

**THE TRUE AND ONLY HEAVEN:  
PROGRESS AND ITS CRITICS**  
(CHRISTOPHER LASCH)

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It is common knowledge that the vast majority of sociology is completely worthless, or worse than worthless, and that “social science” is an oxymoron. Still, the study of the societies of man can be a worthwhile discipline, as a branch of humanities, not the sciences. To be sure, the number of modern authors writing in this discipline who are valuable can be counted on one hand, the hand of a man who earlier had an accident involving a table saw. But Christopher Lasch, who died thirty years ago, should be counted in that small group, and this work, his attack on the American gospel of eternal progress, is even more relevant today than when it was written in 1991.

Lasch, who died in 1994, 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. (His “turn away from leftism” began when he chose to “question the left’s program of sexual liberation, careers for women, and professional child care.”) No surprise, his message was rejected not only by his peers, but by its intended broader audience, America’s intellectual class. For none of his works was that more true than his last, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, published immediately after he died (he had refused chemotherapy for metastatic cancer, saying “I despise the cowardly clinging to life, purely for the sake of life, that seems so deeply ingrained in the American temperament.”). That book was a frontal attack on the professional-managerial elite, the slice of society at the top quintile, a group which has only tightened its parasitical stranglehold on America in the past thirty years.

Since Lasch’s day, every one of the problems with our society he talked about has grown to monstrous size. The only group pushing back has been the Right—not Uniparty Republicans (what Lasch thought of as the Right), but the actual Right, which has never had any power at all, and therefore had no success at all. Thus, it has seemed, in the decades since this book, that there was nothing to be done, which led some on the Right to adopt the position of Scrutonism, in love with

being a beautiful loser. But in one of history's inevitable unexpected twists, the heady days of early 2025 feel like a new dawn, suggesting as the actual Right gains power that finally, maybe, we can execute solutions for some of our society's problems. Lasch's thought is very valuable for clearly identifying and delineating those problems, which makes his books eminently worth studying.

The book's title comes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1843 short story, "The Celestial Railroad." In that tale, a technologically-updated takeoff on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Hawthorne satirized progressive religious leaders of his day. In his modern version of *Vanity Fair*, Bunyan's city of worldly distractions which tempts Christians to stray from the straight path, its residents claim it to be "the true and only heaven," and reject any interest in the actual Celestial City, further up the road. What Lasch means to imply is that Americans have long been seduced by past progress, or apparent progress, primarily economic but also moral, into believing that progress is the be-all and end-all of human existence, the "promised land." They further believe, falsely, that such progress can be infinitely extended and multiplied, and that this "truth" makes consideration of all other values unimportant.

Lasch's overarching aim in this book is to reject "the old political ideologies," which "have exhausted their capacity to explain events or to inspire men and women to constructive action." He refers, first, to the ideology he calls "liberalism." In Lasch's typology, this is not precisely the Left, although there is a large overlap. Rather, it means at root economic liberalism, a type of political economy, resulting from the intersection of the Industrial Revolution with lines of Left-allied thought derived from the so-called Enlightenment. The second ideology is that of the "New Right," by which Lasch means Reaganism. (He mentions only a handful of other Right figures as not part of the New Right, notably the illustrious Paul Gottfried, still alive and vindicated more every day, and correctly ascribes to them little power or relevance to mainstream social thought, in 1991 at least.) Most of Lasch's focus in this six-hundred-page book, however, is on liberalism, counterpoised against those American thinkers who rejected liberalism. They were not men of the Right, but they rejected belief in progress—not in favor of some other ideology, but because of the defects they saw in liberalism. The frame of the book is an exhaustive tracing of the thought of

both the apostles of progress and their critics, despite, or because of, that the latter are largely forgotten and the former are embedded into the premises of modern America.

Lasch blames liberalism for 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.” By “progress” he means primarily an increase in consumption, although he also means, to some degree, supposed progress in social organization, most of all in the suppression of the traditional core moral values of the “petty bourgeoisie.” Lasch believes that the hard limit on progress is resource depletion and environmental catastrophe, and that the soft limit is that when progress is made the only important goal for a society it ultimately destroys the fiber of that society. We have lost “a sense of limits,” and without that, we will all come to grief. (No doubt Lasch would have thought highly of Thomas Sowell’s famous *A Conflict of Visions*, a similar work which counterpoises the “constrained vision” with the “unconstrained vision.”)

The author begins, naturally enough, with a discussion of how the modern conception of progress arose. He rejects the idea that the modern belief in progress is a secularized version of the Christian idea of providence, an idea pushed by Robert Nisbet and A. J. P. Taylor. (The sheer volume of thought discussed in this book is daunting; Lasch weaves analysis of hundreds of works and dozens of authors into his study.) Rather, “The modern conception of progress depends on a positive assessment of the proliferation of wants.” Christianity promises an ultimately happy ending for mankind, but modernity promises instead “steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all.” This collective Western belief in progress “provides the solution to the puzzle that is otherwise so baffling—the resilience of progressive ideology in the face of discouraging events that have shattered the illusion of utopia.” This belief, which Lasch refers to, somewhat confusingly, both as “capitalism” and as “progressivism,” has its origin in Adam Smith, who first spread the notion that “insatiable appetites, formerly condemned as a source of social instability and personal unhappiness, could drive the economic machine.” And this machine would, America was told by our most influential thinkers, allow us to escape from the cycle of civilizations, rise followed by decay. Instead, we could rise forever, through the new chimera of unlimited wants inevitably leading to unlimited progress.

The turn to this way of thinking in the West had many downstream real-life consequences. The nineteenth-century “cult of domesticity,” for example, had nothing to do with subjection of women; it was a progressive doctrine, because “a well-ordered family life allegedly generated the demand for improvements that assured the unlimited expansion of capitalist production.” Similarly, elevating workers out of poverty and oppressive working conditions “multiplied their wants”—which was a good thing. But these benefits were an illusion—“The more closely capitalism came to be identified with immediate gratification and planned obsolescence, the more relentlessly it wore away the moral foundations of family life.” This was because the belief in progress as the highest good implied emancipation from all unchosen bonds—“the right to make a fresh start whenever earlier commitments became unduly burdensome.” Moreover, as a result of progress becoming defined as ever-increasing luxury and ease, both the tragic and heroic views of life, based in hard-learned reality, were thrown out the window, despite the absolute necessity of those views for a strong society.

Progress meant the past had to be dismissed; the future was not to be informed by the wisdom of the past, at all. Lasch shows that the prophets of never-ending progress used claims of nostalgia as a weapon, assuming without arguing that the past was discredited in order to avoid discussing whether it was better or worse (a sin of which the odious John Dewey and even-more-odious Richard Hofstadter were particularly guilty). Denigration of alleged nostalgia was used to “enable sophisticated observers of the cultural scene to dismiss resistance to change as irrational, to equate loving memory with escapism, and to shore up a faltering faith in the future without explaining why such a faith was justified.” (Lasch also notes something I often point out—the idea that there is always a “conflict of generations” is completely ahistorical, a tendentious creation of twentieth-century leftists.) For Lasch, progress means “optimism,” an unthinking belief that everything will always get better, disdainful of the past. “Hope,” by contrast, is the belief that some things can get better some of the time, within the limits set by nature, already known to us, if we pay heed, because our ancestors experienced those limits.

And then we get into the meat of the book. We trace critics of progress, from Jonathan Edwards to Thomas Carlyle, through Ralph Waldo

Emerson and William James, and up to the present day, deeply analyzing their thought and linking it to both what and whom they criticized. We go through "The Sociological Tradition and the Idea of Community," detailing the ideas of everyone from Edmund Burke to Karl Marx. We spend fifty pages on "The Populist Campaign Against 'Improvement,'" discussing William Cobbett, Orestes Brownson, Tom Paine, Samuel Gompers, and many more.

By a close analysis of these writers, whose works were sprawling and do not always fit particularly well together, Lasch constructs a coherent line of thought attacking progress. These men had many concerns, but most revolved around the breaking of social bonds which resulted from treating labor as a commodity, a seemingly-inevitable trend as America industrialized. Their fundamental belief, with respect to economic organization, was that "small-scale proprietorship [the essence of the petty bourgeoisie] conferred moral independence, self-respect, and responsibility." They objected to the atomization inherent in progress, demanding instead "populism"—meaning not more electoral power for the common man, but that he be independent of concentrations of economic power, autarkic, his own master, rather than a wage slave. Lasch describes this as "the struggle to preserve the moral virtues conferred by property ownership against the combined threat of wage labor and the collectivization of property." Closely tied to populism, and a term also occurring throughout this book, is "producerism"—the belief that society should focus on tangible production, and reward producers, not the lords of capital. (Lasch would have had nothing but derision for the fantasy that so-called "AI" will lead to unlimited abundance from above.)

The needed independence of men and women from the economic machine, and how that independence was slowly squeezed out of the American system, is a recurrent theme of the book. Ever-increasing industrialization meant, in order to maximize output and therefore progress, that every man (and woman) had to become a wage worker, shorn of any real power. Early unions, for example, were those of artisans, opposed to being forced into the factory system, but they were unable to withstand the onslaught of progress. Agricultural populism and producerism were the last to be defeated, but defeated they were. Instead, America got Taylorism, the desperate lust for efficiency at the cost of humanity.

Then, turning from philosophy to actual rearguard battles against the loss of worker independence, we survey thought and action tied directly to the intersection of economics and politics, most of all syndicalism. Among most people today, syndicalism is forgotten, but it was once one of the most powerful currents of thought related to labor and capital. Syndicalism was an attempt to solve the problems of the wage system—that not only did it erode autonomy, it eroded both virtue and the ingraining of heroism among the populace, leading to “desiccation,” in the term favored by James.

The apostle of syndicalism was the Frenchman Georges Sorel, implacable enemy of the Enlightenment and modernity, though most remembered today for *Reflections On Violence*, his somewhat chaotic thought on how the working man could only through violent class warfare protect his rights against the extractive segment of society. In its simplest form syndicalism was the proposal that workers own the means of production, not directly but through unions as their representatives and collective actors. It was not a movement of the Left. The “scandal of syndicalism” was that “it was retrograde but obviously revolutionary and therefore difficult for people on the left to dismiss.” It “fell outside the broad consensus in favor of progress, centralization, and distributive democracy. It undercut the Marxist claim to offer the only radical alternative to the capitalist regimentation of the workplace. It forced Marxists to justify their program on the grounds of superior efficiency, on the increasingly implausible grounds that only a socialist state could assure prosperity for all, or on vague appeals to the progress of the human race.” (I note in passing that William “Big Bill” Haywood, a leading syndicalist with a strong Marxist streak, who ultimately fled to Bolshevik Russia after being convicted under the Espionage Act for opposing Woodrow Wilson’s involving America in World War I, and who is buried in the wall of the Kremlin, is not related to me.)

Syndicalism was closely related to other proposals for addressing modern working-class discontents, such as guild socialism and Hilaire Belloc’s distributism, found in his classic *The Servile State*. Both these were opposed to state socialism, exemplified at this time by Fabianism and Marxism. All these lines of thought other than Marxism were ultimately absorbed in the twentieth century into what is generally called social democracy—the attempt to achieve power in a democratic system to

serve the interests of the workers. And whatever the successes of social democracy, they did not include restoring any real autonomy to the workers, or the restoration of any of community, virtue, or heroism. Not only were workers defeated, but it became common wisdom, in part through the contemptuous attacks of men such as Herbert Croly and H. L. Mencken, that the working class could not be trusted to even understand its own interests, and that the “civilized minority” must rule in their real interests—meaning the interests of progress, administered by supposed experts, who would sweep away the stupid petty bourgeois prejudices of the masses. (Lasch’s evisceration of Theodor Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality*, the Platonic form of this genre, is alone worth the price of admission for this book.)

And, finally, Lasch demonstrates that the Reaganite New Right of the 1980s, supposedly bitterly opposed to progress, not only failed to resist any of this, rather it actively participated in and advanced every part. (He does not mention Margaret Thatcher, but she would have been an even better example of the failure of 1980s “conservatism” to conserve anything.) The New Right paid lip service to supporting the family and the middle class, while all its actions eroded both, especially by requiring women to work outside the household in the interests of progress. (Lasch never mentions Gross Domestic Product, but in many ways this book is an extended attack on the idolatrous cult of GDP.) “Ritual deference to ‘traditional values’ cannot hide the right’s commitment to progress, unlimited growth, and acquisitive individualism.” He does not use the term “Uniparty,” but what he identifies is the early incarnation of that loathsome phenomenon, the political arm of the “new class,” meaning the professional-managerial elite, “knowledge workers,” devout acolytes of progress. He sees no obvious way out, but he still holds out hope. “A populism for the twenty-first century would bear little resemblance to the new right or to populist movements in the past. But it would find much of its moral inspiration in the popular radicalism of the past and more generally in the wide-ranging critique of progress, enlightenment, and unlimited ambition that was drawn up by moralists whose perceptions were shaped by the producers’ view of the world.”

I am not totally sure what I thought about this book. While much of it is profound, a work of history and political philosophy as much as of sociology, the impact of its fierce erudition is undercut by throwing

in too many ancillary topics. For example, there is a long discursive analysis about Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King in a chapter titled "The Spiritual Discipline Against Resentment." Even though it does contain an interesting further analysis of Lasch's recurrent theme of the difference between hope and optimism, and outlines how King turned from populism in Lasch's sense to (under the tutelage of Stanley Levison) radical Left politics, much of what is here is tangential to the main point of the book. The reader gets the impression that Lasch took a kitchen sink approach in order to weave in all the lines of thought he found interesting over several decades, which makes the book feel impressive, but yet somehow lacking. A shorter book might have been better.

Lasch's analysis of limits also suffers from the false assumption that America's inherent duty is to bring the same material benefits to the globe that Americans have earned for themselves. The truth, however, is that we have no responsibility at all to Europe, which is killing itself, or to Africa, or to any other place. America for the Americans. All places that are not as materially well-off as America are that way solely through their own fault, a lack in their peoples or their cultures. If, as we should, we focused solely on American interests, as a nation, not as empire, many of the limits Lasch identifies would fall away. Not entirely, true, and certainly this would not, of itself, in any way alleviate the moral and spiritual afflictions that a belief in endless progress has brought to America.

In any case, the core conflict Lasch identified, between those who can see only the benefits of progress and those who also see the limits to progress, is still very much with us. Under Donald Trump, faint glimmers can be seen of populism, in the sense in which Lasch uses it. But they are only glimmers; Trump himself, as can be seen in his recent insanely optimistic AI-generated video of a renewed Gaza, sees progress as the main goal for America and the world, the "Golden Age." True, he, and even more J. D. Vance, are primarily focused on the flourishing of real Americans and bringing to heel the leechlike professional-managerial elite, which in the past thirty years has placed the spreading of globohomo and being global citizens (a vomitous term) far above the interests of American producers. Many of the policies Trump is initiating tend towards what Lasch would have wanted—if not directly, at least in



clearing the ground for a renewed focus on the American worker, the American producer, and rewarding him adequately for his efforts. But we are really no closer, yet, to the future for which Lasch hoped.

The conflict between material progress and its drawbacks, between optimism and hope, is something I find within myself. Thus, I increasingly see myself, a diehard if cynical techno-optimist, caught between two chairs. My political philosophy of Foundationalism is, at its core, an attempt to forge a soaring future for mankind informed by the wisdom of the past, the works of Man under the eyes of God. Lasch would no doubt flatly reject this attempt, seeing it as trying to square a circle. His thought is closer to that of John Michael Greer or of Paul Kingsnorth, that hubris inevitably begets nemesis, and without sharply self-limiting ourselves we will inevitably fall back to the world of the nineteenth century, or the ninth. Not for Lasch the prophecies of the accelerationists, such as Marc Andreessen in his well-known "Techno-Optimist Manifesto," where he proclaims "We believe growth is progress—leading to vitality, expansion of life, increasing knowledge, higher wellbeing," and where he, in a direct line descended from Adam Smith, explicitly claims that technology can lead to never-ending progress, or at least progress with no foreseeable end. I strongly prefer Andreessen's vision, with the caveat that a renewal of virtue at the same time is essential, but always niggling at me is that history suggests Greer and Kingsnorth are correct, and that civilizational renewals of virtue without first passing through the refiner's fire of catastrophe are a mirage, fool's gold.

My wife likes to quote Euripides to me, "Enough is abundance to the wise." To which I invariably reply, "Abundance is enough to the wise." Perhaps the answer is that there are different kinds of abundance, and that Lasch's concept of hope is compatible with many of them. For example, is colonizing Mars an example of hope, or of optimism? Done right, it can be the former. If (an unlikely if), America were to invent a new source of unlimited energy, perhaps workable nuclear fusion, it would allow nearly indefinite material expansion, including to the planets. To be sure, Lasch is no doubt correct that without the restoration of the qualities of the petty bourgeoisie, without Americans restoring the moral fiber of our nation, continued progress, in any sense, is impossible. Gleaming rockets carrying a handful of men over a mass of faceless, dependent slaves gets America nothing, and is not sustainable.

Either way, the contradictions which are busy being heightened in 2025 America will reveal our future. One foot ahead of the other, forwards into tomorrow.