

Old notes on an interesting book

Reading Christopher Lasch's masterpiece *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (1991). "This inquiry began," he writes, "with a deceptively simple question. How does it happen that serious people continue to believe in progress, in the face of massive evidence that might have been expected to refute the idea of progress once and for all?" As he understands it, the idea of progress is "the assumption that our standard of living (in the broadest meaning of that term) will undergo a steady improvement." In his book he tries to reconstruct the opposition to progressive, liberal ideology that runs through American history from the very beginning, as in republicanism (civic humanism, civic virtue), varieties of "radical Protestantism," Emerson, William James, populism (he thinks), Martin Luther King's nonviolent resistance, and, in Europe, Thomas Carlyle and Georges Sorel, among many others.

A number of recurring themes informed the kind of opposition to progressive ideology that I have tried to recover and to distinguish from a more familiar lament for the decline of "community." The habits of responsibility associated with property ownership; the self-forgetfulness that comes with immersion in some all-absorbing piece of work; the danger that material comforts will extinguish a more demanding ideal of the good life; the dependence of happiness on the recognition that humans are not made for happiness—these preoccupations, separately or in various combinations, reappeared in Sorel's version of syndicalism, in the guild socialism advocated by G. D. H. Cole and others, in Josiah Royce's "philosophy of loyalty," in Reinhold Niebuhr's account of the "spiritual discipline against resentment," and in Martin Luther King's practice of nonviolent resistance. What these thinkers shared with each other and with their predecessors was a sense of limits—the unifying thread in the following narrative [i.e., this book]. An exploration of the idea of limits in various guises enables us to reconstruct not so much an intellectual tradition as a sensibility, one that runs against the dominant currents in modern life but exerts considerable force, even today.

It is most simply described, perhaps, as the sensibility of the petty bourgeoisie—difficult to recognize as such, in major thinkers, only because we expect major thinkers to participate in the general revulsion against the petty-bourgeois way of life. These particular thinkers, I believe, embodied the conscience of the lower middle class, giving voice to its distinctive concerns and criticizing its characteristic vices of envy, resentment, and servility. Notwithstanding those vices, the moral conservatism of the petty bourgeoisie, its egalitarianism, its respect for

workmanship, its understanding of the value of loyalty, and its struggle against the moral temptation of resentment are the materials on which critics of progress have always had to rely if they wanted to put together a coherent challenge to the reigning orthodoxy.

Lasch recognizes the unsavory aspects of lower-middle-class culture, such as nativism and racism, but wants to examine the positive aspects. –It seems to me that, while his conservative, ‘traditionalist’ vision, which is embodied as well in *The Culture of Narcissism*, is appealing in some ways, it’s dangerous too. Or rather, it is dangerous if that side of it is emphasized that is little more than a sophisticated version of the “aesthetic morality” of the early intellectual fascists—or national syndicalists—in Italy and France.¹ Lasch hates materialism, consumerism, spiritual shallowness, vulgar bourgeois selfishness, the breakdown of order and authority; he likes heroic cultures (such as ancient Greece), “spontaneity,” moral consensus, the “legitimate authority” that has been corrupted by modernity, and dislikes “progress.” He is concerned above all with the “devastated realm of the spirit.” But look what happened when an intellectual ideology that shared these concerns was seized upon—and embellished—by “the mob” (to quote Hannah Arendt), by Hitler and his companions, Mussolini’s minions, and the French fascists. It is all too easy for this sort of conservatism or a similar kind to latch onto the nation or race as the agent of spiritual regeneration. Or to spawn something like America’s New Right. It is all too easy for an “anti-progress” ideology to be used to suppress democracy and human rights.

Here’s something stupid, from the book: “The danger to democracy [today] comes less from totalitarian or collectivist movements abroad [because those effectively died in 1991] than from the erosion of its [i.e., democracy’s] psychological, cultural, and spiritual foundations from within.” Typical stupid idealism, which can lead to the bad sort of conservatism, the ‘big business’-loving kind. *Institutional facts*—the institutional configurations of corporate capitalism—are what prevent democracy from happening, not the erosion of any cultural or psychological “foundations.” That erosion is an effect of capitalism.

Lasch argues convincingly that the Judeo-Christian linear conception of time (from Paradise to the Fall to redemption) is not the origin of the modern notion of progress, as some people argue; in fact, it’s very different from it. For one thing, in the Christian conception, gradual *progress* isn’t predicted to happen before the end of history. For another, the most common modern idea is that progress is open-ended and continuous, with no end to it. Things just keep getting better—perhaps with periodic

¹ See Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

regressions—as the productive forces expand, the standard of living improves, and freedom spreads. This is original. It derives not from Christianity but from the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment.

The Christian understanding of the temporal order is in fact not all that different from the ancient Greco-Roman one. Both deprecate it, the ancient in the idea of endless cycles of birth and decline, the Christian in the idea of temporal corruption and transience, insubstantiality. Which is like Platonism. This has nothing in common with the modern secular ideology of indefinite progress, which valorizes the temporal order and deprecates, or denies, the spiritual and transcendent. Republicanism (civic virtue, etc.) is different from all this, but, to me, it seems closer to Christianity than to liberalism or “progressivism.” It’s inherently conservative and moralistic (in a sense), opposed to the endless accumulation of desires and needs on which modern progress rests. In some respects it’s kind of like a secular version of Christianity, in that, for example, it encourages people “to find order and meaning in submission to a communal standard of conduct” and “associates the good life with a particular form of community and with the memories that constitute it.” By contrast, classical political economy (Adam Smith and forth) argued that “private vices,” such as greed, become “public virtues” by stimulating industry and invention.

Actually, now that I think about it more deeply, the few similarities between republicanism and Christianity are entirely superficial and coincidental, since the two bodies of thought represent totally different traditions. Republicanism = a certain kind of aristocracy and urbanity, antiquity, this-worldliness, education and knowledge, a desire for glory and excellence; Christianity originally = the poor, the downtrodden and uneducated, the rejects from antiquity, other-worldliness, not reason but transcendent faith and love.

It’s ironic that fascism has affinities with republicanism. Like the former, the latter celebrated (as I just said) masculine virility, honor, self-denying devotion to the common good for the sake of glory, and gazed wistfully on the noble and heroic, un-bourgeois civilizations of the past. It opposed the fracturing of society into independent interest groups, preferring to set up an educational system that would prepare citizens for disinterested public service. Fascism, at least in the mouths of its intellectual exponents in the early twentieth century, is sort of like the vulgarization, massification, industrialization, “nationalization,” “heroicization,” and totalitarianization of republicanism.

Lasch’s thoughts on nostalgia vs. memory are of interest. It’s falsity vs. truth. Escapism vs. reaching out to the world. Negation or rejection (of the *real* past but especially of the present) vs. affirmation (of the present and past). “Memory too may idealize the past, but not in order to condemn the present. It draws hope and comfort

from the past in order to enrich the present and to face what comes with good cheer. It sees past, present, and future as continuous. It is less concerned with loss than with our continuing indebtedness to a past" that formed us. Active memory vs. passive nostalgia. Vitality vs. enervation. Engagement vs. alienation. Lasch contrasts the (healthy) Romantic and the (unhealthy) Victorian attitudes toward childhood. For the first, as Peter Coveney says, innocence is "valuable for what it might become." I.e., the adult should retain a childlike spirit for the sake of maintaining his integrity in a corrupt world. For the later Victorians, however, innocence was seen not as a "resilient expression of man's potential integrity" but as something to be "statically juxtaposed to experience, and not so much static as actually in retreat." There was no place for innocence and integrity in the world, which is why Victorian novels so often had melodramatic childhood deathbed scenes. The pure child had to die, because life sucks. But it's telling that, in practice, the Victorian age treated children quite badly—restricted their opportunities for development, restricted their freedom and play. This shows the falsity, dishonesty, shallowness, and emotional self-indulgence of the Victorian adoration of children. If they were *really* adored, adults would try to learn from them, infuse experience with a spirit reminiscent of the child's, and treat children as they deserved to be treated rather than as prisoners or little wild things that had to be tamed. —The point is that the Victorian attitude exposes the essentially negative essence of nostalgia.

I used to wonder about the relation between socialism and republicanism, or rather between the "republicanism" of the Knights of Labor (1880s) and that of the Founding Fathers. It isn't hard to puzzle out, though. We're basically talking about two different traditions, two different social essences, despite superficial similarities. As Lasch says, classical republicanism was aristocratic and agonistic, civic-humanist. "The republican ethic was nothing if not competitive. It was the ethic of the arena, the battlefield, and the forum—strenuous, combative, agonistic. In urging men to pit themselves against the most demanding standards of achievement, it also pitted them against each other. In politics, it set a high value on eloquence, disputation, and verbal combat..." Its ethic was sort of a fusion of aesthetics and morality. Late-nineteenth-century labor republicanism surely proceeded from very different social impulses and causes, however much it may have borrowed the language and some arguments of Thomas Jefferson when talking about a "republic of labor" and so forth. It was indeed somewhat conservative, like classical republicanism, but in a different way: its essential purpose was to protest against wage labor (and economic parasites like speculators and monopolists) and advocate for free labor. It was an early, not very self-conscious anti-capitalist movement. The classical republicanism of the eighteenth century shared its emphasis on economic independence—because supposedly only propertied people could have the independence of mind to be proper republicans—but it certainly was not

an anti-capitalist movement. It was not a *protest* movement, except against monarchy, which it used as a foil to highlight its own inherently affirmative, antique, elitist ideals. Wage labor, insofar as classical republicans thought about it at all, was another foil. Labor republicanism was born among a different class of people—artisans and so on, not landowners or aristocrats. Just as socialism was an ideology for those who wanted to collectively rise up out of wage labor, so labor republicanism was an ideology for those who were worried about falling into (or remaining in) wage labor. It was a temporary, “reactionary” ideological stage in the transition from pre-industrial to industrial society; socialist ideology has lasted much longer because it is not reactionary, it assumes industrialism but simply wants to organize it differently, in a democratic way. In any case, classical republicanism, while not “reactionary” in the way that labor republicanism is, is the most conservative of these three ideologies, having been born in ancient Greece and Rome, revived in the Florentine Renaissance, and “picked up again by James Harrington and his followers in England and by Montesquieu and Rousseau in France.”

It is true, though, that as classical republicanism died out in the early years of the nineteenth century, under the impact of an encroaching capitalism, its exponents started to sound more and more like future labor republicans, lamenting the commercial spirit of the age, extremes of economic inequality, the spread of wage labor, etc. They went from the offensive (as in the American Revolution) to the defensive. It isn’t a long way from this dying gasp of the old republicanism to the later slogans of the Republican Party (in the 1850s and 1860s) and then the Knights of Labor.

Lasch comments, rightly, that “the very essence of popular radicalism in the nineteenth century” was the distinction between the producing classes—including artisans, shopkeepers, farmers, small business-owners, and industrial workers—and the parasites, mainly bankers, speculators, and lawyers. This reminds us that fascist ideology in many respects drew on nineteenth-century populist radicalism, since it too was (arguably) founded on the distinction between producers (including many types of capitalists) and parasites.

As I read this book, it occurs to me that liberalism and republicanism were often not sharply separated in the eighteenth century. The American Revolution, for example, drew on both. Thomas Paine borrowed from both. So did Jefferson and many others. Classical liberalism, in fact, as Chomsky would say, was quite different from what was later understood as liberalism, which explains why so many people did not see it as incompatible with republicanism. Its basic tenet was individual freedom, which, in a different way, was a basic tenet of republicanism as well. I suspect that the philosophies, insofar as they were clearly defined at all, were sometimes thought to be complementary. Liberalism meant individual rights, republicanism meant duties or “virtue.” The former was negative—“freedom from”—the latter positive, in that it

provided a positive moral vision absent in liberalism. People should be free *from* state intervention, *to* (in part) develop themselves in noble and public-spirited ways.

As Lasch makes clear, liberals had republican sympathies and republicans had some liberal sympathies, and many writers were not clearly one or the other. Classical liberals were very ambivalent about what glimmers of capitalism they saw, though maybe less so than people who were attracted primarily to republicanism. Think of “Locke’s argument that anyone forced by necessity to sell his labor lacked one of the essential attributes of freedom.” Locke was a liberal, but republicans made exactly the same argument. For both traditions, freedom was essential. Which meant that both traditions were bound to oppose wage labor, i.e., capitalism.² Thus, future opponents of capitalism, whether in the 1820s or the 1880s, could take inspiration either from Tom Paine (who was quite liberal) or from William Cobbett (who was quite republican). And historians who argue that republicanism was basically the only source of opposition to capitalism are very wrong. Especially since Christianity was also a source of opposition! And there were spontaneous popular sources too (which frequently quoted arguments from old liberals and republicans). And of course European socialist traditions became sources of opposition as well—and they cannot always, or often, be thought of as continuations of the republican tradition.³

It can’t be emphasized enough that most of the early opposition to industrial capitalism (or wage labor) falls under the category of “*producerism*.” Jacksonian Democrats in the 1830s, many liberals and republicans, the early Workingmen political parties, the early Republican party, the Knights of Labor, the Populists, etc. People shouldn’t have to rent themselves, they should be independent, productive property-owners, and bankers and speculators should be deprived of their power, and so forth. It wasn’t for a *long* time that the sophisticated Marxist understanding (wage labor vs. capital) was widely accepted in the labor movement. Twentieth-century fascists were still seduced by the producerist way of thinking. And, now that I think about it, “populist” currents in American society are *still* basically producerist. The ideology’s appeal is understandable: far-away parasites are leeching off the hard work of us ordinary folk. And “us ordinary folk” do, after all, want to make money and often own

² Well, the type of liberalism that Adam Smith embodied accepted wage labor, an intricate division of labor, etc. But even Smith had definite reservations about these things, and deplored phenomena that later became characteristic of industrial capitalism.

³ Aside from all that, “ethical-aesthetic” and Romantic sources existed too (arguably having affinities with republicanism). But they usually manifested themselves in art and philosophy, not social struggle. At least not until fascist leaders and intellectuals came along later. (One shouldn’t forget, either, the obvious conservative, semi-feudal sources of opposition to modernity. These were closer to the “ethical-aesthetic” opposition than anything else. Edmund Burke is the best example.)

small businesses, so a maturely anti-*capitalist* or socialist ideology is less attractive. Some variant of producerism is the alternative.

“Nineteenth-century populism⁴ meant something quite specific: producerism; a defense of endangered crafts (including the craft of farming); opposition to the new class of public creditors and to the whole machinery of modern finance; and opposition to wage labor. Populists inherited from earlier political traditions, liberal as well as republican, the principle that property ownership and the personal independence it confers are absolutely essential preconditions of citizenship.” But it’s misleading to say that populism—i.e., an ideology and movement of the “people” in general, not just of a specific class—is an inheritance of various intellectual traditions. It is just as much a “spontaneous” product of certain economic and social conditions, in other words something that arises among people who have no exposure to traditions of European thought. Liberalism, republicanism, democracy, etc. are *human*. People who have never heard the words will arrive at the same ideas, because the ideas are common sense. Expressions of the urge for freedom.

Lasch has a stimulating discussion of the eighteenth-century Calvinist Jonathan Edwards (in whose tradition he places Emerson). Query: what is original sin? Does it consist in specific crimes we commit, such as Adam’s bite of the apple? No. It lies “not in specific transgressions so much as in a rebellious, disbelieving heart. Thus even infants have a ‘malignant nature, though incapable of doing a malignant action.’” People want to be happy, they think they have a right to be happy; their lack of happiness, therefore, causes them to resent God.

Rebellion against God, Edwards argued, was simply the normal condition of human existence. Men found it galling to be reminded of their dependence on a higher power. They found it difficult, moreover, to acknowledge the justice and goodness of this higher power when the world was so obviously full of evil. To put it another way, they found it impossible (unless their hearts were softened by grace) to reconcile their expectations of worldly success and happiness, so often undone by events, with the idea of a just, loving, and all-powerful creator. Unable to conceive of a God who did not regard human happiness as the be-all and end-all of creation, they could not accept the central paradox of Christian faith, as Edwards saw it: that the secret of happiness lay in renouncing the right to be happy.

⁴ Lasch uses the term in a much broader sense than the agrarian Populist movement of the 1890s.

Edwards's theology rested on careful observation of what happened to people—himself first of all—who renounced their claims on the universe.

The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees, in the water, and all nature...

In a "personal narrative" of his own conversion, Edwards recalled how he "used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror" at the approach of a storm. The acknowledgement of God's sovereignty transformed his terror into gratitude and wonderment. "I felt God, so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunder storm; and used to take the opportunity, at such times, to fix myself in order to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder,...leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God."

These words help to clarify what Edwards meant by "consent and good will to Being in general"—the essence of "true virtue," as he called it in his treatise on that subject. "Consent" implied a love of God's creation in and for itself, without regard to the ways it thwarted or seemed to encourage human designs. ...Love of God, not love of mankind, was the "primary" meaning of faith, just as sin, the rebellious antithesis of "consent," was first of all an offense against God, not against humanity or particular persons... "True virtue primarily consists, not in love of any particular Beings because of their virtue or beauty, nor in gratitude because they love us; but in a propensity and union of heart to Being simply considered; exciting absolute benevolence...to Being in general." Man has no claim to God's favor, and gratitude has to be conceived, accordingly, not as an appropriate acknowledgement of the answer to our prayers, so to speak, but as the acknowledgement of God's sovereign but life-giving power to order things as he pleased...

Edwards stripped God of personal attributes... God was simply "being in general." As such, he was "absolutely perfect, and infinitely wise, and the fountain of all wisdom," and it was therefore "meet that he should make himself his end, and that he should make nothing but his own wisdom his rule in pursuing that end, without asking leave or

counsel of any." Virtue, then, lay in the joyous affirmation of the beauty and justice of such a God...

Wise thoughts, recalling in some respects ancient Buddhism, Spinoza, and other profound traditions. As I wrote in my "satire" on the Book of Job, happiness will come only when we stop grasping for happiness. ("Happiness is like an eel, slithering from our desperate grasp.") It will come when we embrace *wonder*, when we look on the world with awe and gratitude. In this sense, yes, love of "God" (Being) might mediate love of humanity and even, to an extent, of self.⁵

It's true that the most important thing in a world of suffering, the most moral thing, is to work to eradicate suffering. But this can be done on the basis of something like Edwards's ideas or Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life or, more broadly, the sort of capacious, wonder-full, universally affirming attitude that these philosophies are supposed to express. You can reason and write and preach and poeticize as long as you want, but the only real value of such meditative excursions is their expressing and fostering the very simple attitude of "joyous affirmation," "absolute benevolence," and profound *care*.

But of course you don't even need that, unless you personally need it. You might as well just try to help people.

Edwards is right that self-love is the basis of "a mature conscience [and] the source of man-made morality." For one thing, we have a tendency to obey social (and institutional) norms because by doing so we get people's approval, which reinforces and expands our self-love. More interestingly, concern for others—as well as the very ability to act according to norms, to take into account in your behavior people's expectations and reactions—is based on the capacity to internalize in some degree people's self-love + experiences (i.e., their "perspectives"), or, what amounts to the same thing, to project one's own self-love (or loved self) onto others. How else could it be unpleasant to observe others' pain, or why would it give us pleasure to be in the company of happy people? Pleasure and pain work only on the self; you can't directly experience another's pleasure or pain. So, in order for another's experiences to have some seemingly immediate effect on you, it has to be by your internalizing them (more or less intensely). That's true by definition, in fact. Thus, humans have a natural urge to treat others well because of their self-projection/other-internalization combined with the fact of self-love on both sides (i.e., your self-love and your automatic understanding of the other's self-love—which are components respectively of your self-projection and

⁵ From what I've read of Edwards's thought in general, it is *very* different from Buddhism and other noble philosophies. But some of the ideas above are similar.

your other-internalization). This sort of interpersonal dialectic is possible by virtue of the fact that in your consciousness, in your self, is an “*abstract other*,” a general diffuse otherness (the existence of which explains how you can be an other to yourself, i.e., self-conscious, namely by being implicitly aware of your particularity as contrasted with the universality of the other, or otherness, in your consciousness⁶). For when you encounter a concrete self, a person, your “perception” or “experience” of him—or, rather, *he as perceived by you*—partly occupies or “fills up” the space of the general otherness in your consciousness. Which is to say, you “internalize” him (to some small degree), or his selfhood “instantiates” a part of your consciousness. Your self-love is thus in some tiny degree projected onto him (such that you implicitly, to a very small degree, “identify with” him and his self-love)—or, to say it differently, his self-love is internalized by you. It amounts to the same thing.

Sociopaths and the like are simply people who are deficient in the capacity to *affectively internalize* an other’s perspective, i.e., to care about it (however cognitively or “intellectually” they might understand it).⁷ Some people, on the other hand, have a higher-than-average capacity for affective internalization (such as empathy⁸). An extreme example is the woman who reported that when observing a massage or some such thing she could *literally feel* the same kind of sensations experienced by the other. Such a person demonstrates the truth of all these ideas, for in her—who embodies to an extreme the tendencies of ordinary people—the extension of the (loved) self to incorporate others is obvious, not merely implicit or hidden as in the rest of us.

I need hardly point out, by the way, that self-love is integral to, or part of the essence of, all or nearly all human—or even animal—acts and experiences. Human tendencies are but extreme versions of animal, or at least mammalian, tendencies.

Years ago when reading Emerson I came across Harold Bloom’s opinion that Emerson is “America’s philosopher” or something like that. It struck me as wrongheaded. The spirit of America and the spirit of Emerson had little in common, it seemed to me. “Progress,” “democracy,” “egalitarianism,” American optimism,

⁶ To say it more clearly: you couldn’t be aware of yourself as a particular self unless you were also aware (on a half-conscious level) of some general otherness, some “abstract” general other. Particularity, as such, can exist, or can be known as particularity, only in contrast to universality. I’ve written about this elsewhere.

⁷ The existence of sociopaths etc. shows that we have to distinguish between types of internalization, for these people do internalize others in some way(s), only not in the relevant “empathetic” way.

⁸ It seems to me that not only are there different kinds of internalizations; there are even different kinds of affective internalizations. Insofar as sociopaths care about someone’s opinion of them, they have “affectively internalized” him to some degree.

materialism, commercialism are opposed to the profundity and deep-loving spirituality of Emerson's writings. Lasch agrees with me.⁹ Of course, I probably misunderstood Bloom's meaning. But with regard to scholars' common locating of Emerson in the tradition of progress and optimism—Lasch calls these misinterpreters “professional Pollyannas”—Nietzsche's famous love of Emerson is enough to prove the falseness or shallowness of that interpretation.

In a deeper sense, however, the fundamentally affirmative thrust of Emerson's thought suggests that it can be seen as a “heroic,” spiritual, semi-religious sublimation of young America's vigor and expansiveness. Old-world Calvinism meets new-world dynamism.¹⁰

I have to disagree with Lasch's disagreement with the literary critic Alfred Kazin. Lasch says that Kazin's “assertion that we can still share Emerson's ‘thrill’ in the ‘primacy that he shared with Nature and America itself’ does not strike me as terribly helpful [?], especially when it is accompanied by disparagement of Emerson as a ‘sage-at-large’; a believer in ‘self-actualization’ and ‘rapturous self-affirmation’; a closet elitist whose ‘underlying contempt for those who could not live up to his revelation’ offends us as deeply as his conviction that “‘life’...was indeed nothing but what the “great man” is thinking of’; an apostle of ‘perfect personal power’ whose ‘trust in the spiritual life’ took no account of hard material realities; and, worst of all, an abstracted, ‘unctuous’ ex-preacher who gave the dominant classes their ‘favorite image of the literary man as someone removed from “real” life while remaining an embodiment of the idealism professed as the essence of America.’” Nearly all these characterizations of

⁹ But even Lasch “used to think of Emerson as a foolish optimist.” A strange mistake to make. Even Emerson's essay “Compensation,” which seems so Panglossian, does not express “optimism” properly so-called, or even a shallow belief in life's goodness and the world's justice. It expresses *amor fati*, a probing beneath appearances to affirm that things are essentially in measure. The good and the bad come with compensations. E.g., the rich and powerful are fearful, suspicious, harried, pressured, and eventually for them “pleasure is taken out of pleasant things, profit out of profitable things, power out of strong things,” because these people “seek to separate them from the whole.” —One may dislike such ideas because of their tendency to reconcile the oppressed to the world as it is—and, after the twentieth century, *amor fati* or whatever you want to call it has become impossible—but they aren't as shallow as you might think. Anyway, you should read the essay. Emerson's writings are too deep (whatever their flaws) to be typically “American” in the bad senses.

¹⁰ As Lasch summarizes one scholar's views, “Emerson's rejection of a tragic view of life [read: the apparent implications of Calvinism] should be seen as a hard-won advance beyond tragedy, not as the product of a mind unacquainted with tragedy or unable to conceive it even as a hypothetical possibility.” On the other hand, I think a case can be made that Emerson passed over tragedy and into affirmation too quickly.

Emerson strike me as accurate, or at least highly defensible. Lasch, being an arch-traditionalist and dogmatist, is excessively eager to attack (and to mischaracterize) others' opinions even when they have at least *some* obvious validity.

But, whatever. I won't cavil. The book is interesting. It's a nice diversion to think about all these idealistic philosophies, and it's a fine thing to do occasionally if you're a privileged intellectual who has too much free time on his hands, but it's also necessary—and refreshing—to return to the real world. The age of Emerson and romantic idealism has passed. Reality has become too urgent for us to take seriously these games, variations on Solitaire.

Lasch aptly remarks that twentieth-century syndicalism and guild socialism were the last real challenges to the wages system. (Soviet Communism was basically a version of the wages system.) "They rested on a shared belief that 'slavery,' not poverty, was the overriding issue of modern times." In this respect they were different from social democracy and state socialism. Unfortunately, guild socialism in England was eventually absorbed by social democracy, while syndicalism in France "remained intransigent and unregenerate" until its collapse around 1910, after which time its former supporters gravitated toward either the extreme right or the extreme left. "For the French syndicalists, the servile mentality allegedly fostered by wage labor could be countered only by a movement that upheld discarded ideals of honor, glory, and 'pessimism.'" (E.g., Georges Sorel.) The paradoxical aspects of French syndicalism, such as its being radical and proto-fascist at the same time, are due to the economic circumstances of its adherents. France was still economically backward in the early twentieth century, craftsmen and artisans still being prevalent. It was they who spoke the "revolutionary and syndicalist phrases," even though in practice they were more conservative than the unskilled workers. "Their radicalism derived in part from their resistance to new machinery." But their "moral conservatism" was strong enough for many of them to join nationalist and fascist movements later.

American syndicalism, of course, was different from the French version. It was more progressive, appealing not to artisans and such but the enslaved masses. – Incidentally, William Z. Foster pointed out that the IWW was not syndicalist strictly speaking, since it aimed to organize all into "one big union," whereas syndicalists wanted decentralization and local autonomy. Syndicalists weren't necessarily industrial unionists; they saw decentralization as the key, not any particular form of organization. –Nevertheless, the IWW in its practice and ideology did surely have a lot in common with syndicalism. Just look at its Wikipedia page.

The mid-twentieth-century liberal-intellectual cult of the "expert," the technocrat, the social engineer (administrator)—which Lasch detests—with its accompanying contempt for democracy and the irrational masses among whom consent

had to be manufactured through propaganda and advertising, actually began in embryo in the early 1920s with Walter Lippmann and a small constellation of like-minded intellectuals who felt alienated from vulgar mass culture. Indeed, one can surely trace it even farther back to the undemocratic, "efficiency"-fixated elements of Progressivism. It is embodied, for instance, in the founding of the Council on Foreign Relations in 1921 by Lippmann and others. Then later with the New Deal this liberal statist tradition became more institutionalized, and then much more so with the Second World War and afterwards with the "military-industrial complex" and the expansion of the welfare state. The whole tradition thus matured with the maturing of corporate/state capitalism and a stable consumer society, given the necessity of Keynesian policies and a capital-labor "accord." All these institutional necessities used Lippmann, Thurman Arnold, Robert Lynd and many other liberal anti-democrats as their mouthpieces, their ventriloquist dummies.

One of the things I like about Lasch is his defense of ordinary people against intellectuals' and professionals' contempt for them. He's basically a populist. For example, in opposition to the conventional liberal invoking of white working-class and lower-middle-class racism and their finally being (in the 1960s) "prosperous enough to resent high taxes and welfare programs [for blacks and minorities] but still insecure in the middle-class status" as explanations for the post-1960s conservative "backlash" against liberalism and the civil rights movement, Lasch points out that these classes have always had to "struggle to keep even," even in the late sixties and seventies, and in the eighties their economic situation got worse. Contrary to what both liberals and conservatives have thought, since the 1970s the middle class has been shrinking, not growing. Thus, lower-middle-class whites were not only victims of "status anxiety," as condescending liberals like Richard Hofstadter argued, but had real economic grievances that they thought were not being met by the government. Moreover, anti-busing activists in Boston and other cities (in the 1970s) were not always out-and-out racists; they were concerned about the safety of their streets and the impact of desegregation on their schools. "In city neighborhoods where anxiety about these things has become a way of life, the attempt to achieve racial justice through busing and affirmative action presents itself as a contest between 'rich people in the suburbs,' as Louise Day Hicks put it at the height of the Boston school wars, and the plain people of the city—the workingman and woman, the rent payer, the home owner, the law-abiding,...hard-working, forgotten American." Imagine what the reaction of suburbanites would have been if black students had been bused not to inner-city white schools, as they were, but to rich suburban white schools! *Then* who would have been the "racists"?! —Elite liberals have, in manifold ways, always been deep hypocrites. The work of Noam Chomsky gives innumerable examples.

Despite all this, one should be cautious in one's appreciation of the modern white working class and lower middle class. It remains true that these people are

susceptible to divisive cultural and racial politics (but so is the more affluent middle class), that in their politics they often shoot themselves in the foot, and that in a different time and place most of them would have belonged to fascist parties. Still, they do have genuine economic grievances that propel their discontent, grievances more real than those of the Phyllis Schlaflys of the world.

“From the point of view of those [whites] who lived in deteriorating urban neighborhoods [from the 1960s on], liberals were not only indifferent to their needs but actively hostile, bent on destroying those neighborhoods if they stood in the way of racial integration.” For the working class and lower middle class, their neighborhoods were and are their world. Historically these groups have actually been more interested in preserving their communities—perhaps with a little more security and money—than in seeking upward mobility. So it’s understandable that they would revolt against a national culture that seemed to threaten the things they held dearest, including their self-respect and their ethnic solidarity. As one worker said in the seventies, “The liberals and the press look down on hardhats like me, but we’ve invested everything we have in this house and neighborhood.” Urban renewal programs, too, were destroying old ethnic communities in the sixties and seventies.

In light of liberalism’s inability to solve the growing economic and other material problems of all these lower-class whites, it isn’t at all surprising that many white workers would turn to political conservatives who at least seemed to share their social values, were not disrupting their communities with school busing, gun control, the banning of school prayer, etc., and did not share the “anti-Americanism” of “privileged” antiwar activists and long-haired hippies. The rise of conservative populism was utterly predictable—especially when it was backed by suburban wealth and political connections and the enormous power of conservative sectors of business.

Most of these socially conservative lower-class whites were fairly radical in their economic views, favoring a general redistribution of income. They did support California’s tax revolt in the 1970s, but it was regressive property taxes they opposed, not the federal income tax. (See *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (1987), by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers.)

Don’t forget, too, that liberals in the 1980s pressed for heavy taxes on tobacco, beer, and hard liquor, “the traditional consolations of the working class.” Not surprising that this alienated much of the New Deal’s constituency, as yet another sign of government interference in their lives. On the other hand, had a true populist political party existed, a party in the radical tradition of the 1890s’ Populism, most working-class Reagan-supporters might well have switched their allegiance. Instead, they had to make do with conservative pseudo-populism, which, in order to avoid stirring up the old populist hatred of big business, blamed society’s ills on a “new class” of intellectuals, bureaucrats, and liberals, supposedly allied with black “welfare queens” and other so-called parasites.

—To sum up, Lasch is basically a confused thinker, but every so often he illuminates. His whole book, by the way, consists more or less of his grinding his little ax against the ideas of liberal optimism and endless economic expansion. We have to celebrate *limits!* Human limits! Spiritual discipline! Republican *virtù!* Etc.! It's like, sure, I'm in favor of those things too, but *wow* does this guy have an ax to grind. And *wow* is he an idealist in the bad sense. And *wow* is his polemic against Marxism misguided and one-sided. His whole book-long diatribe against progressive liberalism—for that's really what the book amounts to—is radically confused, particularly in its lack of discrimination between defensible and indefensible forms of progressivism/liberalism. Mainstream liberalism can be devastatingly criticized, but the authentic liberalism of the great anarchists, the great democrats, the great socialists (e.g., Rosa Luxemburg or Rudolf Rucker), is not some vulgar or shallow “progressivist” ideology. It shares many of Lasch's values, while embedding them in a more rigorous and consistent theoretical framework.¹¹ It has no naive faith in “progress.” I also find it bewildering that, despite his familiarity with materialistic scholarship and his use of it, Lasch still clings to a perverse idealism, emphasizing spiritual, cultural, and psychological “foundations” of the social order. *Why*, in God's name, is it so hard for intellectuals to recognize the shallowness and implausibility of idealism (in its many forms)?? I've written long meditations on this puzzle elsewhere, but it continues to baffle me.

¹¹ Again, there is no better example than Noam Chomsky, who has an unsurpassed intellectual *cleanliness*, very different from Lasch's sloppy eclecticism.