



The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy

Christopher Lasch

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In a front-page review in the *Washington Post Book World*, John Judis wrote: "Political analysts have been poring over exit polls and precinct-level votes to gauge the meaning of last November's election, but they would probably better employ their time reading the late Christopher Lasch's book." And in the *National Review*, Robert Bork says *The Revolt of the Elites* "ranges provocatively [and] insightfully."

Controversy has raged around Lasch's targeted attack on the elites, their loss of moral values, and their abandonment of the middle class and poor, for he sets up the media and educational institutions as a large source of the problem. In this spirited work, Lasch calls out for a return to community, schools that teach history not self-esteem, and a return to morality and even the teachings of religion. He does this in a nonpartisan manner, looking to the lessons of American history, and castigating those in power for the ever-widening gap between the economic classes, which has created a crisis in American society. *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* is riveting social commentary.

The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy Details

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From Reader Review The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy for online ebook

Peter Mcloughlin says

Lasch seems to have a communitarian and populist critique of 1990s America. He seems to have a great deal of ire towards the chattering classes and well graduated and the poseurs of academic radical chic. He criticizes the sense of entitlement among the educated that walls itself off from the benighted mob of beer swilling proles it thinks is racist, sexist, homophobic and unenlightened. It is lost in a world of ideas that at one time was shocking and new but have ossified into shibboleths of the conventional wisdom of professional and academic classes. Don't get me wrong as a poorer member of this class I am in love with ideas, education, and intellectualism but when it is cut off from ordinary people it can grow self-absorbed, self-righteous, and become prone to a sense of entitlement. When this class of people grows to loathe anything unlike itself and walls itself off from ordinary people and protected in relative affluence unaware of the struggles of people who work with their hands it can lose touch with the primary reason democracies need educated people in the first place. And with out of touch elites not responding to the needs of the majority institutions of democracy decline. Thomas Frank talks about this in his book "listen liberal" but Lasch was onto this much earlier than Frank.

Michael Greco says

This was more a compilation of essays about America's democratic malaise. I connected more with the beginning, where he talks about the "intensification of social divisions" more than the latter part of the book, where he goes into what he considers a spiritual crisis at the heart of Western culture. Ponderous in many parts.

Gaylord Dold says

Lasch, Christopher, The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy

demagogue, n. 1. a person who tries to stir up the people by appeals to emotion, prejudice, etc. in order to become a leader and achieve selfish ends. 2. in ancient history, a leader of the common people. (Webster's New World Dictionary, Cleveland and New York, 1959)

What comes from expecting the worst out of politics is that when, on occasion, something worse than the worst happens, the blow falls lightly. Following the heady and noble days of the civil rights movement of the early 60s, the ascendancy of the shadowy paranoid and bandbox criminal Richard Nixon to the Presidency was just such an event, with Lyndon Johnson and his war the "worst" out of politics, and Nixon something worse yet. Not a single American was surprised that a besieged Nixon assembled an enemy list, secretly taped his Oval Office conversations (capturing for posterity his rabidly anti-Semitic rants, framed here and there by bourbon-fueled sentiment), funded with cash a massive cover-up of the Watergate affair, and engaged in wildly pathetic self-pity. Having crashed through the stop sign of the worst in American politics, most of us enjoyed the subsequent circus as a cruel necessity. Those days during which the worst was a bungled burglary and got worse only because a paranoid inhabited the White House now seem halcyon

indeed. Endless war, now described by our Nationalist fringe as a multi-generational war against “Islamic Terrorism”, social and economic inequality that exceeds Depression era levels, a twenty-four hour news cycle dominated by talking heads, pundits and fake news scams, along with political gridlock and Billionaires who fund outrageous attack ads—coupled with a permanently disengaged, partially employed, and failing underclass, has led to inchoate anger that only recently congealed on the Orange Head of one Donald J. Trump, Reality TV Star, borderline sociopath, narcissist, tax-dodge, habitual liar, bully and all-around dope. His election (in the “Electoral College” at least) has brought up the question again of what happens when the worst is followed by something worse. The worst would have been Hillary Clinton in the White House; something worse was The Donald himself in the White House. A number of our fellow citizens were outraged and vented in public. Others, mostly minorities, held seminars and planned the Underground Resistance. I decided to find out why it happened, and how. This turned out to be not so hard.

In books like “The Agony of the American Left” (1969) and “The Culture of Narcissism” (1979), political and cultural critic Christopher Lasch established himself as a major interpreter of the “post New Deal” American project. In 1995, when Bill Clinton had been in the White House a few years, Lasch wrote a book that brilliantly and convincingly analyzed the American democratic malaise; a malaise characterized by a citizenry “much more sanguine about the future than they used to be.” Alarmed by the decline of manufacturing and the loss of jobs; the shrinkage of the middle class; the growing number of poor and homeless; the decay of cities and the flourishing traffic in drugs, most Americans saw fierce ideological battles being fought in state-houses and in Congress over peripheral issues. It was the central premise of Lasch’s new book “The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy” that a growing Elite had lost touch with the people and that the unreal and artificial character of American politics reflected their insulation from the common life, plus a conviction that “the real problems are insoluble.”

Of course, Lasch observed, there had always been a privileged class in America. However, in the nineteenth-century, wealthy families were usually settled in one locale over several generations. Old families recognized responsibility to their city and region, endowing libraries and museums, parks, orchestras, universities, hospitals and other civic amenities. These days, Lasch argued, the mobility of capital and the emergence of finance and global markets tended to produce a new rootless elite, bonded only to their common “heritage” of elite universities, elite jobs, and elite bank accounts. Ambitious people understand that “a migratory way of life is the price of getting ahead.” Further adumbrating his basic premise, Lasch wrote, “The new elites are in revolt against “Middle America,” as they imagine it; a nation technologically backward, politically reactionary, repressive in its sexual morality, middle-brow in its tastes, smug and complacent, dull and dowdy. Those who covet membership in the new aristocracy of brains tend to congregate on the coasts, turning their back on the heartland and cultivating the international market in fast-moving money, glamour, fashion, and popular culture.” Lasch further observed that “multiculturalism” suited this new elite to a T, conjuring up as it did exotic cuisines, exotic styles and exotic tribal customs with no questions asked and no commitments required. They were at home “only in transit” to a high-level conference, a business meeting, an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort. Lasch concluded, “Theirs is essentially a tourist’s view of the world—not a perspective likely to encourage a passionate devotion to democracy.” The then-current catchwords were not democracy but “self-esteem”, not equality but “diversity, compassion, and empowerment”, locutions that express the hope that the deep divisions in American society can be bridged by “goodwill and sanitized speech.”

To those in the nineteenth-century who gave it any thought, democracy worked best when it rested on a broad distribution of property. An extreme of wealth, set against an extreme of poverty, would give rise to the “mob”, defined as a degraded laboring class, “at once servile and resentful” (in the eyes of the wealthy), lacking the “qualities of mind and character essential to democratic citizenship.” It was important, then, to ensure that self-reliance, responsibility, and initiative, rested in a wide group of citizens whose “competence” resided in the ability to practice a craft and manage a quantum of property. Widely distributed prosperity ensured a smoothly functioning democratic entity. Put another way, democracy works best when people

depend mostly upon themselves, their friends and neighbors, functioning as a community. Lasch, citing the rise of segregated (by profession, income and wealth) suburbs, the hollowing out of craft jobs, dwindling public services and disappearing civic amenities, argued that the widening gap between elites who resided in suburbs or rapidly expanding “urban corridors” spelled the end of democracy and the collapse of “civic life.” Lasch concludes, “In our time, however, the democratization of abundance—the expectation that each generation would enjoy a standard of living beyond the reach of its predecessors—has given way to a reversal in which age-old inequalities are beginning to reestablish themselves, sometimes at a frightening rate, sometimes so gradually as to escape notice.”

This changing class structure is taking place all over the “industrialized, democratic” world. In America, people in the upper 20% of the income structure “now control half the country’s wealth”—a figure that has become worse since Lasch wrote those words in 1995. The Walton Family from Arkansas owns more wealth than the bottom 40% of American families taken together. Lasch pointed to a growing “contingent labor force” (part-timers, contract laborers, seasonal workers, undocumented workers), the reduction of jobs covered by pension plans and health insurance, the devaluing of a college education (both by tuition inflation and by unemployment), as well as the inelegant pattern known as “assertive mating” (where wealthy men and women marry each other), as accelerating factors in the de-classing of workers and artisans. It isn’t hard to see why “feminism” appeals to elites, providing as it does the indispensable basis for their “prosperous, glamorous, gaudy, sometimes indecent lavish way of life.”

This new class, tentatively defined as “symbolic analysts” by Robert Reich (then Secretary of Labor for Clinton), consisted of professional and managerial elites, groups whose identity rested not so much on property as on the manipulation of information and professional expertise. “Their investment in education and information, as opposed to property, distinguishes them from the rich bourgeoisie, the ascendancy of which characterized an earlier stage of capitalism, and from the old proprietary class—the middle class in the strict sense of the term—that once made up the bulk of the population.” Twenty years ago, at the dawn of the internet, such elites comprised professional brokers, bankers, real estate developers and promoters, engineers, consultants of all kinds, system analysts, scientists, doctors, publicists, publishers, advertising executives, lawyers, entertainers, journalists, television producers and directors, artists, writers, and university professors. The class had always included financiers on Wall Street. Educated at “elite private schools” and “high quality suburban schools”, they enjoy every advantage their doting parents can provide. They get advanced degrees in a cosmopolitan atmosphere. They are “skeptical, curious and creative” (these days, Richard Florida has defined them as the “creative class”), brainworkers who produce “insights” in a variety of fields from marketing to finance and arts and entertainment. They exhibit a “capacity to collaborate” and to “discern larger causes, consequences and relationships.” Since their ability relies on “networking”, they tend to settle in “specialized geographical pockets” populated by people like them. These privileged communities—Cambridge, Silicon Valley and Hollywood (to which now can be added dozens of other “innovation sites” denominated “tech corridors”) represent the epitome of intellectual achievement and attract their own mob of satellite workers, the “in person servers” like voice coaches, yoga instructors, fencing trainers and dancing instructors, among many others. These specialized geographical pockets don’t resemble traditional communities at all. Populated by transients, the pockets and elites who live in them lack continuity.

Here, it is important to note what Lasch calls a “jaundiced observation”, “that the circles of power—finance, government, art, entertainment—overlap and become increasingly interchangeable.” Back then (was it so long ago now?) Robert Reich turned to Hollywood as a compelling example of the “wondrously resilient” kind of community in which there is a concentration of creative types. In Lasch’s words, “Washington becomes a parody of Tinseltown; executives take to the air waves, creating overnight the semblance of political movements; movie stars become political pundits, even presidents; reality and the simulation of reality become more and more difficult to distinguish. Ross Perot launches his presidential campaign from the “Larry King Show.” Hollywood stars take a prominent part in the Clinton campaign and flock to Clinton’s inaugural, investing it with the glamour of a Hollywood opening. TV anchors and interviewers

become celebrities; celebrities in the world of entertainment take on the role of social critics.” Reich, an apostate now, back then worshipped the new world of “abstraction, system thinking, experimentation, and collaboration” and was incongruously made Secretary of Labor, the one category of employment—“routine production” that had no future at all.

Concomitant with the rise of these new professional elites (and very current among financiers) was the theology of Meritocracy. Under Ortega y Gasset’s formulation, mass culture combined “radical ingratitude” with an unquestioned belief in possibility. Owing no debt to the past, mass man was “heir to all the ages” and blissfully unaware of his debt to others. These habits of mind now infest the professional elites who attribute their own rise in the world only to the intrinsic structure of the meritocracy itself. In the nineteenth-century it was thought that “opportunities to rise” were important enough in themselves, but that “dignity and culture” are needed by all “whether they rise or not.” Modern professional elites feed themselves a diet of illusion that their rise rests solely on their own merits. It allows them to “exercise power irresponsibly precisely because they recognize so few obligations to their predecessors or to the communities they profess to lead.” Seeing common schools as sentimental, elites now focus on “self-esteem”. Members of the Labour Party in Britain, who can, send their children to private schools.

Thus, the “aristocracy of talent” (beloved of elites) only appears to distinguish democracies from societies based on hereditary privilege. “The talented retain many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues.” Their children attend expensive private schools. They insure themselves against medical emergencies and hire private security guards, and see no point in paying for public services they no longer use. In their gated enclaves, they seem indifferent to national decline. Nationality, when global capitalism holds sway, no longer seems interesting. The movement of money across borders renders the “whole idea of place” fluid. Even back then Robert Reich recognized the “darker side of cosmopolitanism”, reminding us that people have little inclination to make sacrifices or to accept responsibility for others because “we share a common history or culture.”

These folks gladly pay for private and suburban schools, private police, private systems of garbage collection; but they have relieved themselves of the obligation to contribute to the national treasury.

For Lasch, “the world of the late twentieth century presents a curious spectacle.” United now, capital and labor flow freely across borders through the agency of markets. Everywhere the middle class is in decline; but at no time have there been more ethnic, religious and national wars (this was twenty years ago!). It turns out that the fate of nation states was bound up with the fate of the middle classes, whose outlook was always more nationalistic, jingoistic and militarist than elites of any sort. Yet despite its unattractive features, middle class nationalism contributed to the national sense of place and to respect for historical continuity. In sum, Lasch writes, “Whatever its faults, middle-class nationalism provided a common ground, common standards, a common frame of reference without which society dissolves into nothing more than contending factions, as the Founding Fathers understood so well—a war of all against all.”

Rodolfo Borges says

O livro entrega muito mais do que o prometido pelo título. Ao descrever o distanciamento da inteligência ocidental da realidade, o autor pontua razões como a profissionalização do debate público (via jornalismo), que relegou a especialistas a discussão sobre as questões consideradas relevantes, o que afastou a população leiga da conversa (o livro foi publicado em 1995, quando as redes sociais ainda não tinham entrado na equação). Segundo o autor, o debate público é mais relevante do que a educação para a organização social. Ele destaca que a argumentação é anterior à busca de dados para sustentar posições (a pesquisa científica é consequência de discordâncias que incentivam a investigação metódica das controvérsias). Outra percepção

interessante: a pecado foi substituído pela doença ao longo dos últimos séculos, e a suspensão dos julgamentos morais (uma estratégia terapêutica para acessar a origem dessas doenças) deixou os consultórios psiquiátricos para se espalhar pelo mundo. A culpa individual sumiu, e se tornou coletiva.

Alex O'Connor says

A fascinating study. I learned more from this book than I have in any other in a long time.

Seth says

Christopher Lasch is one of those public intellectuals (a bit like Christopher Hitchens) who radically changed direction in his political leanings throughout his life; once an avowed Marxist he then became a somewhat curmudgeonly critic of the left from within the left whose thought evolved further into being a man who mostly identified with cultural conservatives but who eschewed their laissez-faire economics. A fierce critic of American capitalism, he saw the decline of American society within both cultural leftism and the New Left and the neoliberal economic policies espoused by the Republican (and to some extent Democratic) Party of the time. Like a much more conservative version of Paul Goodman (himself a member of the New Left) he also offered trenchant criticism of the takeover of many if not most of our governmental institutions and public schooling by an elite upper crust of technocrats, bureaucrats, and Wall St. journeymen, all bastardized and in service of a bloated military-industrial complex.

That all of this has gotten so much worse and has culminated in a criminal grifter like Donald Trump in the White House is something Lasch basically predicted in this book; that we see the Clintons still running the Democratic Party is another piece of the endgame he deftly foretold.

Well worth a read and prescient.

Giuseppe D'Antonio says

Lasch è sempre illuminante.

Marc says

A brilliant late book by Christopher Lasch, building on his Magnum Opus 'True and only Heaven'. With this, we see there was an evident deepening in his understanding of U.S culture.

Furthermore, Lasch's lucidity as a writer improved over his lifetime- 'True and only Heaven..' and this work together, showing greater style alongside greater depth, readability and sharpened personalistic criticism than earlier work- 'Haven in a Heartless World..' for example.

(* on Personalism, see Nikolai Berdyaev)

His story is one of a remarkable confluence of personal and scholarly integrity and it is implicitly present in his work.

That his work is written in clear style, familiar language and open to anyone willing to make the effort testifies to my point.

In this work from his twilight years, he takes on the 'elites' with a Prophetic claim for Truth and Justice, over and against 'progress', the 'therapeutic' and other 'modern' ills. (Pun intended).

...those, who by virtue of their many (unchallenged) superficial and superficially diverse progressive assumptions, spread the disease of our times. (think 'Ideas have Consequences')

God rest him.

Trevor says

It is symptomatic of my own political leanings, I suspect, that I started losing interest in this a little after the half-way mark and then could barely take a note from the book for the whole of the third part. To me, this book loses its way and stops being about elites (in revolt or not) in the last section of the book. This is a pity, as I think the start was particularly interesting.

This was written in 1995 – in fact, the copy I read from my university library had a ‘due date’ sheet on the front cover – which is nice, since I now know it was borrowed 16 times prior to 1998 – something I rarely get to see about books I read from the library. Now, 1995 is a significantly long time ago, even if it does seem like yesterday, and yet a lot of what is said here could have, in fact, been written yesterday.

It only occurred to me, right at the end, that what might have been meant by ‘elites’ – given this is an American book – might not be I would normally mean by elites. You know, in the US ‘elite’ often means someone with a bit more than a grade school education who doesn’t watch Fox News... There are places here where the notion of ‘cultural elites’ gets something of a run – again, not my favourite bits of the book.

The main thrust of the start of the book is that the growing inequality in our society is producing such a disconnection between those who rule and those who are ruled that they might as well live on separate planets. Not just that, but because wealth equates to power and since there just isn’t anywhere when the very wealthy get to speak to most of the rest of us, the notion that ‘democracy’ should be pursued or encouraged or supported is something the elites are increasingly less likely to feel even makes sense.

This book, being American, focuses on what I feel are particularly American obsessions, particularly American views of themselves – and these views don’t always translate elsewhere as easily as Americans imagine they should. Nevertheless, growing inequality is an international phenomenon and it is having many of the same impacts across the globe as it is in the US.

I’ve been reading a lot of Bauman – and while both writers are concerned with many of the same themes, for instance, the increasing commodification of all aspects of society, how this is destroying personal relationships, how it undermines community and replaces that with shopping malls, how the public is being replaced by the commercial and so on – I feel this book perhaps ‘personalises’ these issues a little too much – which I guess is my understanding of the last part of the book and its obsessions with finding spiritual pathways in a post-Enlightenment world and where the cultural elite feel that ‘religious experience’ is only for those too uneducated to know better. As someone who too easily falls into exactly this trap, I would have liked this part to have been more illuminating – but unfortunately, I don’t feel I got anything from it at all. I’m prepared to admit this may have been my fault.

I think I'm going to let this guy speak for himself – so here are some quotes:

In the first half of the nineteenth century most people who gave any thought to the matter assumed that democracy had to rest on a broad distribution of property. They understood that extremes of wealth and poverty would be fatal to the democratic experiment. p7

Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors, instead of / depending on the state pp7-8

Self-governing communities, not individuals, are the basic units of democratic society p8

It is the decline of these communities, more than anything else, that calls the future of democracy into question p8

Democracy requires a vigorous exchange of ideas and opinions. Ideas, like property, need to be distributed as widely as possible. p10

'Diversity' – a slogan that looks attractive on the face of it – has come to mean the opposite of what it appears to mean. In practice, diversity turns out to legitimize a new dogmatism, in which rival minorities take shelter behind a set of beliefs impervious to rational discussion. The physical segregation of the population in self-enclosed, racially homogeneous enclaves has its counterpart in the balkanization of opinion. p17

Washington becomes a parody of Tinseltown; executives take to the airwaves, creating overnight the semblance of political movements; movie stars become political pundits, even presidents; reality and the simulation of reality become more and more difficult to distinguish p38

A meritocracy has no more use for chivalry and valor than a hereditary aristocracy has for brains. Although hereditary advantages play an important part in the attainment of professional and managerial status, the new class has to maintain the fiction that its power rest on intelligence alone p39

Social mobility does not undermine the influence of elites; if anything, it helps to solidify their influence by supporting the illusion that it rests solely on merit. It merely strengthens the likelihood that elites will exercise power irresponsibly, precisely because they recognise so few obligations to their predecessors or to the communities they profess to lead. Their lack of gratitude disqualifies meritocratic elites from the burden of leadership, and in any case, they are less interested in leadership than in escaping the common lot—the very definition of meritocratic success p41

In Europe referenda on unification have revealed a deep and widening gap between the political classes and the more humble members of society, who fear that the European Economic Community will be dominated by bureaucrats and technicians devoid of any feelings of national identity or allegiance p46

The decline of nations is closely linked, in turn, to the global decline of the middle class p48

What the left makes of such failings is exemplified by Michael Lerner's argument to the effect that 'self-blaming' is the most important obstacle to working-class militancy. 'Workers come to feel that the problems they face are their own failures to adjust to the given reality'. p54

By giving the school system exclusive control over education, Mann's reforms encourage a division of cultural labor that would weaken the people's capacity to educate themselves. The teaching function would be concentrated in a class of professional specialists, whereas it ought to be diffused throughout the whole community. An educational establishment was just as dangerous as a priestly or military establishment. Its

advocates had forgotten that children were best ‘educated in the streets, by the influence of their associates, ... by the passions and affections they see manifested, the conversations to which they listen, and above all by the general pursuits, habits, and moral tone of the community’ p66

Before the Civil War it was generally agreed, across a broad spectrum of political opinion, that democracy had no future in a nation of hirelings p81

The hope that rising expectations would lead men and women to invest their ambitions in their offspring was destined to be disappointed in the long run. 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. The rising divorce rate, already a source of alarm in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, seemed to reflect a growing impatience with the constraints imposed by long-term responsibilities and commitments p95

Americans have a ‘split personality, which in turns emphasizes individual liberty and the importance of community’ (quoting E J Dionne *Why Americans Hate Politics*) p113

Needless to say, the elites that set the tone of American politics, even when they disagree about everything else, have a common stake in suppressing a politics of class p114

Our approach to eating and drinking is less and less mixed with ritual and ceremony. It has become strictly functional: We eat and drink on the run. Our fast-paced habits leave neither time nor—more important—places for good talk, even in cities the whole point of which, it might be argued, is to promote it p118

As neighbourhood hangouts give way to suburban shopping malls, or, on the other hand, to private cocktail parties, the essential political art of conversation is replaced by shoptalk or personal gossip. Increasingly, conversation literally has no place in American society. In its absence, how—or, better, where—can political habits be acquired and polished? p123

What New York needs, Sleeper argues, is a politics that / will emphasize class division instead of racial ones, addressing the ‘real problem, which is poverty, and the real need, which is jobs’ p139-140

The bureaucratization of education has the opposite effect, undermining the teacher’s autonomy, substituting the judgment of administrators for that of the teacher, and incidentally discouraging people with a gift for teaching from entering the profession at all p159

The social effects of the communications revolution, we are told, will include an insatiable demand for trained personnel, an upgrading of the skills required for employment, and an enlightened public capable of following the issues of the day and the making of informed judgments about civic affairs. Instead we find college graduates working in jobs for which they are vastly overqualified. The demand for menial labor outstrips the demand for skilled specialists p161

Since the public no longer participates in debates on national issues, it has no reason to inform itself about civic affairs p162

What democracy requires is vigorous public debate, not information p162

Information, usually seen as the precondition of debate, is better understood as its by-product p163

It is significant, as Carey points out, that Dewey’s analysis of communication stressed the ear rather than the eye. ‘Conversation’, Dewey wrote, ‘has a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written

speech ... The connections of the ear with vital and outgoing thought and emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye. Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator' p172

Unless information is generated by sustained public debate, most of it will be irrelevant at best, misleading and manipulative at worst p174

Economic stratification means that a liberal education (such as it is) has become the prerogative of the rich, together with a small number of students recruited from select minorities. The great majority of college students, relegated to institutions that have given up even the pretence of a liberal education, study business, accounting, physical education, public relations, and other practical subjects p177

At best, the exposure to 'otherness' turns out to be a one-way street. The children of privilege are urged—even required—to learn something about 'marginalized, suppressed interests, situations, traditions,' but blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities are exempted from exposure to 'otherness' in the work of 'Western white males.' An insidious double standard, masking as tolerance, denies those minorities the fruits of the victory they struggled so long to achieve: access to the world's culture. The underlying message that they are incapable of appreciating or entering into that culture comes through just as clearly in the new academic 'pluralism' as in the old intolerance and exclusion; more clearly, indeed, since exclusion rested on fear more than contempt. Thus slaveowners feared that access to the best of Euro-American culture would encourage a taste for freedom p185

One of the effects of corporate or bureaucratic control is to drive critical thinkers out of the social sciences into the humanities, where they can indulge a taste for 'theory' without the rigorous discipline of empirical social observation. 'Theory' is no substitute for social criticism, the one form of intellectual activity that would seriously threaten the status quo and the one form that has no academic cachet at all p193

If Rieff is correct in his contention that culture rests on a willingness to forbid, a 'remissive' culture like our own cannot be expected to survive indefinitely. Sooner or later our remissive elites will have to rediscover the principle of limitation p223

Socialists and aesthetes shared a common enemy, the bourgeois philistine, and the unremitting onslaught against bourgeois culture was far more lasting in its effects... p233

The educated classes, unable to escape the burden of sophistication, might envy the classes that continued to unthinkingly to observe traditional faiths in the twentieth century, not yet having been exposed to the wintry blasts of modern critical thinking p339

The deepest variety of religious faith (the 'twice-born type', as he (James) calls it) always, in every age, arises out of a background of despair p243

Jonathan Sargent says

More like a collection of essays than an actual book. Unfortunately loses steam with a few chapters, but the rest are gold.

Gy says

"If Rieff is correct in his contention that culture rests on willingness to forbid, a "remissive" culture like our own cannot be expected to survive indefinitely. Sooner or later our remissive elites will have to rediscover the principle of limitation."

I'm distracted. My impression is that really there is no truth, but just different points of views.

A long kaleidoscope, many books lined up to support, to prove or disprove. Somehow I felt that there is a lack of willingness to define, to postulate. The truth is, when ride on social sciences, people must feel the tendency toward social order. At least I do.

One I've learned and thanks for that: There is no bigger danger for a society, but when enlightened politics is losing connection with society and reality...and we must wait next elections to jail them.

Two stars! I didn't enjoyed it.

J. Mulrooney says

When Christopher Lasch died on Valentine's day in 1994, America lost the most profound of her critics. His final book, *The Revolt of the Elites*, was published a year after his death. It is a group of discrete but thematically linked essays that continue the concerns of his previous book, *The True and Only Heaven*: how did American democracy come to its current state?

The title of the new book reverses José Ortega y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses*. Lasch contends that the American elites -- executives of the Fortune 1000, the political class in Washington, celebrities of the mass media, academics, even the heads of the great unions -- refuse to accept ordinary limitations and ignore the concerns of ordinary people. Speaking only to their own kind, they push the country in directions that best suit their own aggrandizement, and undermine any democratic impulse that might allow middle America -- an economic as well as a geographic description -- a share in governing.

As befits an historian, Lasch's method is to mine the veins of the past to discover the core of our present predicament. This historical approach is so old-fashioned as to seem entirely new. Liberals, committed to the myth of progress, too often simplify the past into the record of people-who-were-not-so-sophisticated-and-wise-as-ourselves. Conservatives, committed to the mirror image of progress, nostalgia, romanticize the past into a golden age. Lasch rejects these typological approaches. History is the story of the answers that people gave to the questions they asked, and the story of how those answers conditioned the questions that their sons and daughters asked. The excitement of reading Lasch is that he is not so much interested in fixing our answers as our questions.

In his discussion of religion, he writes, "In the commentary on the modern spiritual predicament, religion is consistently treated as a source of intellectual and emotional security." This is true, he points out, both of liberals and conservatives. Liberals condescendingly admire the small-mindedness of believers: they are like "children... who know exactly what they should do and how they should conduct themselves."

Conservatives, accepting the same premise, believe that the moment doubt is entertained, the world collapses into "relativism, moral anarchy, and cultural despair." Eschewing arguments over foundationalism, Lasch argues for a more pragmatic approach. Religion, especially in the prophetic tradition common to Jews and Christians, contains in itself an unsparing attack on the believer's own pride and complacency. A glance at the book of Psalms or the sayings of Christ should be enough to show anyone the silliness of Freud's idea that religion was created out of the need for "dependence", for a comforting father figure of a God -- and yet people on both sides of the debate argue as if Freud captured the essence of religion.

The Revolt of the Elites ought to have been a book, not an essay collection. The material, with a little more work, might have been welded into a single argument. As it is, the essays are less than they might have been. In his Acknowledgments, Lasch notes the book was written under "trying circumstances" -- a laconic description of his own terminal cancer. He did what he could with the time he had. What he left contains more insight than any dozen bestsellers on our cultural predicament.

[the above was published in a slightly different form in the Canadian Catholic Review some years ago. On re-reading, Lasch ages very well. We've added troubles with Muslim fundamentalists to our immediate list of things to worry about; and the access to information and communications enabled the internet and personal mobile devices are not things Lasch considered -- but by and large, the essays stand up, because the essentials have not changed.]

Matthew says

Ok, I think I may be on to something (as a result of reading this book) as to why they hate us so much...its (not surprisingly) about religion... "They", of course, are those on the political right, especially those on the extreme and religious right; "we" are those who consider ourselves to be "liberal", "progressive", "enlightened", "modern", "well-educated" with a "healthy dose of skepticism re. matters of religion..." But what this book made me realize is that they don't hate us solely for what we typically view as their religious fanaticism that reflects and breeds paranoia and intolerance while imposing their beliefs on all of us (our paranoia). Rather, its our use of science, "enlightened"/"liberal" thinking/world view/religious skepticism (what they call "elitist", but what this book confirms what most of us have known all along: that elites are ALL PEOPLE that are well-off, well educated, and span the political spectrum, and dominate the power structures and political debate in this country.) that they find threatening on such a level, that we must STOP poo pooing it, and START taking it seriously.

This book is actually a series of essays and articles that Lasch had written in his final years and were put together as a book by he and his daughter, but published posthumously. It does have a rather fragmented feel, as each chapter, for the most part, stands on its own, as a completed essay about such things as "The Malaise of Democracy", "Racial Politics in NYC", the "History of Common Schools" the "Abolition of Shame" and "The Soul of Man Under Secularism". Each essay is a damning portrait of how fucked up our society is as a result of Elites creating class divisions, though a distortion of the term "social mobility", through the segregation of students through school tracking, through the creation of a completely shameless society, only to have Elites ridicule the rest as a bunch of ignorant know-nothings as the elites go off to live in and run a completely different world..."Revolt of the Elites" ("We're outta here man, you dumb, religious people suck!") Each essay uses language that is as angry as the reader feels reading them as Lasch lambasts any and all dominant political points of view: "You are all a bunch of elitist fucks who deserve each other and everything YOU'VE CREATED!!" (No wonder he's my kind of author!) But all of the essays eventually bring us to his final chapter which is a very compelling denouncement of how power elites (not the religious right) have created a secular society that is not only wrong-headedly divisive, but IS so because it is so wrong-headedly threatening toward a religious culture that is so desperately needed in our lost society; and we've all thrown it off in the names of science, progress, and higher education...we should be ashamed of ourselves for perpetuating this lost world, (we, as a result, are very lost ourselves...I'll plead guilty) and "they" have every right to feel seriously threatened by us...

In that final chapter Lasch argues that religion is so needed in our society because those who believe in it are justified in not wanting to follow the secular path of disillusionment that exists due to our renouncement of religious belief. That generation upon generation of humans have seen (for centuries) the very real hurt, pain,

and evil that exists in the world (throughout the history of the world), and that is the main reason religion will never die...people need their faith just to get through their daily lives, and have a very difficult time understanding why/how the elites of the secular world would want them to get rid of it. Lasch argues that secular elites do not own a monopoly on the doubting of faith. For him the difference between those who hang tight to religion despite all of the evil in the world, as opposed to the secular, who renounce religion as a result of it, is that the former have made their peace with it, while the latter have not. While those with a religious perspective will maintain faith in God despite the horrors that they know exist, they do so, not only as way to keep on keep'in on (as Bob might say and is completely valid) but because the alternative is a disillusionment of the world and life that dominates the thought process of the non-believers who refuse to make peace with it, and, in turn, with themselves...

This is compelling stuff folks...and we all need to look at ourselves and think about how much faith we might need in our lives, and if we recognize it, and accept it, it might just be a way of bringing more meaning into our lives, into society, into our world, while serving as a bridge to the other side of the political spectrum, who, we all decided long ago, there was just no talking to.

John says

At the time it was written, 20 years or so ago, this book likely seemed hopelessly nostalgic. Reading it in 2016, it comes off as disturbingly prescient.

Stephen says

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat, one of the house conservatives, recommended some reading in December 2016. He did not use this term (originated by George Wallace or Lester Maddox) but it the recommendations were directed to “pointy-headed liberals that can’t even park a bicycle straight” to (maybe) get insight into why Donald Trump won the Electoral College. For my penance I picked out *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* by Christopher Lasch. Prof. Lasch died in 1994, but Mr Douthat must feel that the book presages what Douthat thinks motivates Trump supporters thirty years later: anger at feeling forgotten by government leaders who are rootless, upwardly mobile careerists constantly mouthing watchwords like “affirmative action,” “multiculturalism,” “self-esteem” and “compassion.” In the introduction we read

“The new elites are at home only in transit, en route to a high-level conference, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort.”

To me, that is a caricature (Douthat did concede that Lasch is “too angry”, but perhaps it does capture the Trump voters’ zeitgeist.

Prof Lasch read and thought deeply about history. He wrote eloquently. He’s not an Ayn Randian. If he were alive today he might not see Donald Trump as a messiah since the man embodies narcissism. I disagree with the book on so many things, though. It took self-discipline to finish it. For one Prof Lasch does not understand the experience of black Americans in any century.

For a further helping of gall and wormwood I went back to *The Culture of Narcissism*, an earlier book by the same author on the same themes that I’d failed to finish many years ago. Failed again. It’s too much a diatribe. About only thing I agreed with is that the introduction of the Designated Hitter was bad for baseball.

Several weeks after the reading list Mr Douthat wrote a column in which he called Trump's election a "godsend." God help us.
