attacks on the elites in this first part of the book get the most attention, and they are certainly deserved, those attacks are much less important than his affirmative prescriptions for the right kind of society, which occupy the second part of the book. Not because those prescriptions will have any effect on our elites, who are a lost cause, and probably were even in 1995. Rather, because they can inform our new elite, after we wipe clean the slate. Lasch offers thoughts that revolve around, more or less, communitarianism and discourse.

By communitarianism, he does not mean the fake, astroturfed communitarianism of cretins such as David Brooks. Rather, he means the actual reestablishment of lost community. And by discourse, he means how members of society communicate among themselves as a whole society. “Civic life requires settings in which people meet as equals.” Much of what Lasch says has a resonance with the work of Chris Arnade, who in particular focuses on informal meeting places as does Lasch. Where neighborhood social intercourse disappears, and where those who control the levers of financial power of a town no longer live in or have any other connection to the town (as happened to, for one of many examples, Lancaster, Ohio, as chronicled in *Glass House*), civil society necessarily fractures, completely aside from what the elites of the larger nation may be doing, or not doing. Robust discourse, with its formation of networks, further helps democracy in that it pushes back against the idea that information flow and government action should be reserved to experts. It also helps bridge racial gaps, and in general, binds a society’s divisions. I note that one of the many heinous problems unnecessarily imposed on us by the hyper-feminized reaction to the

Wuhan Plague is the destruction of nearly all face-to-face discourse; Lasch would be appalled.

He would also be appalled by how American “conservatives” prostituted themselves to corporate and business interests over the past quarter century. Among the many idols of our elites that Lasch identifies as harmful to community, the divinization of the market is probably the one on which he focuses most, at least as it relates to normal men and women. (Identity politics and similar abominations receive much of his focus as well, but there the focus is the effects on the elites.) His analysis has much in common with Robert Nisbet, Jane Jacobs, and Wilhelm Röpke; he specifically adduces Jacobs. The overly-exalted market corrodes social cohesion, which results in the state inserting itself more and more into private lives and communities, weakening social trust, responsibility, and civic virtue. Lasch did not foresee the parallel idolatry of explosive consumerism, where cheap tat from China has become a substitute for community, a salve for the meaningless and empty lives of most Americans, but he would not be surprised, nor that the combination of the internet and an unwillingness to muzzle the market has exacerbated many of the problems he did identify, in particular increasing the power of those who rule the market.

The Revolt of the Elites was spat on by the elites when it came out; just read the review given to it by the *New York Times*. A prophet, and less a Jeremiah, and even less an ideological traitor, is never honored among his own. And Lasch pulled no punches in his attacks on precisely the type of person who wrote for the NYT, so they returned the favor. No matter, now; Lasch was proved right, but his enemies won the war.

Lasch asks, at one point, “How much longer can the spirit of free inquiry and open debate survive under these conditions?” Fifteen years, give or take, was the answer; by 2010 free inquiry and debate had taken their first major hits (going beyond the decades-long control by the Left of the major media), and now, with the massive and ever-more-aggressive iron clampdown by the Lords of Tech, we are seeing that the American future will be one of *samizdat*, just as in the Soviet Union—although, fortunately, of more efficient *samizdat*, enabled to circulate far faster due to technological aids that help route around censorship. (This week Amazon announced it intends to hugely increase censorship on its Amazon Web Services platform, which powers forty percent of the

internet, and whose censorship was a key element of destroying Parler when that service threatened the narrative hegemony of the Left.) No matter. We're going to win the future, because we're going to win the next war, and while this book may not be crucial in forming the future (I'd point to books like Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* for that), Lasch did what he could to help point the way, for which he should be honored.