

# Christopher Lasch: the Making of an American Anti-Capitalist Conservative

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CANDIDATE

Man is neither angel nor brute, and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute.

B. Pascal, *Thoughts*, 1670.

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites, – in proportion as their love to justice is above their rapacity, – in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption, – in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

E. Burke, *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, 1791.

You cannot say in an absolute and general way that the greatest danger of today is license or tyranny, anarchy or despotism. Both are equally to be feared and can emerge as easily from the same single cause, which is general apathy, fruit of individualism; this apathy means that the day when the executive power gathers some strength, it is able to oppress, and that the day after, when a party can put thirty men in the field, the latter is equally able to oppress. Since neither the one nor the other is able to establish anything lasting, what makes them succeed easily prevents them from succeeding for long. They arise because nothing resists them, and they fall because nothing sustains them. What is important to combat is therefore much less anarchy or despotism than apathy, which can create almost indifferently the one or the other.

A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, 1840.

Are there no calamities in history? Nothing tragic?

O.A. Brownson, *The Philosophy of History*, 1843.

There is a third form of society, and it is the only one in which sufficiency and security can be combined with freedom, and that form is a society in which property is well distributed and so large a proportion of the families in the State severally own and therefore control the means of production as to determine the general tone of society; making it neither Capitalist nor Communist, but Proprietary.

H. Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*, 1936.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	p. 5
<b>Introduction</b>	p. 9
<b>Chapter 1 - An Imaginative Thinker on the Margins.</b>	p. 13
<i>1.1 A Biographical and Intellectual Outline of Christopher Lasch's Life.</i>	p. 17
<i>1.2 The Poverty of Liberalism.</i>	p. 56
<i>1.3 Two "Devil Terms": Progress and Capitalism.</i>	p. 78
<i>1.4 An Imaginative Thinker on the Margins.</i>	p. 90
<b>Chapter 2 - Christopher Lasch and "democracy": Traditions, Independence, Localism.</b>	p. 108
<i>2.1 "democracy" Against Its Time: A Radical and Populist Journal in a Politically Conservative Era.</i>	p. 110
<i>2.2 Christopher Lasch and Sheldon Wolin: Democracy and Its Enemies.</i>	p. 120
<i>2.3 A Cultural Step Towards What? Christopher Lasch Between Radicalism, Populism and Cultural Conservatism.</i>	p. 141

**Chapter 3 - Society as the Patient. Christopher Lasch, the New Paternalism and the Populist Sensibility in the Eighties.** p. 146

3.1 *The Erosion of the Family and Its Consequences.* p. 148

3.2 *The New Paternalism and the Therapeutic State.* p. 156

3.3 *Christopher Lasch, Paul Piccone and “Telos”: Populism, Federalism and the “New Class”.* p. 163

**Chapter 4 - Between Radicalism, Conservatism and Anti-Capitalism. Christopher Lasch and the “New Oxford Review”.** p. 170

4.1 *Christopher Lasch: A Disappointed Thinker, A Seeker of Ideas.* p. 173

4.2 *Christopher Lasch, Dale Vree and the “New Oxford Review”: A Radical, Anti-Capitalist Conservative Perspective Against Progressivism.* p. 182

4.3 *Towards a Conservative Vision Well Understood?* p. 209

## **Chapter 5 - American Conservatism or Conservatisms?**

**A Very Short Introduction.** p. 218

5.1 *The Conservative Renaissance in the Fifties and Beyond:*

*Conservatism Between Traditionalism and*

*Libertarianism, Neoconservatism and*

*Paleoconservatism.* p. 220

5.2 *Richard Malcolm Weaver, Russell Kirk and the “God*

*Terms” of Our Time: Liberalism and Progress.* p. 225

5.3 *Wendell Berry, Christopher Lasch and Ordinary People*

*Conservatism.* p. 245

## **Chapter 6 - Christopher Lasch and Conservatism Well**

**Understood** p. 260

6.1 *Centrism vs Decentrism: Two Visions of Order.* p. 263

6.2 *Christopher Lasch and Anti-Capitalist Conservatism as*

*Stewardship.* p. 273

6.3 *The Ethos of a Human-Scale Order.* p. 289

**Conclusions. Christopher Lasch: Anti-Capitalist**

**Conservative** p. 297

**Bibliography** p. 300

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I cannot, then, omit my thanks to Luiss “Guido Carli” University for giving me the possibility of developing this study by means of a scholarship.

A particular mention goes to Luiss Library, and specifically to Alessandra Mazzoccone. For the same reason, I heartly thank Maria Letizia. They strongly helped me to find many resources I needed. They demonstrated a boundless patience and an extraordinary work ethic.

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to have hope and not to despair. His goodness and wisdom reminded me what the wise and prudent elf Haldir said to the young and still immature hobbit Merry at the end of the first part of J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings*. The following quotation is thus dedicated to him: "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater".

I then say thanks to my parents, who gave me the possibility to study and taught me self-sacrifice and devotion to the work to do. But much more important, I would add, they gave me the liberty of making choices and, for this reason, even to make errors: without them, I would now more immature than in the past. As Lasch would have said, family is the real, crucial institution for a good society: which does not mean that is perfect and "the true and only heaven". However, it remains perhaps the best alternative, among the possible and defective alternatives, for the education task: the best "haven" in a partially "heartless world".

My lifelong friends, afterwards, remain an essential point of reference. Even if the time spent together is always inadequate, they still stand as a decisive part of my life.

To the author and the person to whom I devoted this study I must say many thanks. Lasch taught me that tradition without reason is blind. But, much more importantly, that reason without tradition could lead to a paradoxically enlightened form of sectarianism, intolerance, Manicheism. An enlightened vision of life could drive to lose sight of a simple and common-sense fact: that human world is made of imperfect



creatures, but still persons characterised by a dignity that no power, no elite conceit can overwhelm. Despite his limitations – for instance, his too rigid and sometimes monolithic idea of liberalism as well his prejudicially negative idea of capitalism, which cannot be considered, as Lasch did, something like a living hypostasis – Lasch passed on to me the deep sense of life, what Edmund Burke called “the unbought graces of life”: love for his own family and friends, for the life itself, made of delights and pains, good and evil. He taught me, or simply suggested me, to wisely conserve what has to be conserved, rather than to aim at unrestrained passion for change.

In the end, I dedicate the following quotation, extracted from an interview released by the protagonist of this humble thesis, and this study as well, to Felicia, by hoping that we could form our family in a not so far future:

“The only things worth living for are love and work. I have a family I like to live with and work I enjoy. Every day I make compromises, but I don’t know how else to live”.

## Introduction

The study contained in the following pages aims to reconstruct, from a history of political thought perspective, the intellectual journey of the American sociologist and historian of ideas Christopher Lasch (1932-1994), with particular reference to the period of his intellectual maturity, namely from the publication of his book *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977). In doing so, I have profited from first-hand sources that I found during a period of archival research at the University of Rochester, where Lasch taught from 1970 until his death. There his manuscripts, texts of conferences he participated to, books drafts, notes and correspondence are conserved.

In the first chapter, the thesis deals with the important biographical pieces of information which help to outline the intellectual profile of the thinker. After that, I pass on speaking of his main critical topic which accompanied his reflections for all his life, that is to say liberalism. Then, I conduct an inquiry on his critical judgment on progress and capitalism, about which he constantly manifested a vehement negative prejudice. In the last section of the first chapter, I consider the literature concerning his political thought, by outlining a personal interpretation, which is also part of the title of the research. In fact, after being a liberal, also under the influence of his family, which was ascribable to the New Deal liberalism, Lasch developed a radicalism which, however, after his direct experience in the New Left and the disillusion he lived in the Seventies, shifted to a cultural conservative sensibility that accompanied him ever since, by strengthening too. Indeed, populism could be conceived just as a step

towards a more definite conservative ethos. In the end, what can be considered the constant and permanent element in his reflections is his deep, rooted anti-capitalist tone.

Lasch's intellectual journey is analysed, then, by considering his contribution, in the Eighties, to some cultural journals, such as "democracy", "Telos" and the "New Oxford Review" (chapter 2, 3, 4) and its related directors. By his contribution to "democracy" (chap. 2), Lasch developed a critical perspective which was made of radicalism and cultural conservatism and hinged on the defence of traditions and Jeffersonian democracy, that is to say self-government and independence from elitist, progressive statism. That point is particularly touched in chap. 3 in which I focus on Lasch's critique of the "therapeutic state" of progressive elites. As a matter of fact, "Telos" criticized the new paternalism of the liberal elites precisely as Lasch did, that is to say by considering it a peril to the self-government and independence of society from the state.

A crucial step in Lasch's intellectual journey was then the journal "New Oxford Review" (chap. 4). Indeed, also by means of his correspondence with its director, Dale Vree, Lasch did mature a conservative sensibility, rooted also in some kind of religious sentiment. The journal, in fact, hinged on a cultural, Christian conservatism which, at the same time, never abandoned anti-capitalism and radicalism. Therefore, Lasch contributed to the journal by developing his moral-realist conservatism also under the influence that the journal and Vree had on him. Lasch's interest in some kind of Christian, conservative anti-

capitalism, represented for instance by the works of Hilaire Belloc or Pope Jean Paul II, could be explained by the fact that the “New Oxford Review” and its director had precisely such authors as main sources of influence.

The last two chapters, in the end, focus more closely on Lasch’s conservative sensibility. In chap. 5, after a very brief introduction into American conservatism(s), I consider specifically the conservative thought of two traditionalist conservatives, Richard Malcolm Weaver and Russell Kirk, who developed a similar critique to Lasch towards liberalism and progress, as well as the ordinary people conservatism of Wendell Berry. Against the therapeutic and rationalistic tendencies of liberal elites, Weaver, Kirk, Berry and Lasch, even though with some inevitable dissimilarities, due to their differences regarding historical, cultural and personal roots, shared a conservative sensibility made of moral realism, sense of limits and awareness of the tragic condition of human life: a conservatism conceivable, therefore, as stewardship of the very humble and precarious human condition, and of the natural contexts (preferably agrarian) in which people live. In the last chapter (chap. 6), I try to outline the political and cultural vision endorsed by Lasch, by referring to Weaver, Kirk, Berry and the German “humanist” economist Wilhelm Röpke as well to the English Distributists, which were cherished by all the above-mentioned thinkers. The final part is about the ethos of an anti-capitalist, human-scale order that Lasch supported: instead of speaking of progress and change, Lasch thought that was crucial to

conserve the traditional, rooted and family-based moral infrastructure in order to live appropriately.

As I previously stated, this work is based on a methodology ascribable to the history of political thought field of research. That means, as it is clear, to use first-hand material, which I found during the archival research I conducted, and which was crucial to me, in order to more deeply enter into the political thought of the author, by considering the historical context and the meaning of concepts during the historical periods in which they are used. The boxes conserved at the University of Rochester amounted to more than seventy. Therefore, I tried to use as much material I found interesting as possible, and in some cases never published before by other scholars, but I surely forgot to consider some archival resources, due to the hugeness of them. Nevertheless, I hope that, by means of the archival research, I could have portrayed, even by some deficiencies, Lasch's intellectual picture in an exhaustive manner. Mistakes and oversights remain clearly imputable entirely to me.

I am sure, as a matter of fact, that this study is far from being excellent. But I am also aware, as Montesquieu argued in *My Thoughts* (1720), that “the best is the mortal enemy of the good”<sup>1</sup>. And as Lasch would have said as well, perfection is not the proper condition of human beings. Indeed, I would add, without such an impossibility, that is to say the impossibility to reach perfection, there would not exist the very prerequisite to experience the very imperfect liberty that is gave to us, as precarious and fragile creatures.

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<sup>1</sup> Ch. L. de Secondat, Baron of La Brède and of Montesquieu, *My Thoughts* (1720), ed. and with an introduction by H.C. Clark, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 2012, p. 281.

## Chapter 1 - An Imaginative Thinker on the Margins.

A new politics that aims to break the present ideological deadlock and to modify our riotous standard of living, our predatory habits, our domineering attitude toward the rest of the world, our domineering attitude toward nature requires not only an intellectual revolution but a profound change in our entire moral outlook.

Christopher Lasch<sup>2</sup>

Christopher Lasch, “Kit” for his friends, was quite a nonconformist and lonely thinker. He did not like to praise fashion ideologies and the established ways of thinking of his time. He preferred, on the contrary, exploring other roads, other possibilities, other half-forgotten traditions, by hoping that they would have been more promising and useful for a better understanding of human world. Lasch was a seeker of ideas and an imaginative explorer of intellectual paths.

In this first chapter, I will consider his biography, both from an intellectual and historical point of view, by emphasizing the key moments of his life. In the first section of it, I will concentrate mainly on the steps of his intellectual and academic career. In fact, a history of political thought research must consider not only books and essays of the author under study, but also the background from which they emerge. By doing so, in addition to the classical sources such as his books and essays, I will

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<sup>2</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Beyond Left and Right: Philosophical Foundations of Liberalism*, University of Toronto, 22 January 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 18, p. 26.

use some crucial interviews that Lasch gave at the end of his life as well as correspondence and essays concerning his political thought.

Secondly, I will focus on the main critical topic Lasch dealt with: the doctrine of liberalism. According to the American thinker, liberalism was not just a doctrine *inter alia*. It was a pervasive vision, even if weak in its moral commitments, that has dried up the whole human existence. Directly derived from the Enlightenment and endorsed by progressive elites, it led to an erroneous conception of human being and to a moral disorder which caused, as a consequence of that, an external disorder, namely a cultural and political disorder. Liberalism, ultimately, eroded some previous traditions that could have been the sustaining forces of liberalism itself, above all some kind of Christian tradition. As corollaries of the liberal “creed”, as Lasch put it, his criticisms about the notion of progress and capitalism will be investigated.

In the final section of the chapter, I will deal with the interpretations of Lasch’s political thought. I have already argued that Lasch was an unconventional political thinker. It is difficult to circumscribe him to a definite and specific school of thought, even if in the thesis I provide an interpretation of his reflections. His intellectual life, quite paradoxically, because of his deep and vehement critique of the notions of progress, change and development, could be described as in a never-ending condition of motion, even if constantly anti-capitalist. He certainly lived non detached from the world he inhabited. As such, he was influenced by the particular conditions, of time and space, in which he happened to live. He was as part of history as history is humbly made by every ordinary

individual. As he admitted in a late interview, his positions changed as a consequence of recent developments in history and, more specifically, in history of ideas<sup>3</sup>. But these changes of perspective were also due to the fact that Lasch was always extremely curious as well starving of new sources of learning. It is not so weird, then, if his political thought can be associated, over his intellectual life, with a plenty of thinkers such as, just to name a few of them, Sigmund Freud and the School of Frankfurt, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Jefferson, Orestes Brownson and Edmund Burke. However, his name cannot be strictly and exclusively linked to one of the mentioned figures. Ideas, as it widely known, tend to follow often unexpected and peculiar roads. All the more is valid for Christopher Lasch, who did not hesitate – sometimes in a superficial manner, it must be noted – in mixing and blending authors even distant one of another in order to demonstrate his arguments, even though it could have been deemed inappropriate or simply wrong.

Lasch was absolutely not interested in following rigid and stereotyped intellectual cages (except for his anti-capitalist prejudice): in this sense, he used a large amount of imagination in his vision<sup>4</sup>. Human

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<sup>3</sup> P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, “Telos”, n. 97, Fall 1993, p. 133 (interview taped in Rochester, in December 1990).

<sup>4</sup> See Sh. Wolin, *Politics and Vision. Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (1960), Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2016, p. 19: “Imagination has involved far more than the construction of models. It has been the medium for expressing the fundamental values of the theorist; it has been the means by which the political theorist has sought to transcend history”. Lasch sought to transcend history in the sense that he tried to revitalize the American populist tradition of the end of nineteenth and the beginnings of twentieth century in a different historical context. By doing so, he hoped to awaken some key points of a good society: hope and trust in life, sense of limits in time and place, rootedness, some kind of faith and so on. Nevertheless, and somehow contrary to Wolin’s ideas, he remained very well attached to history and that kind of moral realism and Aristotelian’s *phronesis* he derived from it. Moreover, the naked imagination without constraints, as much of historical type as of other type, he thought, could have led to collectivist and bureaucratic nightmares, rather than to human dreams. In the end, Lasch did not try to imagine an all-embracing



beings, wrote once Blaise Pascal in his *Thoughts* (1670), differs from other creatures or things because of their capacity of thinking and reflecting. Reason cannot everything: heart and faith are part of human beings, who remain humble and imperfect creatures. But this does not mean that it cannot something: “I can well conceive a man without hands, feet, head (for it is only experience which teaches us that the head is more necessary than feet). But I cannot conceive man without thought; he would be a stone or a brute”<sup>5</sup>. For all these reasons, we consider Lasch an “imaginative thinker on the margins”. He was an imaginative thinker since by means of reason he could try to follow unbeaten tracks as well as to revitalize a “moral imagination which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies”, as Edmund Burke put it in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)<sup>6</sup>. A conversational dialogue with the past, which contains an unvaluable set of memories and moral reserves, represents a formidable treasury. He was “on the margins” for the results of his inquiries led him to a non-linear political thought, in such a way that it can be hardly reconciled with the usual political labels of left and right: a non-linear thought that, nevertheless, assumed a growing and clear conservative accent over the years. Indeed, these labels had become to him quite useless and worn-out. They lost the touch with the common people as well as they lost sight of the conservation of the moral order of

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political program: he was an anti-utopian and anti-monist thinker. He just sought to revive some principles that, according to him, could have nurtured a humble, plain and human life.

<sup>5</sup> B. Pascal, *Thoughts, Letters and Minor Works* (1670), P. F. Collier & Son Corporation, New York, 1910, *Thought* n. 339, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in *Selected Works of Edmund Burke*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1999, vol. 2, p. 171.

the inhabitants of this world: concrete and rooted human beings, characterised by a dignity that cannot be overwhelmed by anything. “It is the moral imagination – once Russell Kirk pointed out – which informs us concerning the dignity of human nature, which instructs us that we are more than naked apes”<sup>7</sup>. Liberalism, Lasch thought, often tended to answer to moral questions that “anything goes” and to merely follow procedures or scientific knowledge. The problem is that, Lasch stated, this opens the door to servility, dependence, moral weakness, that is to say the contrary of a well-structured society made of free and responsible individuals: “A society that no longer is able to define the difference between right and wrong is all too eager to accept the impartial, ‘objective’ evidence of the medical and ‘social’ sciences as a substitute source of such distinctions and to tolerate the abnormal as long as it acknowledges its need for treatment”<sup>8</sup>.

### ***1.1 A Biographical and Intellectual Outline of Christopher Lasch’s Life.***

This is not a study concerning the whole life of Christopher Lasch, for an intellectual biography of the American thinker already exists<sup>9</sup>. As

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<sup>7</sup> R. Kirk, *The Moral Imagination* (1981), in *The Essential Russell Kirk. Selected Essays*, ed. by G. Panichas, ISI Books, Wilmington, 2017, p. 208. Lasch speaks also of “historical imagination”: R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, “Intellectual History Newsletter”, 16, 1994, pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Ch. Lasch to Richard Wightman Fox, 7 June 1976, Lasch Papers, Box 4, Folder 6.

<sup>9</sup> E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time. A Life of Christopher Lasch*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2012. I will quote from the kindle edition. From this book I will draw some biographical information. See that book for a detailed treatment of Lasch’s life. Other important sources for tracing his intellectual development are a few interviews, which I will use: B. Rowes, *Gratification Now Is the Slogan of the '70s, Laments a Historian*, “People”, 9 July 1979; T. Kirkpatrick, *Family is Victim of 20th*, “Sunday Post-Crescent”, 25 June 1978; A.P. Sanoff, *Why ‘the Survival*

such, I will not focus deeply on the entire work of him: the aim of this inquiry consists in exploring the political thought of the Lasch's maturity, taking the book on the family topic, published in 1977<sup>10</sup> as the *a quo* term. Nevertheless, it is crucial, in order to understand his intellectual pilgrimage, to trace an outline of his life and intellectual story: some influences received and direct experiences made by him help to make order in it.

Christopher Lasch was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in the Midwest part of the US, on June 1, 1932. His parents, Robert Lasch and Zora Schaupp, were married in 1931. They were fervent social democrats,

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*Mentality' Is Rife in America: A Conversation with Christopher Lasch*, "U.S. News and World Report", 17 May 1982; M.C. Miller, *Advertising and Our Discontents*, "Adweek", 3 December 1984; B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy. A conversation with Christopher Lasch*, "The Civil Arts Review", n. 4, 1991, pp. 4-9; N. Gardels, *Why Liberalism Lacks Virtue*, "New Perspectives Quarterly", vol. 8, issue 2, 1991; P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, "Telos", n. 97, Fall 1993, pp. 124-135 (interview taped in Rochester, in December 1990); C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch*, "The Journal of American History", vol. 80, n. 4, March 1994, pp. 1310-1332; R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, "Intellectual History Newsletter", 16, 1994, pp. 3-14. For a first, brief overview of Lasch's life and thought, see moreover J.B. Elshstain, *The Life and Work of Christopher Lasch: An American Story*, "Salmagundi", n. 106-107, Spring-Summer 1995, pp. 146-161; R. Wightman Fox, *Christopher Lasch*, in R. Wightman Fox, J.T. Kloppenberg (eds.), *A Companion to American Thought*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 381-383; K.M. Hickey, *Christopher Lasch*, in P. Hansom (ed.), *Twentieth-century American Cultural Theorists* Gale Group, Farmington Hills, 2001, pp. 240-52; A. Woolfolk, *Christopher Lasch*, in B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism. An Encyclopedia*, ISI Books, Wilmington, 2006, pp. 488-490.

<sup>10</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (1977), W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1995 (paperback ed.). The whole Laschian production include, in chronological order: *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (1962), McGraw-Hill, New York, 1972 (paperback edition); *The New Radicalism in America (1889-1963). The Intellectual as a Social Type*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1965; *The Agony of the American Left*, A. Knopf, New York, 1969; *The World of Nations. Reflections on American History, Politics and Culture*, A. Knopf, New York, 1973; *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1991 (paperback ed.); *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1984; *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1991; *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995), W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1996 (paperback ed.); *Women and the Common Life. Love, Marriage and Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1997; *Plain Style: A Guide to Written English*, edited and with an introduction by Stewart Weaver, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2002.

voting the Democratic Party. Actually, in 1932 Robert voted for the socialist candidate, Norman Thomas. His son Christopher described him in an interview as “a New Deal liberal of a fairly radical sort”<sup>11</sup>. Robert worked as a journalist for a few liberal newspapers in Omaha, Chicago and St. Louis, also winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1966 for his editorial writing on Vietnam<sup>12</sup>. Zora, instead, was one of the first women earning a Ph.D. in philosophy. She was occupied part-time as a social worker, taught philosophy and logic, and she was also active in the “League of Women Voters”. As it is clear, Lasch stated, “it was a very political household”<sup>13</sup>. Another point is worth being emphasized: both of his parents were militant secularists<sup>14</sup>. Thus, he inherited from his family, though in a critical way, various aspects which had to deal over the years with: liberalism, atheism, political engagement, passion for culture, for studying and writing.

Lasch remembered that, when he was at the high school in Barrington, a Chicago suburb, he started to appreciate history, thanks to a good teacher, but also philosophy – he remained “fascinated” by a lecture on Plato – and Greek tragedy<sup>15</sup>. Although he obtained a scholarship at the University of Chicago, he preferred Harvard, even if he did not get a scholarship. At Harvard, Lasch continued to be very interested in history. In particular, he mentioned his passion for medieval

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<sup>11</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1313.

<sup>12</sup> E. Miller, *Pilgrim to an Unknown Land: Christopher Lasch's Journey*, in W.M. McClay (ed.), *Figures in the Carpet. Finding the Human Person in the American Past*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2007, p. 350.

<sup>13</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1311.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1313.

<sup>15</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., pp. 3-4.

history and American history. Thanks to his “wonderful”<sup>16</sup> tutor Donald Meyer, he also discovered a pair of books which, Lasch admitted, “actually in the long run had a powerful influence on me”: *Love in the Western World* (1940) by Denis de Rougemont and *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) by David Riesman<sup>17</sup>. At that time, however, he discovered other unexpected interests. Indeed, he greatly appreciated a course on the Pauline tradition of theology, which included some readings of St. Augustine and St. Paul<sup>18</sup>, and thus he started to become influenced by the teachings of some theologians, such as Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr and Søren Kierkegaard, “that remained with him throughout his life”<sup>19</sup>. Such a spiritual discovery accompanied him from that day, by giving form to a sort of Laschian disposition towards the Judeo-Christian tradition: a disposition that, however, erupted vehemently only during the Eighties. Still, as Miller clearly argues in his Laschian biographical portrait, not only this “nascent interest became a recurring point of tension”<sup>20</sup> between him and his parents. After receiving a letter in which Christopher stated his interest for theology, her mother immediately answered as follows: “I hope you won't be infected with French's religious fanaticism”. As a

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<sup>16</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1313.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*; R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 5. D. de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (1940), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983; D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1969. The former for its conception of love, which, according to de Rougemont, has not to be understood as something romantic or idolatrous: love requires patience, sacrifice, commitment and care, all virtues Lasch associated with democratic life. The latter, instead, for the introduced typology of human character between tradition-directed, other-directed, inner-directed type of person. The ideal-type Lasch preferred, we could say, lies between the autonomous self, i.e. the inner-directed man, and the tradition-directed one: without some traditional commitment, autonomy becomes an empty box, in Lasch's view.

<sup>18</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> E. Miller, *Pilgrim to an Unknown Land*, cit., p. 351.

<sup>20</sup> E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 426.

typical exponent of Enlightened way of thinking, as Lasch would have said later about the new therapeutic elite or class, Zora warned that such experience could “seriously affect your thinking”: she even considered that such a “religious flare-up” could have required consultation with a “psychiatric advisor”<sup>21</sup>.

In addition to that, Lasch declared to have loved at the time other books, which awakened what he called “historical imagination”: *The Mind of the South* (1941) by Wilbur Cash, *All the King’s Men* (1946) by Robert Penn Warren and *Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919) by Johan Huizinga<sup>22</sup>. The latter, in particular, “simply enthralled me”, Lasch declared<sup>23</sup>. In 1954, he enrolled as a graduate student at Columbia University. In New York he felt quite a foreigner due to its cosmopolitanism and impersonality, its lack of human warmth and rootedness: “you can go there and not look up anybody you know, can stay within two or three blocks of them without looking them up”<sup>24</sup>. And again: “Everybody has a furtive look as if he were likely at any moment to run smack into a friend. The man without friends is lucky. He just has to avoid strangers. But woe to the man with friends!”<sup>25</sup>. He felt alone. At Columbia University he studied with William Leuchtenburg, who became his thesis supervisor, because Lasch wanted to study the New Deal period and Leuchtenburg held a seminar on it. About those years in

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pos. 431.

<sup>22</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., pp. 5-6. W. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941), Vintage Books, New York, 1991; R. Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men* (1946), Penguin, London, 2007; J. Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919), Cluny, Providence, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 577.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

New York, Lasch remembered the extreme professionalization of the department of history: “I can’t remember having any conversations with anybody at Columbia during all this time about politics or international affair (...). The department at Columbia was very professionalized and we ever really talked about history, without much sense of its application to the present”<sup>26</sup>. In 1955 he concluded his master and in 1956 he married Nell Commager and started his Ph.D., whose thesis supervisor was still Leuchtenberg. At the end of 1956 he failed the orals required for passing to the dissertation: “It’s not the questions were hard. I simply froze. Everything seemed more complex than it had before”<sup>27</sup>. In 1957, then, he left Columbia for a teaching post at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, until 1959. In those years his family enlarged: in 1958 his first son Robert Evans was born and in the following year his daughter Elizabeth Dan was born. Between 1960 and 1961 he accepted a contract of assistant professor at the Roosevelt University, in Chicago, and in 1961 he eventually concluded his Ph.D.<sup>28</sup>. The following year, his first book, essentially his Ph.D. dissertation, was published: *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*<sup>29</sup>. In that book, Lasch dealt with the American intellectual reactions to the Bolshevik Revolution, not from the point of view of simple facts, but rather considering them as linked to the history of ideas. From that moment hence, Lasch would have been radically critical of liberalism. The topic of liberalism will be analysed in

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<sup>26</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1315.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1316.

<sup>28</sup> In a similar way to the human experience lived in New York, Lasch did not feel well in another big city like Chicago: it was “dirty, unbeautiful, and hard to get around in”, E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 869.

<sup>29</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*, cit.

the second part of this chapter, but it is equally important here to remark, even if briefly, what Lasch meant for liberalism: he described it as a Manichean, “messianic creed”<sup>30</sup>, “the opiate of the intellectuals”<sup>31</sup>, according to which there is a civilized minority that considers itself a culturally enlightened elite which has the mission of redeem and spread its progressive and forward-looking values throughout the majoritarian ignorant people.

During the Fifties, to be honest, Lasch admitted to be attracted to realist liberalism, and in particular to George F. Kennan and Walter Lippmann. At the same time, though, he was attracted to some intellectuals who criticized liberalism from within, such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr, Daniel Bell and Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>32</sup>, as well as Lionel Trilling and, above all, the historian Richard Hofstadter<sup>33</sup>. He knew Hofstadter at the time he was at Columbia. When he was there, he read his *The Age of Reform* (1955)<sup>34</sup>, as well as he was considerably influenced by his *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948)<sup>35</sup>, and he did his research assistant for one summer<sup>36</sup>. In fact, Lasch considered one of the dominant figures on his intellectual education: “His work exemplified the reengagement with the progressive

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XVI.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XIII. These words refer immediately to the title of a famous book written by the French sociologist Raymond Aron: *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), Routledge, New York, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 682.

<sup>33</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1314. R. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, Vintage Books, New York, 1955.

<sup>34</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 6. R. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948), Vintage Books, New York, 1989.

<sup>35</sup> E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 622.

<sup>36</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1315.



tradition, the tradition that most American historians come out of, that seemed so fruitful to me. Together with the charming presentation of his ideas – a compelling blend of analysis and narrative”<sup>37</sup>. However, as he pointed out, Hofstadter embodied the “tendency of American liberals to regard themselves as a civilized minority, an enlightened elite in a society dominated by rednecks and other ‘anti-intellectuals’”<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, Lasch conceived two Hofstadter’s works, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), as the best representations of the liberal mentality of what he later would have called the “New Class”: “He could not conceal his disdain for the hopelessly muddled thinking of ordinary Americans”<sup>39</sup>. “Instead of arguing with the opponents”, moreover, the liberal elite and Hofstadter with them, Lasch declared, “they simply dismissed them on psychiatric grounds”<sup>40</sup>. Hofstadter simply tended to spoke in psychological terms, by following the influence of the tradition of the late “Frankfurt School”, in particular *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950)<sup>41</sup>, “in a way that is very congenial to a class that aspires to be therapeutic caretakers of a country that is so deeply sick that it needs medical and psychiatric attention”<sup>42</sup>. In the foreword of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition*, Lasch recognized the importance that the historian had in his intellectual career. However, he did not spare him mordant

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1317.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1318.

<sup>41</sup> Th. Adorno et al, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), Norton, New York, 1969. For the Laschian criticism of that book see in particular Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit.

<sup>42</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1317.

critics. Hofstadter, in Lasch's words, had impetuously stigmatized American populism as a nostalgic, backward-looking and full of anti-intellectualism movement. However, he did not say a word, Lasch noted, about the anti-intellectualism of the intellectuals, by confusing, moreover, intellect with the interests of the intellectuals as a class<sup>43</sup>.

Nevertheless, Lasch was influenced by the "Frankfurt School" in the sixties. He found persuasive, in particular, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944)<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, he received their influence for the "critique of mass culture": on that point, Lasch thought, the ideas of the "Frankfurt School" tended to coincide with those advanced by a few American sociologists, notably Dwight Macdonald and Irving Howe<sup>45</sup>. In the same years, he was hugely influenced by some authors, the historian Edward P. Thompson and the literary critic Raymond Williams, that he ascribed to the tradition of the "English Marxism"<sup>46</sup>. Williams, in particular, showed him "the necessity of fusing the variegated radical, liberal, and conservative critiques of industrial civilization in the attempt to develop 'a new general theory of culture' and thus an adequate political and intellectual response to the times"<sup>47</sup>. As he will declare in the introduction to *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), not only such a tradition was fruitful for "it

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<sup>43</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Foreword* (1973) to R. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948), Vintage Books, New York, 1989, pp. vii-xix. It was also published, in slightly different form, as Ch. Lasch, *On Richard Hofstadter*, "New York Review of Books", 8 March 1973, pp. 7-13.

<sup>44</sup> Th. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Stanford University Press, Redwood, 2007. In general, he spoke of the tradition of Freudian Marxism as "promising": C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1321.

<sup>45</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> See in particular R. Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Anchor Books, New York, 1960.

<sup>47</sup> E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 1396.

repudiated economic determinism and the mechanistic distinction between economic ‘base’ and cultural ‘superstructure’. It showed that class consciousness is the product of historical experience, not a simple reflection of economic interest”. “The work of Williams and Thompson also showed – Lasch continued – how Marxism could absorb the insights of cultural conservatives and provide a sympathetic account, not just of the economic hardships imposed by capitalism, but of the way in which capitalism thwarted the need for joy in work, stable connections, family life, a sense of place, and a sense of historical continuity”<sup>48</sup>. If in Lasch’s political thought we can notice a sharp propensity to mix a wide range of thinkers and traditions of thought, sometimes in a questionable manner for its too superficial way of proceeding, this is due to not only his intellectual curiosity, but also to the influences he received by the authors just mentioned.

The sixties were a time in which many things changed in Lasch’s life, both personally, academically and intellectually. In 1961, after concluding his Ph.D., he became assistant professor in history at the University of Iowa, where, in 1963 and until 1966, he was associate professor. In the meantime, as a consequence of a series of lectures he gave there, his second book was going to be ended and was finally published in 1965, when Lasch became father for the third time, of his son Christopher Nelson: *The New Radicalism in America (1889-1963)*. *The Intellectual as a Social Type* <sup>49</sup>. The book, Lasch admitted, was

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<sup>48</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 29

<sup>49</sup> Ch. Lasch *The New Radicalism in America*, cit.

written almost in the same way of Hofstadter's ones<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, the late chapter, whose title was *The Anti-Intellectualism of the Intellectuals*, clearly echoed, although in critical terms, Hofstadter's book on anti-intellectualism. In fact, if Hofstadter blamed the masses of anti-intellectualism, Lasch, on the contrary, pointed an accusatory finger at the intellectuals themselves. This work was part of Lasch's growing interest in the problem of intellectuals<sup>51</sup>. Indeed, for Lasch, one of the main problems of his time was the fact that intellectuals saw themselves as a minority, a status group, a superior elite who claimed, as direct consequence of their enlightened vision and their presumed detachment from society, their right-duty to guide society and improve the masses. "The rage for planning – Lasch wrote – reflected the planners' confidence in themselves as a disintegrated elite, unbound by prejudices either of the middle class or the proletariat"<sup>52</sup>. They were confident, therefore, of their messianic and orthopaedic-pedagogic<sup>53</sup> crucial role. For them, Lasch thought, the point was not to eradicate injustice or inequality: they had a much wider program. They wanted, Lasch explained, to eradicate conflict itself in order to definitely wipe out the evil from the world. "Accordingly, they proposed to reform society not through the agencies of organized coercion, the courts of law and the power of police, but by means of social engineering on the part of disinterested experts who could

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<sup>50</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 8. Lasch even thanked Hofstadter in the introduction.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, where he stated to have done a lot of readings on it, such as the works of Randolph Bourne and Julien Benda, Daniel Bell, Edward Shils and Charles Wright Mills.

<sup>52</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, cit., p. 168.

<sup>53</sup> I borrow the expression from Giovanni Orsina, in particular from his book *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2013. As it is clear by reading his book, Orsina owes Michael Oakeshott for that.

see the problem whole and who could see it essentially as a problem of resources”<sup>54</sup>. They aimed to reduce the problem of morals to a problem of simple management: men could have been reduced, in short, to mere wheels of an engineering machinery led from top-down. “The liberalism of the fifties and sixties – Lasch concluded – with its unconcealed elitism and its adulation of wealth, power and ‘style’, was firmly rooted in a social fact of prime importance: the rise of the intellectuals to the status of a privileged class, fully integrated into the social organism”<sup>55</sup>. And fully at the head of it.

Such a critical treatment is quite complementary with Lasch’s radical political engagement of the Sixties. When he was at the University of Iowa, he manifested actively against the Cuban missile crisis and the risk of nuclear war. He contributed to organize talks and teach-ins around these topics<sup>56</sup>. “By the late sixties – Lasch would have later declared – I thought of myself as a socialist, attended meetings of the ‘Socialist Scholars Conference’, and took part in several attempts to launch a journal of socialist opinion”<sup>57</sup>. While he became professor of history at Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois, in 1966 and till 1970, things were changing. Around 1968, Lasch stated, “the whole atmosphere had changed. It had become very ugly, full of recriminations, full of conspiracy theories of the wildest kind”. Moreover, the radicalism he was witnessing, he thought, revealed itself very futile. At Northwestern University, a more upscale university than the University of Iowa, “it was

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 316.

<sup>56</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1321.

<sup>57</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 28.

only the children of privilege who could indulge themselves in this kind of pseudo-radicalism: the revolt against Daddy, who continued to foot the bills”<sup>58</sup>. The New Left, he continued, which he was previously sympathetic to, “was dissolving into a kind of existential politics in which the value of political action was measured by your willingness to put your body on the line. Not a politics – Lasch judged – it seemed to me that had much future”<sup>59</sup>. The trouble with the New Left, among others, laid also “in its ignorance of the earlier history of the left, as a result of which it proceeded to recapitulate the most unattractive features of that history: rampant sectarianism, an obsession with ideological purity, sentimentalization of outcast groups”<sup>60</sup>. In *The Minimal Self* (1984), Lasch would have then used caustic words about it: the position “that corresponds, more or less, to the thinking of the new left or at least to those who advocate a ‘cultural revolution’ not merely against capitalism but against industrialism in general, is (...) the easiest to caricature”<sup>61</sup>. But his judgment about the movement was two-sided. On the one hand, in fact, the New Left’s suspicion of large-scale social organization, its rejection of democratic centralism, its revolt against technological domination and its interest towards the limits of reason were all aspects not addressed by the dominant politics. On the other hand, however, Lasch pointed out, New Left’s criticism of instrumental reason had degenerated into a “Dionysian celebration of irrationality” and nihilism,

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<sup>58</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1322.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>60</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 28.

<sup>61</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 199.

as well as its deep rejection of traditional forms of authority could have led towards new forms, much more despotic indeed, of dominion<sup>62</sup>.

Moreover, Lasch's attitude towards the role of intellectuals was much at odds with contemporary intellectual's tendency of considering themselves as advisors to political movements or some sort of intellectual guide of the whole society. To some extent, Lasch tried to cultivate, at the same time, "a certain kind of detachment" from the society he lived in "with the most intense kind of engagement"<sup>63</sup>. According to him, it was quite impossible to have conceit of "claiming scientific detachment and neutrality"<sup>64</sup>. "A social critic – Lasch thought – tries to catch the general drift of the times, to show how a particular incident or policy or a distinctive configuration of sentiments holds up a mirror to society, revealing patterns that otherwise might go undetected. But a social critic, unlike a scholar of the purest type, also take sides, passes judgment". Because he holds, as every particular human being holds, some prejudices, namely specific and peculiar point of views. But he does not presume, Lasch believed, to proceed in such a way, concealing his own prejudices or interests for some sort of objective knowledge, because he possesses the monopoly of truth. Even if in *The New Radicalism in America* Lasch explicitly declared to have not wished to write another Benda's *Trahison des Clercs* (1927), he effectively followed somehow in his wake<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> See in particular Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., pp. 226-227. See also Ch. Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left*, cit., pp. 183-184.

<sup>63</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1329.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>65</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, cit., p. XVI. See J. Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* (1927), Beacon Press, Boston, 1959. On the theme of the role of

In 1969 and 1973 he published his third and fourth book, which were, as he admitted<sup>66</sup>, collections of articles already published, even if in part revised: *The Agony of the American Left*<sup>67</sup> and *The World of Nations*<sup>68</sup>. In the former, it is important to emphasize that he dealt, for the

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intellectuals see also Ch. Lasch, *A Typology of Intellectuals: I. The Feminist Subject*, "Salmagundi", n. 70-71, Spring-Summer 1986, pp. 27-32; *A Typology of Intellectuals: II. The Example of C. Wright Mills*, "Salmagundi", n. 70-71, Spring-Summer 1986, pp. 102-107; *A Typology of Intellectuals: III. Melanie Klein, Psychoanalysis, and the Revival of Public Philosophy*, "Salmagundi", n. 70-71, Spring-Summer 1986, pp. 204-213. See also R. Westbrook, *Christopher Lasch, the New Radicalism, and the Vocation of Intellectuals*, "Reviews in American History", vol. 23, n. 1, March 1995, pp. 176-191; K. Mattson, *The Historian As a Social Critic: Christopher Lasch and the Uses of History*, "The History Teacher", vol. 36, n. 3, May 2003, pp. 375-395.

<sup>66</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> *The Agony of American Left*, cit., was constituted by the following essays: *The Decline of Dissent*, "Katallagete", 1, Winter 1966, pp. 11-17 (included in chap. 1); *Whatever Happened to Socialism?*, "New York Review of Books", 12 September 1968, pp. 14-23 (included in chap. 2); *The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of the Congress for Cultural Freedom*, in B.J. Bernstein (ed.), *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, Pantheon, New York, 1968, pp. 322-59 (included in chap. 3); *The Trouble with Black Power*, "New York Review of Books", 29 February 1968, pp. 4-14 (included in chap. 4); *The New Politics: 1968 and After*, "New York Review of Books", 11 July 1968, pp. 3-6 (included in chap. 5); *Where Do We Go From Here?*, "New York Review of Books", 10 October 1968, pp. 4-5, (included in chap. 5).

<sup>68</sup> *The World of Nations*, cit., was constituted by the following essays: *Two 'Kindred Spirits': Sorority and Family in New England, 1839-1846*, "New England Quarterly", 36, March 1963, pp. 23-41 (included in chap. 2); *Divorce and the Family in America*, "Atlantic Monthly", November 1966, pp. 57-61 (included in chap. 3); *Emancipated Women*, "New York Review of Books", 13 July 1967, pp. 28-32 (included in chap. 4); *Burned Over Utopia*, "New York Review of Books", 26 January 1967, pp. 15-18 (included in chap. 5); *The Anti-Imperialists, the Philippines, and the Inequality of Man*, "Journal of Southern History", 24, August 1958, pp. 319-31 (included in chap. 6); *Epilogue*, in R. Aya, N. Miller (eds.), *The New American Revolution*, Free Press, New York, 1971, pp. 318-34 (included in chap. 8); *Gandhi and Non-Violence*, "Dialogue", 3 1970, pp. 89-92 (included in chap. 9); *Can the Left Rise Again?*, "New York Review of Books", 21 October 1971, pp. 36-48 (included in chap. 10); *Populism, Socialism, and McGovernism*, "New York Review of Books", 20 July 1972, pp. 15-20 (included in chap. 11); *The Gates of Eden*, "Yale Law Journal", 80, March 1971, pp. 865-70 (included in chap. 12); *Change Without Politics*, "Manchester Guardian", 9 September 1971, p. 9 (included in chap. 12); *The Historian as Diplomat*, "Nation", 24 November 1962, pp. 348-53 (included in chap. 13); *The Cold War, Revisited and Re-Visioned*, "New York Times Magazine", 14 January 1968, pp. 26-27, 44-51, 54, 59 (included in chap. 14); *The Making of the War Class*, "Columbia Forum", 1, Winter 1971, pp. 2-11 (included in chap. 15); *Examining the War Class: An Exchange*, "Columbia Forum", 1, Spring 1972, pp. 49-52 (included in chap. 15); *Educational Structures and Cultural Fragmentation*, in J. Voss, P.L. Ward, *Confrontation and Learned Societies*, New York University Press, New York, 1970, pp. 105-26 (included in chap. 16); *The Good Old Days*, "New York Review of Books", 10 February 1972, pp. 25-27 (included in chap. 16); *The Social Thought of Jacques Ellul*, "Katallagete", 2, Winter-Spring 1970, pp. 21-30 (included in chap. 17); *Birth, Death and Technology: The Limits of Cultural Laissez-Faire*, "Hastings Center Report", 2, June 1972, pp. 1-4 (included in chap. 18).



first time fairly in detail, with populism<sup>69</sup>. The topic will be crucial to him for the rest of his intellectual life, as we will see later. But for the moment what is important to underline is that for Lasch the American populism of the late Nineteenth century did not owe its ideas to Karl Marx, who was and remained an epigone of progress, but rather to Thomas Jefferson, for his ideas of rooted republican democracy, the crucial role of a wide distribution of propriety, the emphasis he placed on the decentralisation of power and his preference for farmers over city life<sup>70</sup>.

The latter of the two above-mentioned books opened with a fierce critique of Marx. As he already declared at the beginnings of his first book<sup>71</sup>, liberalism and Marxism shared, in his view, a “Whiggish or progressive interpretation of history”. And he continued as follows: “I have never found very convincing those explanations of history in which our present enlightenment is contrasted with the benighted conditions of the past; in which history is regarded as ‘marching’, with occasional setbacks and minor reverses, toward a better world; and in which moral issues appear unambiguous and reform and radical movements are seen as a straightforward response to oppression”<sup>72</sup>. Against a deterministic and mechanistic theory of history he opposed a more humble, human and realist point of view borrowed by the Italian philosopher Giambattista

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<sup>69</sup> Actually, the interest for it is already manifested in a book review in the early Sixties: Review to N. Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1962 and to W.T.K Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962, “Pacific Historical Review”, 33, 1, February 1964, pp. 69-73.

<sup>70</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Agony of American Left*, cit., in particular pp. 13-14. It should be noted, however, that Jefferson was far from being *against* the idea of progress. It seems, then, that Lasch, similarly to other cases, took some parts of an author, while rejecting or simply omitting other sides.

<sup>71</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*, cit., p. XVI.

<sup>72</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The World of Nations*, cit., p. 10.

Vico: “But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the never-failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could hope to know”<sup>73</sup>.

Moreover, in that book he dealt specifically with an author who was beginning to have an extensive influence on him, that is to say Jacques Ellul. Ellul was a French theologian and sociologist, who argued for a point of contact between political radicalism and cultural conservatism. Lasch defined him as “one of the few contemporary radicals fully to grasp the cultural dimensions of the twentieth-century crisis”<sup>74</sup>. He fully understood, Lasch said, “people’s helpless bewilderment in the face of mass communications, the assimilation of science to technique, the degradation of art, the collapse of values. He shows – Lasch continued – how the mass media subject people to a barrage of disconnected and therefore meaningless facts and how this makes critical reflection on

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<sup>73</sup> Lasch put the quotation, extracted from Vico’s magnum opus *The New Science*, whose first edition was published in 1725, in exergue to his book.

<sup>74</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The World of Nations*, cit., p. 278. The main references of Lasch to Ellul’s books are: *The Technological Society*, A. Knopf, New York, 1964; *Propaganda*, A. Knopf, New York, 1966; *The Political Illusion*, A. Knopf, New York, 1967; *The Presence of the Kingdom*, Seabury Press, New York, 1967. See also a later Lasch’s essay on Ellul: *Theology and Politics: Reflections on Ellul’s Living Faith*, “Katallagete”, 9, Fall-Winter 1984, pp 10-15. Due to the difficulties of finding, I have consulted it directly in archive: Lasch Papers, Box 41, Folder 28.

politics impossible”<sup>75</sup>. Moreover, he criticised, quite correctly for Lasch, liberationist vision of the New Left, “which proposes to free man from all forms of external authority. Ellul holds to the idea that order and authority are necessary and even desirable; that conflicts with authority are a necessary part of education and of growing up in general”<sup>76</sup>. Ellul insisted on the importance of a few key elements of human society, namely the “need for privacy, order, continuity” and stability as well, linked to his praise for the family<sup>77</sup>. In brief, what Ellul deemed crucial for a good society was not progress, change, liberations from binding commitments conceived as cages. Rather, cultural conservation, stability, continuity, “a freedom rooted not in personal liberation but in the dignity of privacy, kinship ties, moral order, and civic duty”. “On this matter – a scholar noted – he [Lasch] was far closer to the Christian humanist vision of a Jacques Ellul than to the secular liberationist vision of a Herbert Marcuse”<sup>78</sup>. In order to be effectively free, Lasch argued, you have to count on some inner resources that liberationism, on the contrary, tends to radically corrode. Actually, Lasch wrote in the early sixties two articles dealing with conservatism<sup>79</sup>. In them, it can be already well traced a sort of radical distrust towards liberalism as well as a not a priori revulsion of conservatism. Indeed, a certain conservative propensity, disposition or sensibility of him was already there. Nevertheless, as he would have

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 279.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*. See E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 2140-2145; E. Miller, *Pilgrim to an Unknown Land*, cit., pos. 358.

<sup>78</sup> E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pos. 2268.

<sup>79</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Wrong Sort of Conservatism*, “St. Louis Post-Dispatch”, 16 July 1959, p. 2B; Ch. Lasch, *Is Conservatism the Real Enemy?*, “St. Louis Post-Dispatch”, 2 August 1961, p. 2C.

written later, he did not like the association, rather the equation, of conservatism with change and progress, capitalism and big business, license and hedonism. In sum, with what his contemporary conservatism demonstrated to be.

In 1970, he reached the university in which he would have remained until his death, in 1994, namely the University of Rochester. This time too, however, he decided not to go living in the city, but in a small town, Avon, for moving later, in 1978, to another small place, Pittsford. During the seventies, he continued to publish several essays focused on the family topic. After the “liberationist moment”, namely the late sixties, in which radicals had claimed their revolution against all forms of authority, by following a simple equation that linked authority with authoritarianism, Lasch had concentrated his efforts on the erosion of the traditional authority of the family institution. By means of the connection between different elements, such as the growing importance of helping professions and medical industry, a capitalistic system devoted to consumerism and linked to its propaganda by mass media, social sciences that, on the strength of the authority of scientific and objective knowledge, advised the structures of political power about what to do, traditional forms of authority were then seen not only as obsolete but also as wrong and superable: a better society was at hand. The problem was, Lasch thought, that new forms of authority could have been much more ominous. In 1978, he wrote hence that “the superstate has not only survived the ‘sexual revolution’, it has enlisted the sexual revolution in its own campaign, undertaken on the whole with the best intentions, to

eradicate the last remnants of secrecy and private life”<sup>80</sup>. In an article published in 1975 in “The New York Review of Books”, Lasch stated that such a “medical view of reality” could be traced in the nineteenth-century attempts to remodel private life<sup>81</sup>. For Lasch, such a modern and enlightened vision, namely the idea that society could be rebuilt at will, in accordance with an orthopaedic-pedagogic mission of the elites, reduced the most part of society to nothing less than a herd to guide and traditions and common ways of life to backward prejudices to overcome: “‘Modernization’ is a naïve theory of historical progress. It reflects the enlightened prejudices of our own time – the earlier generations were incapable of understanding things we now take for granted, that they seldom attained our heights of feeling; that love, sex, and personal autonomy are our own inventions; and that because the masses in ‘traditional’ society did not express their emotions in novels and poems it can safely be assumed that they had none to express”<sup>82</sup>.

The family, the key institution for a stable and well-structured society, had become just “the perfect consumer”<sup>83</sup> of external and top-down instructions. The following year, Lasch published another article whose title, *The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World*<sup>84</sup>, would have become in 1977 the title of his fifth book. As he will declare in a late interview, the work on it already started in 1973 and it was “the most

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<sup>80</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Talking About Sex: The History of a Compulsion*, “Psychology Today”, November 1978, p. 158,

<sup>81</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What the Doctor Ordered*, “New York Review of Books”, 11 December 1975, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Emotions of Family Life*, “New York Review of Books”, 27 November 1975, p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World*, “Salmagundi”, n. 35, Fall 1976, pp. 42-55.

difficult of all the books that I ever wrote”<sup>85</sup>, but also the best, he said, together with *The True and Only Heaven*<sup>86</sup>. The title, actually, did not mean to consider the familiar institution as a perfect and idyllic place. On the contrary, the distinctive characteristic of human creations, for Lasch, lies in their inescapably limited, fragile and precarious nature. However, as he put in a manuscript dated 1978 but not published, *The Future of the Family*<sup>87</sup>, it represents perhaps the most fundamental institution of a stable, free, self-governing and democratic society: “families perform indispensable services that cannot be entrusted to other agencies without endangering society. It trains self-reliance, the basis of democratic citizenship, and it helps to protect the interest of the individual against the state”<sup>88</sup>. As a barrier between the individual and the state, it teaches that “democracy rests on voluntary associations”<sup>89</sup>. Therefore, as an anti-monist institution, “it instills loyalties that take precedence over those of the state, which is why the champions of state power – Lasch continued – have always hoped to do away with the family and to make citizens directly dependent on the state”<sup>90</sup>. In sum, in addition to its precious role of educating new lives to live responsibly and independently, “the family – even in the weakened form in which it survives today – provides one small but necessary defense against its [the power of state] unlimited expansion”<sup>91</sup>. Moreover, the family authority teaches the youngest that

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<sup>85</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>86</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1320.

<sup>87</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Future of the Family*, 1978, Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 11 (not published). As it appears from a letter dated 27 June 1978, the article should have been published by “Friends Magazine”, but it never happened so.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*. P. 6.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

not every authority leads necessarily to authoritarian outcomes. Rather, it let them cultivate self-reliance and self-discipline, but also cooperation towards a common purpose. In a letter to his friend Jean Bethke Elshtain, dated 1981, Lasch argued that “the parents try to equip the child with the capacity to make his own decisions and to think for himself, which will in time supersede the parents’ caretaking functions”<sup>92</sup>. The substitution of the family, as the key institution of education, with external, tutelary and permissive agencies, instead, could erode such a development of character promoting a servile mind. The erosion of the family, in brief, would have strengthened the formation of a “therapeutic state”<sup>93</sup>. Instead of creating better and freer individuals, liberation from traditional types of bonds and constraints could have produced, Lasch warned by a very Tocquevillian tone, new and more perilous, because milder but also stronger, forms of despotism<sup>94</sup>.

This theme, i.e. the expansion of a type of character much more inclined to be dependent on others, specifically on bureaucratic and impersonal control agencies, which is linked to the weakening role of the

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<sup>92</sup> Ch. Lasch to J. Bethke Elshtain, 19 March 1981, Lasch Papers, Box 6, Folder 2, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> On that, in addition to the mentioned book, see in particular Ch. Lasch, *Authority and the Family: Permissiveness, and Growing State Control*, “New York Times”, 14 November 1977, p. 33, part one (Lasch Papers, Box 15, Folder 20); Ch. Lasch, *Authority and the Family: Controlling Society a New Way*, “New York Times”, 15 November 1977, p. 41, part two (Lasch Papers, Box 15, Folder 20); Ch. Lasch, *Life in the Therapeutic State*, “New York Review of Books”, 12 June 1980, pp. 24-32, now in Ch. Lasch, *Women and the Common Life*, cit., chap. 9, pp. 161-186; Ch. Lasch, *The Bill of Rights and the Therapeutic State*, in S.C. Halpern (ed.), *The Future of Our Liberties: Perspectives on the Bill of Rights*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1982, pp. 195-203; Ch. Lasch, *On Medicalization and the Triumph of the Therapeutic*, in M.W. de Vries, R.L. Berg, M. Lipkin Jr (eds.), *The Use and Abuse of Medicine*, Prager, New York, 1982, pp. 36-41 (Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 6).

<sup>94</sup> My reference, of course, is to A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 2010, vol. II, Part IV, chap. 6, *What Type of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear*, pp. 1245-1261. I will deal more widely and accurately with the family topic, its relationship with the therapeutic state and the new form of despotism in chapter 3.

family and its invasion by new models of authority, leads directly to his next book, published just two year after the fourth, and precisely in 1979: *The Culture of Narcissism*<sup>95</sup>. If *Haven* let know Lasch to a broader public, by means of the following book the American historian and sociologist became to some extent famous. As a proof of that, at the beginnings of that year, he was interviewed by two important popular magazines, “Time” and “Newsweek”<sup>96</sup>. Then, in July, he was interviewed by the American weekly magazine “People” too<sup>97</sup>. Moreover, in May, Lasch was invited to meet the President of the US, Jimmy Carter<sup>98</sup>. After the book on narcissism, in general, the public interest concerning his ideas grew. As such, the reviews amounted to over fifty per book<sup>99</sup>. And he would have constantly received, over the years, many invitations for giving public and academic lessons around his themes of research<sup>100</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit. In a similar way to other books, such as *The Agony of the American Left*, cit., *The World of Nations*, cit., *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., also this book used some articles already published elsewhere, even if in revised way: Ch. Lasch, *The Narcissist Society*, “New York Review of Books”, 30 September 1976, pp. 5-16; Ch. Lasch, *Planned Obsolescence*, “New York Review of Books”, 28 October 1976, p. 7 and 10; Ch. Lasch, *The Narcissistic Personality of Our Time*, “Partisan Review”, 44, n. 1 1977, pp. 9-19.; Ch. Lasch, *The Corruption of Sports*, “New York Review of Books”, 28 April 1977, pp. 24-30; Ch. Lasch, *Aging in a Culture Without a Future*, “Hastings Center Report”, 7, August 1977, pp. 42-44; Ch. Lasch, *The Siege of the Family*, “New York Review of Books”, 24 November 1977, pp. 15-18; Ch. Lasch, *The Flight from Feeling: Sociopsychology of Sexual Conflict*, “Marxist Perspectives”, 1, Spring 1978, pp. 74-94; Ch. Lasch, *To Be Young, Rich, and Entitled*, “Psychology Today”, March 1978, pp. 124-26.

<sup>96</sup> R.Z. Sheppard, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, “Time”, 8 January 1979; V. Lloyd, *Me, Me, Me*, “Newsweek”, 22 January 1979.

<sup>97</sup> B. Rowes, *Gratification Now Is the Slogan of the '70s, Laments a Historian*, cit.

<sup>98</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 12. I will speak of it later, in chapter two.

<sup>99</sup> Actually, his previous book was already much read and commented. However, such an interest remained, so to speak, inside the academic milieu.

<sup>100</sup> Just to give an idea of the popularity he reached by means of the book on narcissism, here there are, in chronological order, some lectures he gave during the eighties (in some cases the information about the host institution I traced in the archive are not complete): *The Nuclear Family and Its Critics*, University of North Carolina, 3 April 1979, Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 24; *The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Knowledge*, University of Rochester, 11 November 1979 Lasch Papers, Box 20, Folder 19; *The State of The Family*, Rochester, 14 June 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 36; *Democracy*



Let us recur to what was said before, namely the main argument of the book. In general, as Lasch put it, “it grew directly and easily out of *Haven* because so many of the themes were shared”<sup>101</sup>. In fact, if *Haven* had dealt with the erosion of the family, *The Culture of Narcissism* dealt with the consequence of that, that is to say the emergence and the widespread expansion of the narcissist social type. Lasch, of course, did not denounce the erosion of the family only for the creation of a narcissistic society. However, that was part of a broader phenomenon that reduced individuals to easily manipulable atoms. Contrary to what it

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*and The Crisis of Confidence*, Florida Atlantic University, 20 November 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 42; *The Freudian Left and the Theory of Cultural Revolution*, Freud Memorial Lectures, University College London, February-March 1981, Lasch Paper, Box 22, Folder 2;; *The Modernist Myth of the Future*, 26 April 1982, Minneapolis, Lasch Papers, Box 23, Folder 28; *The Self Under Siege*, Vermont, 20 October 1982, Lasch Papers, Box 23, Folder 31; *The Self Under Siege*, Duke University, 17 February 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 23, Folder 33; *Recent Controversies About Narcissism and Selfishness*, Holgate University, 17 November 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 24; *The Future of Personal Freedom*, University of Akron, 21 January 1984, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 26; *Individualism and Intimacy: The Critique of the Patriarchal Family*, University of Chicago, 1 February 1984, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 28; *The Disappearance of the General Reader*, Rochester Public Library, 14 April 1984, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 29; *Individualism, Community and Public Conversation*, Cedar Rapids, 25 April 1985, Lasch Papers, Box 25, Folder 30; *Modernism and Its Critics*, University of North Alabama, 1 October 1985, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 11; *Beyond Left and Right*, University of Toronto, 22 January 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 18; *The Moral Implications of Psychoanalysis*, University of Rochester, February 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 19; *Individualism and Its Critics*, The College of Wooster, Ohio, 30 September 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 36; *In Search of Common Ground*, University of San Francisco, November 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 10; *The Future of the Self*, Louisiana State University, 1 March 1987, Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 7; *The Idea of Progress in Our Time*, New York, 1 April 1987, Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 8; *The Idea of Progress in Our Time*, Lehigh University, 30 April 1987, Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 9; *The Historical Background of Idea of Progress*, McGill University, October 1987, Box 27, Folder 14; *Narcissism, Gnosticism and the Faustian Spirit of Modern Science*, McGill University, October 1987, Box 27, Folder 14; *Optimism or Hope? The Ethic of Abundance and the Ethic of Limits*, Providence College, 28 March 1990, Lasch Papers, Box 28, Folder 34; *Society as The Patient: A Critique of Compassion*, Colorado, November 1991, Lasch Papers, Box 42, Folder 10; *The Family and Its Friends*, Conference on The Family in American Life, Indianapolis, 25 March 1992, Lasch Papers, Box 23, Folder 23; *What Was the American Dream?*, Harvard University, 14 April 1993, Lasch Papers, Box 31, Folder 25. In general, for every official invitation Lasch asked one thousand dollars plus travelling expenses.

<sup>101</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 11.

might be expected<sup>102</sup>, Lasch did not consider the narcissist as the “acquisitive individualist of nineteenth-century political economy”. Such a social type had got faith and a sort of moral restraint related to it: his desires and aspirations were checked by some sort of inner balance. As such, he accumulated goods and provisions because, in some way, he was linked to the past as well to the future: he believed in the intergenerational continuity of history. On the contrary, the narcissist “demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire”<sup>103</sup>. He is just a consumer in a world that considers everything, even values and principles, as consumer goods. Hence, he does not possess any sort of moral and internal constraint. He cannot, therefore, really be free, because he is consumed by, and made radically dependent and captive of his own desires which become now his fetters. As Lasch argued in an article of some years later, in 1984, by which he was called to speak about George Orwell’s masterpiece *1984* (1949)<sup>104</sup> and its relevance in an age in which totalitarian Soviet despotism was still alive, the problem of his time, he thought, was not so much the external forces that threatened political freedom. Indeed, Lasch observed, the point consists in the fact that “political freedom itself rests on a sense of selfhood that is growing more and more difficult to sustain”<sup>105</sup>. “The greatest danger we face – Lasch continued – is not so much the decline or collapse of political freedom as the gradual weakening of its cultural

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<sup>102</sup> On that, among others, it is crucial Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism Revisited*, “World & I”, May 1990, pp. 511-23, then reprinted as afterword to the paperback edition, published in 1991, of *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., 237-49.

<sup>103</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., p. XVI.

<sup>104</sup> G. Orwell, *1984* (1949), Mariner Books, Boston, 2013.

<sup>105</sup> Ch. Lasch, *1984: Are We There?*, “Salmagundi”, n. 65, Fall 1984, p. 62.

and psychological foundations”<sup>106</sup>. The main problem, then, was not so much the prospect of an unlimited political power, in any case “terrifying”: rather, it was the urgency of a “work of moral and spiritual renewal”<sup>107</sup>. The emergence of such a totalitarian or despotic power, eventually, depends logically on the quality of the citizenship. And the contemporary democratic type of character, for Lasch, suffered from a radical disease: the lack of inner resources for facing contemporary paternalistic and tutelary despotism, perhaps milder but nonetheless not less ruinous than in the past cause of its pervasiveness<sup>108</sup>.

In 1980, when the paperback edition of the book on narcissism was published, Lasch refused the “American Book Award”, for the section of “paperback current interest”, as a sign of radical critique of the cultural industry<sup>109</sup>. In the winter of 1981, he gave the Freud Lectures at University College. After the book on narcissism, he declared, “I was sick of psychoanalysis and I didn’t want to hear any more about it”<sup>110</sup>. However, in the lectures he explicated how he meant Freud’s teachings. His interpretation of it was quite at odds with liberationist thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Lacan and their followers. According to him, “Freud puts more stress on human limitations than on human

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>108</sup> In a certain sense, Lasch would have considered much more relevant for his days another dystopic book: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932), Vintage Books, 2020. The drug that the World State gave for free to its citizens, the so called “soma”, which produced happiness, a sense of complacency and timelessness pleasure, could be compared to what create, according to Lasch, capital system and therapeutic state together: a society that is totally dependent on a paternalistic power and that conducted to induced pleasures by it. However, Lasch quoted it just in an essay: Ch. Lasch, *Lewis Mumford and the Myth of the Machine*, “Salmagundi”, n. 49, Summer 1980, p. 25.

<sup>109</sup> See Ch. Lasch a Ms. Cunliffe, 2 May 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 19, Folder 1.

<sup>110</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 13.

potential”<sup>111</sup>. Freud did not call for some kind of revolution or social progress: he “does not support the notion that liberation consists in the repudiation of family ties or the introduction of a new system of collective childrearing”<sup>112</sup>. He invited, much more plainly, to recognize and therefore to compromise with intrinsic human limitations<sup>113</sup>. After some readings<sup>114</sup>, Lasch came to understand that psychoanalysis could not be “approached as a science or would-be science”, or even a sort of pseudo-religion: “it’s only I think when it is assimilated to a very old tradition of moral discourse that it’s real meaning begins to emerge”<sup>115</sup>. In a later lecture at the University of Rochester, in 1986, would have said as follows: “the value of psychoanalysis lies in its capacity to recapture some of the deepest insights of an earlier religious tradition”<sup>116</sup>. It was, according to Lasch, “a critique of human pretensions, which incorporates ancient cultural traditions”, such the Greek idea of justice which refuses human *hybris* and the Christian doctrine of original sin and human limitedness. Lasch was beginning, in sum, to consider some sort of

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<sup>111</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Freudian Left and the Theory of Cultural Revolution*, cit., p. 1. This is the manuscript of one of the speeches he gave at University College. It was published at the end of the same year: *The Freudian Left and Cultural Revolution*, “New Left Review”, n. 129, September-October 1981, pp. 23-34. On that, he recognized that he paid an influence to N.O. Brown, *Life Against Death*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1959.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>113</sup> See also the discussion followed to the speech, *Talk with a Radical*, Lasch Papers, Box 22, Folder 1.

<sup>114</sup> In particular, Ph. Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (1959), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979. Rieff, actually, had already influenced Lasch with another book, Ph. Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic. Uses of Faith After Freud*, New York, Harper, 1968. But I will speak of it in the next chapters, in particular chapter 3 and 4.

<sup>115</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>116</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Moral Implications of Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 15.

spirituality, derived from some kind of Christian tradition, as an essential part of life and its understanding<sup>117</sup>.

All the themes were the core of *The Minimal Self*<sup>118</sup>, published in 1984, which continued and to some extent concluded the research Lasch began with *Haven*. In that book, Lasch tried to clarify some points that he had already raised in the previous work and that had been sources of misunderstanding. “In a time of troubles, everyday life becomes an exercise in survival”, he started off in the preface. “In this essay, I hope first of all to make clear what *The Culture of Narcissism* seems to have left obscure or ambiguous: that the concern with the self, which seems so characteristic of our time, takes the form of a concern with its psychic survival”<sup>119</sup>. Contrary to the common idea of narcissism as an overexpanded self, the “under siege” self of today<sup>120</sup>, Lasch argued, “contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity. Emotional equilibrium demands a minimal self, not the imperial self of yesteryear”<sup>121</sup>. “As the Greek legend reminds us – Lasch continued – it is this confusion of the self and the not-self – not ‘egoism’ – that distinguishes the plight of Narcissus. The minimal or narcissistic self is, above all, a self uncertain of its own outlines”<sup>122</sup>. And again, narcissism and selfishness or overexpanded self are quite opposite terms: indeed, narcissism “signifies a loss of selfhood, not self-assertion. It refers to a

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<sup>117</sup> On that, it is crucial Ch. Lasch, *Modernism and Its Critics*.

<sup>118</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>120</sup> Specifically on this point, see the manuscripts of two conferences he held: Ch. Lasch, *The Self Under Siege*, Vermont, Foucault Series, 20 October 1982; Ch. Lasch, *The Self Under Siege*, Duke University, 17 February 1983.

<sup>121</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

self threatened with disintegration and by a sense of inner emptiness”<sup>123</sup>. As his friend David Riesman wrote to him in a letter, the title echoed a lot Robert Musil’s masterpiece *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-1943), *The Man Without Qualities*<sup>124</sup>. Indeed, not only the title: the narcissist, like Ulrich, lives an extreme existential crisis. Concluding the book, Lasch thought that the best was to rediscover “what remains valuable in the Western, Judaeo-Christian tradition of individualism (as opposed to the tradition of acquisitive individualism, which parodies and subverts it): the definition of selfhood as tension, division, conflict”<sup>125</sup>.

That did not mean, Lasch stated in an interview, that he had “undergone some kind of religious conversion”<sup>126</sup>, even if some doubts about it remain, also due to his sincere participation to the Christian journal “New Oxford Review” from 1986 to 1993 and several of his writings seem to demonstrate<sup>127</sup>. In any case, he said, he was much “more willing to listen”, also considered the fact that “my politics were in the course of changing”<sup>128</sup>. Although in 1979 he had already argued that “religion is the substitute for religion”<sup>129</sup>, the idea that some form of Christian religion was to humans unavoidable and necessary was by then consolidated. In a series of lectures he held towards the end of the

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, p.

<sup>124</sup> D. Riesman to Ch. Lasch, 2 July 1984, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 11. See R. Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-1943), Vintage Books, New York, 1996.

<sup>125</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 258.

<sup>126</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>127</sup> On this point see chapter 4.

<sup>128</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 13. In this occasion, he remembered his exposure, when he was young, to “a certain kind of theology”.

<sup>129</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Me Decade: Narcissism in America*, 1 sound cassette. Washington, D.C, National Public Radio, 1979. Panel discussion with Henry Fairlie and moderator Richard Cohen. Recorded at a National Town meeting at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and broadcast on NPR on 21 June 1979. See R. Miller, *Pilgrim to an Unknown Land*, cit., p. 364.

eighties, Lasch went on the same road, by adding, moreover, a tough critique towards the idea of progress – a critique well rooted in his fervent anti-capitalism: the project culminated by writing *The True and Only Heaven* (1991) was started.

In a first conference, held at the beginnings of April, Lasch asked for considering the deepest religious message “the injunction to love life even though it isn’t organized around the fulfilment of human wishes”<sup>130</sup>. “Religion – Lasch continued – urges us to accept our dependence on uncontrollable forces not as a source of despair but as the condition of our being, as such the source of whatever happiness we can expect enjoy”<sup>131</sup>. Instead of pleading the cause of an indefinite and unlimited progress, which is linked to a never-ending appetite of more autonomy and therefore to human rebellion against its limitations, Lasch invited to reconsider “gratitude and hope, a joyful affirmation of the rightness of a world that was not created for our particular benefit”<sup>132</sup>. In a close conference, this time at the end of April, Lasch spoke in the same way. He argued that it revealed unfruitful and sterile debating between optimism and pessimism about the present age and the past one. He preferred hope, not to be conceived as an attitude toward the future, but rather “as trust in life itself, an underlying disposition to see the promised land not as a distant objective but as a present reality, the ground and basis of our being”<sup>133</sup>. In another conference, a part of a series held at the

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<sup>130</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Idea of Progress in Our Time*, New York, 1 April 1987, cit., p. 19.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22. See also Ch. Lasch, *Optimism or Hope? The Ethic of Abundance and the Ethic of Limits*, Providence College, 28 March 1990, cit.

<sup>133</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Idea of Progress in Our Time*, Lehigh University, 30 April 1987, cit., p. 22. It is this conference, Lasch argued in an interview, that the broad reflection about

McGill University of Montreal, Canada, dated October 1987, Lasch wrote about *The Historical Background of the Idea of Progress*. He rejected the belief according to which the idea of progress could be dated back to the Judaeo-Christian prophecy: rather, “we can see that the Judaeo-Christian conception of history had more in common with the classical conception, as reformulated during the Renaissance, than with the modern. What they had in common – Lasch stated – was precisely an awareness of (...) the contingent, provisional and finite quality of temporal things”<sup>134</sup>. In the end, he criticized both left and right, because “both assume that only a belief in progress, usually interpreted as the secular substitute for a belief in personal immortality, gives modern man the incentive to make sacrifices on behalf of posterity”<sup>135</sup>. They both were progressive in their ideology, he thought. And they both, therefore, tended to deny human limitations as obstacles to the irresistible march of progress. In the following conference, Lasch linked the ideology of progress and the “faustian spirit of modern science”, as he called it, with the gnostic impulse<sup>136</sup>. Gnosticism, in a similar way to modern scientific

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the specific theme of progress took shape: “It was the first time I had actually even done any serious reading about the idea of progress”, R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 14. In another interview, however, he said that he “spent ten years, making one false start after another, discarding draft after draft”, C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1320, which would mean that the idea of such a project would be ideally started around 1981.

<sup>134</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Historical Background of Idea of Progress*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>136</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Narcissism, Gnosticism and the Faustian Spirit of Modern Science*, cit. On this topic, see also the series of article for the “New Oxford Review”, appeared between 1985 and 1991, as follows: *The Infantile Illusion of Omnipotence & the Modern Ideology of Science*, “New Oxford Review”, October 1986; *Probing Gnosticism & Its Modern Derivatives*, “New Oxford Review”, December 1990; *The Spirit of Modern Science*, “New Oxford Review”, January-February 1991; *Anti-Modern Mysticism: E.M. Cioran & C.G. Jung*, “New Oxford Review”, March 1991; *The New Age Movement: No Effort, No Truth, No Solutions*, “New Oxford Review”, April 1991. I will speak in detail about Laschian contribution to such a journal in chapter four.



materialism and progressive ideology, Lasch argued, shared “a common revolt against human condition”: “gnosticism elevated man above the physical world and proclaimed his independence from nature; and the same view of man reappears in the ideology of modern science”<sup>137</sup>. Once more, Lasch expressed a certain affinity towards the position of Christianity, which “have always set definite limits to man’s domination of nature, limits inherent in the belief that the natural world is a manifestation of God’s glory”<sup>138</sup>. Both gnosticism and science, instead, reject in a Faustian way such limits, by refusing, thus, human condition itself. The ideology of progress, therefore, was to Lasch, as he put it in an article published in 1989, “the last superstition”<sup>139</sup>. All these ideas were collected in the most voluminous book that would have published<sup>140</sup>. Lasch so commented: “I thought that it was the most tightly organized thing I had ever done and I was proud of it”<sup>141</sup>. However, due to the length and sometimes redundant treatment of some arguments he was criticized for it too<sup>142</sup>. By means of *The True and Only Heaven* he came to circumscribe his interest in populism, even if in a partial, limited and problematic way. He considered it as a “sensibility” or “state of heart and mind”<sup>143</sup> typical of the half-forgotten “Middle-America”, informed by sense of limits and rootedness, grace and hope for the ordinary and

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>139</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Progress: The Last Superstition*, “Tikkun”, 4, n. 3 1989, pp. 27-30.

<sup>140</sup> Just to give an idea, material of the book covers at least eight boxes, namely from box 34 to 41 in Lasch Papers Archive.

<sup>141</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>142</sup> The book consists in around six hundred pages. He added to the usual treatment also an almost forty page long “bibliographical essay”, which, caustically, Roger Kimball argued that it could have been another chapter as well: see R. Kimball, *The disaffected populist: Christopher Lasch on Progress*, “New Criterion”, March 1991.

<sup>143</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 17 and 530. I will deal with it later.

everyday life: what Edmund Burke would have called “the unbought grace of life”<sup>144</sup> against therapeutic ideologies imposed by external, remote and progressive elites<sup>145</sup>. As his friend Elshtain put it, all the book is pervaded by a “tough-minded Augustinianism”: a natural and humble disposition towards “the reality of human limits and of sin”<sup>146</sup>. A disposition very close to a certain conservatism, which in any case Lasch did not deny, as he admitted in many occasions<sup>147</sup>, that let some observer deem as a step towards a more articulated conservative vision<sup>148</sup>. Actually, Lasch himself was not truly convinced of the rightness of the term “populism” for describing his growing, anything but sudden or new, sensibility. Indeed, in an occasion, dated December 1990, he argued that “populism is a rather slippery term, and I am not altogether happy with it”<sup>149</sup>. In another occasion, the year later, he described himself and the “populist sensibility” as follows: “But if I have to be labelled, I would prefer to be called a populist. That is an ambiguous term to be sure and

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<sup>144</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, cit., p. 170.

<sup>145</sup> Specifically on that, see P.A Lawler, *Moral Realism versus Therapeutic Elitism: Christopher Lasch's Populist Defense of American Character*, in P.A. Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 1999, pp. 157-87.

<sup>146</sup> J.B. Elshtain, *A Modern Jeremiad*, “First Things”, April 1991, p. 55. As for many reviews of his books and articles in general, often quite difficult to find, I procured it in Rochester: Lasch Papers, Box 35, Folder 9.

<sup>147</sup> Just to give an example: Ch. Lasch, *What's Wrong with the Right*, “Tikkun”, 1, n. 1 1986, pp. 23-29 (Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 30); *Contribution to “Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism*, “New Oxford Review”, October 1987; *A Response to Joel Feinberg*, “Tikkun”, 3, n. 3 1988, pp. 41-42; *A Response to Fischer*, “Tikkun”, 3, n. 6 1988, pp. 72-73 (Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 24); *Conservatism against Itself*, “First Things”, n. 2, April 1990. But we can trace far back some comments of Lasch about “cultural conservatism”. For example, Ch. Lasch, to J.B Elshtain, 9 July 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 12. And further back his comments appeared as Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to symposium ‘On the New Cultural Conservatism’*, “Partisan Review”, 39, n. 3, 1972, pp. 431-33, as found in Lasch Papers, Box 14, Folder 14.

<sup>148</sup> See in particular P. Gottfried, *Stop the Wheels*, “The World and I”, March 1991, pp. 374-377 (Lasch Papers, Box 35, Folder 8).

<sup>149</sup> P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 125.

can give rise to all sorts of misunderstandings. I readily admit populism can be reactionary. Nor has it been successful at countering bad economic programs with good ones of its own. I use the term primarily to recapture a moral vision that has been largely lost in modern society. It is, first of all, a useful way of criticizing the pretensions of progress and also a way of setting in relief certain values I cherish: a sense of limits, a respect for the accomplishments and aspirations of ordinary people, a realistic appraisal of life's possibilities, genuine hope without utopianism which trusts life without denying its tragic character"<sup>150</sup>.

In occasion of the end of his role as head of the Department of History at the University of Rochester, in 1993, and which started seven years before, Lasch held a commencement address to the department by recognizing that the youngest, namely his students, were by that time disillusioned with the society in which they were living<sup>151</sup>. However, Lasch thought, that did not mean that their "cold-eye realism", which was his too, coincided with cynicism and despair: it was possible to be morally realist and, at the same time, to be hopeful and to have "warm hearts". Hence, he ended the discourse, by inviting to be trustful in life and by encouraging to follow the things which are worth of stewardship: "love, useful work, self-respect, honour, and integrity". However, his radical, populist or conservative sensibility could not have had the time to fully develop itself.

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<sup>150</sup> B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit.

<sup>151</sup> I found the document in Lasch Papers, Box 68, Folder 8. It was published then as Ch. Lasch, *The Baby Boomers: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: A New Generation in the Wings*, "New Oxford Review", September 1993.

Unfortunately, Lasch died prematurely, at his home in Pittsford, on February, 14<sup>th</sup> 1994, after a long illness, a kidney cancer<sup>152</sup>. Hence, he could not see the publication of the last of his works, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995)<sup>153</sup>. He included in that book reflections of the growing insularism of the elite as well as thoughts on the very idea of democracy as self-government, and not as a mere structure of power. Moreover, he developed once more his idea of religion, not addressed perhaps only to the public: “For those who take religion seriously, belief is a burden, not a self-righteous claim to some privileged moral status. Self-righteousness, indeed, may well be more prevalent among skeptics than among believers. The spiritual discipline against self-righteousness is the very essence of religion”<sup>154</sup>. He could conclude the book, thus, by writing that living does not consist simply in being happy or having every desire that one possesses satisfied. To live,

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<sup>152</sup> As Miller reports, actually, in February 1992 one of his kidneys was already removed causing the apparent elimination of the illness: E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pp. 4830-4835.

<sup>153</sup> As for other of his books, also this one was in part made of already published articles, even if for the occasion partially revised. I mention them by following the order of their original publication: *Journalism, Publicity and the Lost Art of Argument*, “Gannett Center Journal”, 4, Spring 1990, pp. 1-11 (included in chap. 9); *Academic Pseudo-Radicalism: The Charade of ‘Subversion’*, “Salmagundi”, n. 88-89, Fall 1990-Winter 1991, pp. 25-36 (included in chap. 10); *The Saving Remnant*, “New Republic”, 19 November 1990, pp. 32-36 (included in chap. 12); *Civic Wrongs*, “Tikkun”, 6, n. 2 1991, pp. 71-73 (included in chap. 7); *Preserving the Mild Life: Neighbourhood Hangouts and the Social Spirit of the City*, “Pittsburgh History”, 74, Summer 1991, pp. 87-91 (included in chap. 6); *The Soul of Man Under Secularism: On the Pride of Disillusionment*, “New Oxford Review”, July-August 1991, pp. 12-19 (included in chap. 13); *The Great Experiment: Where Did It Go Wrong?*, in W.K. Buckley, J. Seaton (eds.), *Beyond Cheering and Bashing: New Perspectives on The Closing of the American Mind*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green, 1992, pp. 8-18 (included in chap. 8); *A Reply to Jeffrey Isaac*, “Salmagundi”, n. 93, Winter 1992, pp. 98-109 (included in chap. 4); *Communitarianism or Populism? The Ethic of Compassion and the Ethic of Respect*, “New Oxford Review”, May 1992, pp. 5-12 (included in chap. 5); *For Shame*, “New Republic”, 10 August 1992, pp. 29-34 (included in chap. 11); *The Revolt of the Elites*, “Harper’s”, November 1994, pp. 39-49 (included in chap. 2)

<sup>154</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 16.

for Lasch, was a very serious thing, a strenuous effort – “the moral equivalent of war”, William James would have said, and Lasch thought<sup>155</sup> – and the very faithful and trustful attitude towards the life itself was to accept it as limited and painful, on the hand, and joyful, on the other side: the central paradox of religious faith is “that the secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy”<sup>156</sup>. Therefore, Lasch, as he was so starkly faithful, was ready to accept death. He wrote to his doctor in this manner: “I love life, and have tried to live with intensity, passion, and integrity; but for this very reason I am prepared to leave it if called to do so”<sup>157</sup>.

Lasch had also thought to write more books than he did. And the arguments he would have touched show the continuing and the always in motion desire for reflection and research, as well as for some maturing ideas: as reality was changing, and not for the good, he thought, the same was for his perspective, more and more radical, populist and conservative, but always and constantly anti-capitalist. In particular, before writing the book on progress, in the mid-eighties Lasch wrote in a letter that he was working on a book entitled *Beyond Left and Right: Notes on the Cultural Civil War*. As a draft of contents shows, Lasch would have dealt with many topics he was focusing on, in particular the critique of liberalism, and then prospecting a radical-conservative alternative both to his contemporary progressive left and right<sup>158</sup>. The

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<sup>155</sup> I found the paper in Lasch Papers, Box 47, Folder 18: W. James, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, International Voluntary Service, Cabot, 1960.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 246.

<sup>157</sup> Ch. Lasch to Phil Rubin, 3 June 1993, Lasch Papers, Box 7c, Folder 1.

<sup>158</sup> See the letter from Ch. Lasch to Steve, 30 December 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 38, Folder 17. The draft of the index shows the structure of the book as divided into four

title, besides, was also reminiscent of an essay in which Lasch criticized the manipulative and therapeutic social control ethic of the progressive upper middle-classes, that later he would have called “new class”, and praised for the moral realism of ordinary and common people<sup>159</sup>. At the same time, though, he blamed political conservatives not to be conservative at all: they were progressive too. He argued, in the end, for the necessity of an option that was at the same time radical in its critique towards the contemporary progressive, enlightened world and conservative of some key elements of a good society: “the values of family, law and order, patriotism, and continuity”<sup>160</sup>. He praised, in essence, a cultural conservative prospect. Moreover, Lasch would have thought to a book entitled *The Theory and Practice of Neo-Paternalism or Capitalism Without Capitalists*, which demonstrates very well his constant anti-capitalist spirit<sup>161</sup>. In that book, and starting from the insights expressed in *Haven in Heartless Worlds* and *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch would have wanted to show “the institutional and

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parts: the first entitled *Liberalism in Retreat*, the second *The Liberal Critique of 'Nostalgia'*, the third *Liberal Reason and Technological Rationality*, the fourth *Beyond Left and Right*, and the introduction *Left and Right: A Study in Ideological Obsolescence*. As the most part of his books, many essays that were already published elsewhere would have been used, even if revised.

<sup>159</sup> Lasch proposed the essay as *The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Knowledge*, but the review “Katallagete” published it as *The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Faith*, “Katallagete”, 8, Summer 1982, pp. 12-18 (Lasch Papers, Box 23, Folder 11). Title and contents are reminiscent of a lecture he gave some years before: Ch. Lasch, *The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Knowledge*, Beaven Lecture, University of Rochester, 11 November 1979, Lasch Papers, Box 20, Folder 19.

<sup>160</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Knowledge*, Lasch Papers, Box 23, Folder 11, p. 22.

<sup>161</sup> Actually, as it seems to show the second title in particular, Lasch blamed capitalism for being an anti-human type of machine. However, he appears to be in favour of a more human-scale type of it, if possible. What is clear, maybe, is that Lasch was never perfectly clear about that.

intellectual dimensions of dependence”<sup>162</sup>. According to Lasch, the new paternalism developed itself by the means of a mix of actions of the corporations, the professions, the educational system, the mass culture industry and the state”. This new form of paternalistic social control, Lasch summarized, fully developed in the years of the New Deal liberalism, in which the actions of the new bureaucratic agencies replaced the voluntary cooperation of independent individuals and social actors by creating a habit of dependence and a servile state of mind which was, Lasch thought, so pervasive at his time. This theme, namely a dichotomic opposition between an independent and democratic state of mind and a therapeutic and dependent form of enlightened modernization, had already been in his mind at the beginnings of the eighties. In a worksheet dated December 1981, in fact, Lasch wrote that liberalism could be conceived as a tradition in which two very distant traditions found home: a populist one, represented by Thomas Jefferson and his idea of society made of rooted, independent individuals that create order from a bottom up and subsidiary point of view<sup>163</sup>, and a tradition, paradigmatically exemplified by Jeremy Bentham, that Lasch called “Whig-philanthropic-progressive”, because of its idea that order can be only created by a top-down perspective, due to the enlightened and privileged point of view of elites<sup>164</sup>.

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<sup>162</sup> I found the document named *The Theory and Practice of Neo-Paternalism* in Lasch Papers, Box 38, Folder 23, a preliminary contract with Basic Books, as well as a draft of the book index and a brief description (three pages) of the contents, from which I quote.

<sup>163</sup> Jefferson, as it is well known, had in mind a republic of small farmers or yeomen: “Those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God”, Th. Jefferson, *Writings*, ed by M.D. Peterson, Library of America, New York, 1984, p. 290.

<sup>164</sup> See Lasch Papers, Box 34, Folder 11. In another worksheet, Lasch wrote that Bentham, according to him, shows how from individualist premises it could be derived

In a letter dated July, 31<sup>st</sup> 1987, Lasch explained his ideas about a new book, a book on the idea of progress which he “tentatively” called *The Megapolitan Mind*<sup>165</sup>. In the index, a chapter, the eighth, spoke about the idea of conservatism “from elitism to populism”<sup>166</sup>. And this very well reflects what he was looking to, namely an idea of conservatism of the ordinary men, rooted in time and place, equipped with the sense of limits and characterised by a sense of trust and hope towards life. In brief, a conservatism conceived not as ideology of progress, but rather as stewardship of a human order, as stewardship of the very idea of human beings. However, it is now time to concentrate ourselves on Lasch’s critique towards the tradition he came from: the liberal tradition. This is the crucial topic of the whole Christopher Lasch’s intellectual life. As evidence of that, among others, Lasch explicitly said in a letter, in 1983, that he was planning to write a three-volume history of liberalism<sup>167</sup>. Liberalism, he wrote in a paper rejected by the journal he proposed to, the “American Quarterly”, had embraced since the nineteenth century a conception of politics as a top-down process aimed to impose rationalistic and enlightened plans, by replacing then people self-government and self-control with moral supervision: politics as therapy substituted

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collectivistic and technocratic outcomes: those of the therapeutic state. See Lasch Papers, Box 34, Folder 29.

<sup>165</sup> Ch. Lasch to Ed (Baber?), 31 July 1987, Lasch Papers, Box 37, Folder 22.

<sup>166</sup> See Lasch Papers, Box 37, Folder 22. As it can well be seen, all the themes of these planned books Lasch never ended will be then at the centre of *The True and Only Heaven*.

<sup>167</sup> Ch. Lasch to editors Beeman and Radway, 26 August 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 2. In a letter to Jean (Bethke Elshain), 7 December 1981, Box 21, Folder 27, Lasch had already argued about his idea of writing a book on liberalism, a history of liberalism actually, but he never wrote it. In the same letter he also manifested his intention of completing a historical study of the family, which however was never completed: see E. Lasch-Quinn, *Introduction* to Ch. Lasch, *Women and the Common Life*, cit., pp. IX-XXVII.



politics as democratic self-determination, by lying the basis, Lasch thought, for the modern therapeutic state<sup>168</sup>.

## ***1.2 The Poverty of Liberalism.***

As Lasch repeatedly clarified, liberalism was the tradition he came from. His parents were part of the tradition of the New Deal liberalism<sup>169</sup>. Hence, the influence of that tradition on him continued over his whole life. Nonetheless, Lasch did not mean the concept of tradition as a “settled body of dogma”. He deemed, on the contrary, as “something you argue with or against”<sup>170</sup>, because in one way or another it was a critical part of his intellectual life. However, since Lasch did not consider himself a passive actor, he started, at least from the mid-sixties, to criticize liberalism. In a first moment, by radicalizing his ideas, namely by moving farther to the left<sup>171</sup>. But starting from the seventies, Lasch experienced,

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<sup>168</sup> Lasch’s article that was not accepted was entitled *Early Nineteenth-Century Humanitarianism and the Origins of the Therapeutic State*, twenty-three pages: Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 2. This is a very complex theme to deal with. What appears clear is that Lasch imposed on liberalism in general an idea that it could be better fit for a specific evolution of liberalism starting from the end of XIX century. A better explanation of the radical change in the liberal thought, in particular due to the influence of new liberals such as Thomas H. Green and Leonard T. Hobhouse in England, and John Dewey in the US, can be traced in P. Gottfried, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State*, Princeton University Press, 1999, in particular chap. 1. To be noted that Gottfried was a friend, and an admirer of the late Lasch. We will see that later.

<sup>169</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1311; Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 25. For a critical assessment of Lasch’s treatment of liberalism see: K. Mattson, *Christopher Lasch and the Possibilities of Chastened Liberalism*, “Polity”, vol. XXXVI, N. 3, 2004, pp. 411-445; L. Menand, *Christopher Lasch’s Quarrel with Liberalism*, in J.P. Diggins (ed.), *The Liberal Persuasion. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the Challenge of the American Past* (1997), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2017, reprint edition, pp. 233-250; G. Borgognone, *Tecnocrati del progresso. Il Pensiero americano del Novecento tra capitalismo, liberalismo e democrazia*, UTET, Torino, 2015, pp. 310-314.

<sup>170</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., *ibidem*.

<sup>171</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 26.

pushed by reality and by the study of the family<sup>172</sup>, a growing cultural conservatism.

What it has to be observed, firstly, is that Lasch was not always clear about what he meant for liberalism – better said: he seems to evade the fact that it is better and more accurate to speak of *liberalisms* rather than of *liberalism*. He referred to it considering both its economic version, let us say the classical liberal one, whose most important name was Adam Smith, and about whom his judgment was however ambivalent<sup>173</sup>, his contemporaries such as Milton Friedman<sup>174</sup>, and its cultural and political one, namely the modern, American version that he linked to names such

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibidem*. P. 25.

<sup>173</sup> See B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit. It is paradigmatically what Lasch said in that interview, arguing that Smith was split in two: he was at the same time both a political economist and a moral philosopher. Lasch stated as follows: “What we don’t often remember is that classical liberalism relied on the moral and cultural capital of earlier traditions to underwrite its vision of a liberal society much more heavily than it was willing to admit at the time. Adam Smith is a case in point. As a political economist he could speculate boldly about free markets, the acquisitive self and invisible hands. But as a moral philosopher part of his being was firmly rooted in a restraining tradition”. See also Ch. Lasch, *The true and Only Heaven*, cit., pp. in particular pp. 52-58. In essence, Lasch recognized some kind of inconsistency between Smith’s major books, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1982 and *An Inquiry into the Nature and the Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1981. As everybody knows, this is the typical problematic approach that emerged in Germany in the second half of nineteenth century: the so called “Adam Smith Problem” concerned the presumed incompatibility between the Smithian conceptions of human nature advanced in the two above-mentioned books.

<sup>174</sup> See N. Gardels, *Why Liberalism Lacks Virtue*, cit., p. 33. Lasch blamed Friedman for idolizing market economy, by considering society nothing more than a set of abstract, rational self-interested individuals. The book considered by Lasch was M. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.

as John Dewey<sup>175</sup>, John Rawls<sup>176</sup>, James Rorty<sup>177</sup>. Already since his first book, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*, Lasch saw liberalism as a “baffling” concept, perhaps one of the most baffling in politics. According to him, it indicated more a “a set of assumptions about human affairs” than something related to specific attitudes towards policies<sup>178</sup>. A set of general assumptions about human affairs meant, primarily, the idea that human beings were all provided with a very powerful reason. Liberalism, moreover, was driven by an optimistic conception of human being and, therefore, of human relations as well. In this sense, by reason and optimism, Lasch wrote, liberalism became an ideology or a *Weltanschauung* that could have embraced all the persons

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<sup>175</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 205, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., pp. 366-368. Lasch considered him too much infatuated with the ideology of progress and Enlightenment. Dewey saw science and technology as means by which the people could be liberated from their own prejudices and backward-looking views: something Lasch could not accept. Nevertheless, his interest in him, as democratic theorist, was renewed by a late book of one of his colleagues. Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993. In Rochester’s archive, I found Box 42, Folder 3 full of documents and note of Lasch about Dewey, in addition to the photocopies of J. Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1935. What Lasch underlined in a page is very much revealing about Dewey’s ideas, as opposed to Lasch’s: Dewey emphasized the importance of “Approximation to use scientific method in investigation and of the engineering mind in the invention and projection of far-reaching social plans”, p. 73. “Engineering mind”, “scientific method in investigation”, “social plans”: all things Lasch was opposed to.

<sup>176</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 103: “the prime exponent of a social democratic liberalism that conceives of human beings as rootless abstractions wholly absorbed in maximizing their own advantage (...). Rawls’ theory has no room for trust or conscience, qualities he finds ‘oppressive’. It has no room for affective ties except in their most abstract form”. In essence, Lasch criticized the fact that Rawls conceived abstract, non-human figures, devoid of any particular and rooted moral content.

<sup>177</sup> See P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 126. Lasch saw Rorty’s postmodern liberalism as a symptom of a disintegrated society, lacking any value or principle in common that made possible its own existence: “It is a liberalism which has deliberately forgotten all the universals, mystical assumptions which at one time rendered it so influential. His postmodern liberalism has given up all rights to talk about public life. Today public life is seen as a market in which people must completely suspend their own culture and values, in favour of few minimal rules, those structuring all markets”. Such an extreme form of relativism was also criticized by Lasch as follows: “Cultural relativists are so strongly impressed by cultural differences that they overlook what human beings share simply by virtue of being human”. Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 201.

<sup>178</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*, cit., p. VII.

throughout the world. Such an idea, Lasch thought, was not so far from the very idea of communism: both considered themselves some sort of “messianic creed”<sup>179</sup>. As such, it is not tied up to a particular and rooted place: its claim is universalistic. Moreover, according to Lasch, it is not bound up to some sort of moral restraining order, a moral infrastructure that could moderate its own insatiable appetites<sup>180</sup>. Due to its rational and optimistic foundations, its development was followed by, or it was the premise of the growth and the expanse of science and technology. Enlightenment’s development, Lasch thought in a certain sense, is unconceivable without liberal thought. And the same could be argued for the development of scientific way of proceeding. Particularism was replaced by universalism, historical and common-sense way of thoughts were replaced by abstract and rationalistic schemes of thought, a sense of precariousness and tragic nature of human life left the place to a scientific and progressive presumption of men over nature, the crucial role of the past for shaping the basic structure of a moral human order

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XVI. It is interesting to note that Sir Isaiah Berlin spoke in a similar manner about that: “No movement at first sight seems to differ more sharply from liberal reformism than does Marxism, yet the central doctrines - human perfectibility, the possibility of creating a harmonious society by a natural means, the belief in the compatibility (indeed the inseparability) of liberty and equality - are common to both”, I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (1950), in Id, *Liberty*, ed. by H. Hardy, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, 2002, p. 68. That recognised, nevertheless, they differed radically, as it is clear, about the very meaning of liberty and about the judgment over liberalism. For a classical treatment of liberalism as radically antithetical to “messianic creeds” see R. Boudon, *Pourquoi les intellectuels n'aiment pas le libéralisme*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2004. Boudon argues that intellectuals do not like liberalism precisely because it is not a comprehensive ideology: Lasch thought that liberalism, instead, was precisely an all-embracing ideology: but that because, maybe, he imposed on liberalism in general the ideas of ideology liberals of the post Second World War.

<sup>180</sup> The literature about liberal ideas is clearly enormous. Just to mention two recent books that appear to catch some Laschian critiques and provide the necessary space to morals for sustaining persons and society see H. Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism. From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2018 and A. Kahan, *Freedom from Fear. An Incomplete History of Liberalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2023.

was replaced by the belief in the future as ultimate horizon. In sum, a humble and limited perspective of human affairs was replaced by a very different one, much closer to a “God-like status”<sup>181</sup>: “The most important premise underlying the liberal tradition – Lasch wrote in a book review essay in 1986 – is the equation of knowledge with certainty – more specifically, with the positive knowledge supposedly achieved by modern science – and the corresponding devaluation of practical reason, of knowledge that is contingent, finite, and limited. The Promethean revolt against limits most clearly defines the liberal world view and explains why liberals tend to waver between social engineering and a debilitating political skepticism”<sup>182</sup>. According to Lasch, liberalism hinges on the idea of “instrumental reason”: by means of it and of an optimistic way of thinking, liberals think that they can overcome nature and go beyond the

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<sup>181</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Infantile Illusion of Omnipotence & the Modern Ideology of Science*, cit. “This is one of the several contributions by Lasch to the Catholic and anti-capitalist review “New Oxford Review” about the critique of science and progress. I cannot deal now with them. See for their treatment chap. 4.

<sup>182</sup> Ch. Lasch, book review to A. Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism*. Basil Blackwell, New York, 1984, “The American Historical Review”, vol. 91, n. 3, June 1986, p. 635. However, one thing must be said. As in other occasion, for example in his treatment of capitalism, he tended to see a phenomenon in a monolithic way. In this case, he considered liberalism, even if he distinguished at least two variants of it, as we have already said, as a direct heir of Enlightenment’s thought. Therefore, he did not distinguish, or at least he minimized crucial distinctions between, let us say, a French and a Scottish Enlightenment. He conceived, hence, Adam Smith and David Hume, on the one side, and French thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau sharing some basic propositions. Both the first and the second type of Enlightenment aimed to reshape from the beginning human society. See in particular Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., pp. 127-128: “The French revolution, far more clearly and dramatically than British utilitarianism, showed that the attempt to remodel society according to abstract principles of justice, to uproot established way of life and overthrow ancient beliefs, could lead more easily to a reign of terror than to a reign of universal love and brotherhood”. From that excerpt, Lasch appears to have in mind a crucial difference between two types of liberalism. Indeed, he had in mind a distinction between a bottom-up and a top-down liberalism. Nevertheless, he did not draw the proper conclusions and, therefore, continued to deal superficially with liberalism. For a crucial distinction between the different way of conceiving Enlightenment, and thus liberalism, see F.A. von Hayek, *Individualism: True and False* (1947) in F.A. von Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, pp. 1-32; G. Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity. The British, French and American Enlightenments* (2004), New York, Vintage Books, 2008.

very limits of human capacity. They consider themselves, as Lasch put it, “the children of the light”<sup>183</sup>. In this sense, they are incapable of looking at their true conditions: one made of a limited, fragile, humble nature. Liberals tend to corner and devalue what could teach them their precariousness. Religion, Lasch argued, should instruct them precisely in this very premise of their condition<sup>184</sup>. However, instead of facing up their humble condition, humans prefer to illude themselves, by using scientific way of thought and technology as means by which human limits can be controlled and even overcome. By an “engineering mind” and a “scientific method of investigation”, as Dewey put it<sup>185</sup>, they could have subjected nature and the unknown of the human world to knowledge, certainty and a future that, based on this new scientific knowledge, could now be planned.

In a conference held in 1986 at the University of Toronto, Lasch gave a speech entitled *Beyond Left and Right: Philosophical Foundations of Liberalism*<sup>186</sup>. Lasch inextricably linked the scientific revolution of sixteenth-century to the development of modern liberalism. René Descartes, in particular, tried to elaborate a scientific program by which it could be possible to discover some universal applicable principles: this could have led, Lasch wrote in another place, “to skepticism just as well as to certainty”<sup>187</sup>. To skepticism because everything would have been by then considered as something to doubt about: nothing would have

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<sup>183</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 466.

<sup>184</sup> See for example Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 164.

<sup>185</sup> J. Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, cit., p. 73.

<sup>186</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Beyond Left and Right: Philosophical Foundations of Liberalism*, cit.

<sup>187</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 125.

survived this scientific skepticism. At the same time, though, the scientific method used would have been considered, quite paradoxically, as something certain and absolute, since it was based precisely on a scientific way of inquiry. Since that very moment, what was not included in such enlightened canons would have been considered as something to be rid of: the past, traditions, common sense, ordinary way of life, hence, would have been seen as nothing but discarding elements. Lasch, however, thought that even an enlightened vision, even liberalism should have presupposed some moral order. Otherwise, its absolute sense of relativity, quite an oxymoron, would have not saved: an absolute relativity would have led to nihilism. In a letter of October 1987, in which he explained what he would have dealt with in some lectures that he would have given at McGill University of Montreal, Canada<sup>188</sup>, Lasch made clear that he considered that everything that had to do with the human world was forcibly provisional and relative: in this world nothing can be considered absolute, certain, “celestial”. However, from that premise we cannot infer that everything is equal, that any truth or common principle “goes”. The central element of the modern project of Descartes, Lasch wrote, has to be rejected: the quest for certainty collides with human imperfectability. However, Lasch continued, “the contingent, provisional, finite, historical character of human understanding – of human projects in general – doesn’t mean that human projects are therefore meaningless and futile (...). It’s the temptation to

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<sup>188</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Historical Background of Idea of Progress*, cit.; *Narcissism, Gnosticism and the Faustian Spirit of Modern Science*, cit.

absolutize the relative that always has to be resisted”<sup>189</sup>. But from that it does not derive that by means of a presumed objective knowledge, namely the scientific knowledge, some perfect, rationalistic scheme can be elaborated: good and noble intentions could lead, unintentionally, to disastrous ends<sup>190</sup>. This was precisely what, according to Lasch, Jeremy Bentham pursued. “Yet his dream of reducing politics to an impersonal, fool-proof system – it has been noted – made him the first of those who tried to move politics into the high and dry barracks of what they supposed was science”<sup>191</sup>. According to him, it was not only desirable, but rather feasible “to remake the world according to a rational pattern”<sup>192</sup>. And Lasch wrote as follows: “Armed with a scientific understanding of the requirements for human happiness, philanthropists like Jeremy Bentham did not hesitate to propose a comprehensive reconstruction of political institutions”<sup>193</sup>. Bentham, Lasch continued,

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<sup>189</sup> Ch. Lasch to Mr. Freese, 6 October 1987, Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 15.

<sup>190</sup> This leads directly to Friedrich von Hayek’s argument about the unintentional consequences of individual intentional actions. It is not a case, then, if Lasch possessed, as I found in the archive, the photocopies of the whole first book of F. A. von Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Routledge, London-New York, 1982 namely *Rules and Order* (Lasch possessed The University of Chicago Press’ version): Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 4. In his treatment, Hayek vehemently criticised human hybris and his conceited mastery over nature, as well as Cartesian, constructivist rationalism, as Lasch did. Hayek’s dichotomy between spontaneous orders, “cosmos”, as they naturally emerge from bottom-up, and rationalistic organizations, “taxis”, as they are built from top-down. However, Lasch did not believe in the good self-regulation of market, as a “cosmos”, because he thought that big-scale forms of economy tend to form some kind of a whole with other powers, by giving the birth to what Lasch used to call therapeutic state. Lasch found, in sum, too idealistic Hayek’s idea of market as a spontaneous order. Not to mention the Hayekian rejection of the social justice: Lasch thought that a conception of it, presumably based on a moral infrastructure, was crucial for the holding of a society. Hayek did not deny the moral basis of a society: but the distance between the two authors is evident – although they share, for example, the preference for a bottom-up order: see their critique of Bentham – if nothing else because Hayek insisted in considering individuals as self-interested entities, whereas Lasch spoke of them as not mere self-interested.

<sup>191</sup> Sh. Robin Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty. David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Beatrice Webb*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1998, p. 200.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XV.

<sup>193</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 127.



deemed that all the errors accumulated in the past, in the unenlightened past, were to be removed. And he was convinced to have discovered the key to certainty, to perfection, to a perfect (un)human order. The problem is that such a key – Lasch wrote that such a key, such a knowledge is not for human beings: “only God has that kind of knowledge”<sup>194</sup> – simply remains a wishful thinking: an imperfect creature, like human being, cannot discover the secret for overcoming his precarious condition. Such a promethean aspiration, moreover, paradigmatically embodied by Bentham is what Michal Oakeshott called “rationalism in politics” or “politics of faith”<sup>195</sup>: what Lasch, in a few words, called “gnosticism” as the new political and rationalistic religion, “the faith of the faithless”<sup>196</sup>. Bentham just considered the technical knowledge, namely a type of knowledge which is, as Oakeshott put it, susceptible of precise formulation: it is contained, for example, in books because it can be written by maxims, rules, principles. However, Oakeshott invited to reflect that another type of knowledge exists, a more humble and less noble one. Practical knowledge, in fact, cannot be neither “formulated in rules” nor “learned from a book”: it can only be “imparted and acquired” practically and directly<sup>197</sup>. If the rationalist, engineering mind thinks that

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<sup>194</sup> Ch. Lasch to Mr. Freese, cit.

<sup>195</sup> M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (1947), in M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1991, pp. 5-42; M. Oakeshott, *The New Bentham* (1932), in M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, cit., pp. 132-150; M. Oakeshott, *Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996. Oakeshott considered the prototypes of “Rationalism”, before Bentham, René Descartes and Francis Bacon. The capital “R” indicates, as it is obvious, the idea of a perfect and infallible reason. It is a pity that Lasch did not know Oakeshott, since their ideas tended to meet for some aspects, even if not entirely: the critique of rationalism and the idea of conservatism, just to give two examples.

<sup>196</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Gnosticism, Ancient and Modern: The Religion of the Future?*, “Salmagundi”, n. 96, Fall 1992, p. 40.

<sup>197</sup> M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, cit., p. 12 and p. 15.

just this type of knowledge is necessary for the human conduct of life, he deceives himself: what constitutes the basis of human life is what is part of it without knowing, without explicitly and systematically knowing it, namely folklore, traditions, and all what unites the past, the present and the future as well<sup>198</sup>. And Lasch thought the same: a pure reason, a pure scientific knowledge is impossible, because reason and scientific knowledge without the very sources of human life, namely tradition, common sense, practical knowledge, in Oakeshottian words, are simply blind. Indeed, they are even perilous, since they let humans think that everything can be built just by means of reason and will. The fact is that, as Lasch wrote, the result is “Bentham’s Panopticon (...which) embodied in miniature a system of universal surveillance, a union of ‘benevolence’ and rigorous discipline that could serve as a model for the social order as a whole”<sup>199</sup>. In essence, a scholar observed, “by ruthlessly ignoring the refractions of ideas and emotions, he produced devices of a monstrous efficiency that left no room for humanity”. “In his ardour for reform – Robin Letwin concluded – Bentham prepared the way for what he feared”<sup>200</sup>: from absolutely individualist and pure-reason, namely “rationalist” premises, Lasch wrote in a note, collectivist and technocratic results will follow<sup>201</sup>.

Therefore, Lasch thought that a rationalist point of view, i.e. one of an engineer or an inventor, one that sacrifices the known for the unknown, the therapeutic over the democratic, were to be rejected. He thought that

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>199</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 127.

<sup>200</sup> Sh. Robin Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty*, cit., p. 200.

<sup>201</sup> See Lasch Papers, Box 34, Folder 29.

a certain moral, non-rationalist infrastructure was necessary for a human scale society. Nevertheless, he did not argue for a plan or a program: that would be precisely the way of proceeding of the “rationalist” or the “liberal mind”, namely the application of one or more techniques from top-down, which replaces ways of life and thought of ordinary people<sup>202</sup>. In *The Minimal Self*, Lasch argued, in Freudian language, that culture malaise can be faced in different ways: the liberal, the conservative, and the New Left’s way<sup>203</sup>. Liberals, Lasch wrote, tends to concentrate themselves on the rational faculty of persons, what Freud used to call “ego”. In this sense, they aimed just to fortify the rational part of the individual, by means of an enlightened education: “They have argued that a dynamic, pluralistic, and democratic society cannot live by the inherited moral wisdom of the past”<sup>204</sup>. Conservatives, on the contrary, evaluate crucial the restoration of what Freud called “superego”, namely what individuals inherited from the past, from traditions, everyday common sense, parental teachings and so forth<sup>205</sup>. According to them, rationality cannot rest on itself alone: it needs some kind of cultural prerequisite. In this sense, moral restraints and ways of behaviours, principles and values, are nothing but something inherited. If Lasch was inclined to side with a

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<sup>202</sup> The reference here is to K. Minogue, *The Liberal Mind* (1963), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 2001. Minogue was a disciple of Oakeshott. Lasch quotes Minogue’s book in Ch. Lasch, *Why the Left Has No Future*, “Tikkun”, 1, n. 2 1986, pp. 92-97. See also K. Minogue, *The Servile Mind. How Democracy Erodes the Moral Life*, Encounter Books, New York, 2012.

<sup>203</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 199. As Lasch clarified, however, “neither coincides exactly with those categories”. They are, in this sense, just Weberian ideal-types to be used sparingly. Here I will consider just the first two categories, namely the liberal and conservative ones. The third is now useless.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205. Lasch mentioned as part of this group “Dewey and his followers”.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200. Lasch mentioned explicitly Philip Rieff, Daniel Bell and Lionel Trilling.

conservative position, nevertheless he emphasized the role of a critical acceptance towards such a perspective: after all, an individual, Lasch thought, cannot be conceived as a robot. Therefore, as Lasch put it, quite speaking for himself, “a truly conservative position on culture rejects both enforced conformity and laissez-faire. It attempts to hold society together by means of moral and religious instruction, collective rituals, and a deeply implanted though not uncritical respect for tradition. It stresses the value of loyalty – to one's parents, one's childhood home, one's country. When it speaks of discipline, it refers to an inner moral and spiritual discipline more than to chains, bars, and the electric chair. It respects power but recognizes that power can never take the place of authority. It defends minority rights and civil liberties”<sup>206</sup>. Put another way, and by using David Riesman’s categories, Lasch was considering as the most fruitful option among the possible ones the meeting of the inner-directed individual with the tradition-directed one: the first without the moral force of traditions is weaker and more fragile, since he does not have any moral support except for his own reason, which is a humble and very precarious one; the second without the aid of reason, however, is incapable of adopting a critical perspective and runs the risk of becoming merely nostalgic and backward-looking<sup>207</sup>.

In an interview, dated 1991, Lasch stated as follows: “It has become unmistakably clear that even a liberal social order requires a moral

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<sup>206</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201. Lasch continued by stating that such a point of view could have united both cultural conservatives, political liberals and democratic socialists: a perspective, however, that over the development of his intellectual thought he seemed to abandon. See Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to ‘Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism’*, cit.

<sup>207</sup> See D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, cit.

infrastructure – neighbourhoods, families, churches and an array of institutions in which self-government actually works. No social order can get along without them”<sup>208</sup>. Lasch considered liberalism as deeply linked to the Enlightenment idea of an abstract reason detached from time and space, an uprooted one. The moral vision it carried, for him, was therefore very limited: since that very premise, liberalism “is quite neutral and non-committal about a whole range of moral issues”<sup>209</sup>. It tends to speak about the individual and his rights, but not about his obligations and responsibility. In a note I found in the archive in Rochester, Lasch wrote that liberalism itself must presuppose a moral consensus, a common culture, otherwise it would simply become “untenable”<sup>210</sup>. Liberals, Lasch argued, abdicated the idea that some sort of virtue was crucial for a good society: a virtue not imposed by some sort of elites, but rather everyday experienced in particular and ordinary circumstances, and inherited from the past too. They only considered virtuous institutions as fundamental for a good order<sup>211</sup>. This is something very dangerous, he

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<sup>208</sup> B. Murchland, *On the moral vision of democracy*, cit.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>210</sup> Lasch Papers, Box 34, Folder 25. Very curiously, this is an argument well developed by the “neoconservatives”, and in particular by the “godfather” of the intellectual movement, Irving Kristol. However, Lasch was very hostile to them. About the common culture that liberalism must presuppose, see the following recent works: P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2019 (paperback edition); M.T. Mitchell, *The Limits of Liberalism: Tradition, Individualism, and the Crisis of Freedom*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2019. Deneen wrote the ninth chapter of one of his books explicitly dealing with Lasch, together with Reinhold Niebuhr: P.J. Deneen, *Hope in America: The Chastened Faith of Reinhold Niebuhr and Christopher Lasch*, in *Democratic Faith*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, pp. 239-269. It is not a case, therefore, if both share a cultural experience, hinged on the idea of localism and cultural conservatism, called “Front Porch Republic”, whose explicit points of reference are Wendell Berry and Ernst F. Schumacher, Wilhelm Röpke and Russell Kirk, Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert K. Chesterton, together with Alexis de Tocqueville and Lasch as well. See M.T. Mitchell, J. Peters (eds.), *Localism in the Mass Age. A Front Porch Republic Manifesto*, Front Porch Republic Books, 2018. These arguments will be touched in the last two chapters.

<sup>211</sup> N. Gardels, *Why Liberalism Lacks Virtue*, cit., p. 31.

thought, for at least two reasons. First of all, since every institution is constituted by the same individuals: therefore, the solidity of it is linked to the moral strength of them. Secondly, because it depends on the moral character and ethical principles on which it hinges. And if this is corrupted or degenerated, maybe by the therapeutic culture of the elites that Lasch feared, what follows will be, as a consequence of that, a degenerated or corrupted institutions. For these reasons, what Lasch considered crucial for a human-scale order, one morally stronger than a simple liberal one, was the cultivation of some virtues that could be acquired only in a pre-liberal way, namely by traditions, by ordinary and common-sense teachings, by parental and communitarian rootedness.

In an article Lasch dedicated in 1989 to Orestes Brownson, whom Lasch, as expressed in a letter, considered “one of my favourites”<sup>212</sup>, he wrote that “man grasps the universal only through the particular”<sup>213</sup>. The political thinker Wilson Carey McWilliams, whose work Lasch appraised invaluable, once argued that “it is possible to love everyone equally only if one loves nothing in particular”<sup>214</sup>. Fraternity, Lasch thought, is a better concept than equality, because by means of it we remain attached to our

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<sup>212</sup> Ch. Lasch to Dale Vree, 14 November 1988, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 5.

<sup>213</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Orestes Brownson's Christian Radicalism: Grasping the Universal Through the Particular*, “New Oxford Review”, September 1989, then part of Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 194.

<sup>214</sup> W.C. McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973, p. 48. In an article published in 1986 Lasch wrote that this book was “splendid”: Ch. Lasch, *A Typology of Intellectuals: II*, cit., p. 106. In a letter of the same year, Lasch wondered why the book was not so known by academia: Ch. Lasch to Michael (Lerner), 20 November 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 57, Folder 3. In the archive, as a matter of fact, Lasch conserved also an essay of McWilliams, entitled *The Bible in the American Political Tradition*, in M.J. Aranoff (ed.), *Religion and Politics*, Transaction Books, New York, 1984, pp. 11-45. In his treatment, McWilliams wrote about human limitations and imperfect condition, by considering the Bible as a crucial means by which human beings can compromise with and accept their nature. Lasch underlined precisely the points in which McWilliams emphasized these concepts. See Lasch Papers, Box 20, Folder 29.

roots and our particular “little platoons”, by consider ourselves as part of a bigger whole we know: the family, the church, local associations and so on. This leads to reject equality, which is nurtured by envy and resentment, and which pivots on an individualistic perspective. However, since a radical pursuit of equality tends to remove every anti-individualistic element, which is considered a lethal threat to such a starving pursuit, it tends to isolate, according to a very Tocquevillian argument, everyone from each other. Fraternity, on the contrary, is based on a particular place we are rooted and in which we tend naturally to cooperate: “It would seem that we need a conception of politics neither communitarian nor individualistic, a conception best described as fraternal. Fraternity recognizes the boundary between the self and others. It does not (...) seek to fortify the self against dependence on others, to achieve a state of complete self-sufficiency. Nor, on the other hand – Lasch continued – does it try to annihilate the self in the hope of achieving universal brotherhood (...) The ability to love something in particular, someone in particular – Lasch concluded – rests on a refusal to see others merely as extensions of ourselves”<sup>215</sup>. Liberalism, with regard to that point, did not understand that society is a precarious building that moves from the lower levels, from the particular condition of the individuals, to the higher ones: if an elite thinks to remove these natural foundations all the building simply collapses or becomes a monistic, collectivistic and despotic, perhaps benevolent and mild, reign. For this reason, he

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<sup>215</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Politics and Morality: The Deadlock of Left and Right*, in R.J. Neuhaus (ed.), *Guaranteeing the Good Life: Medicine and the Return of Eugenics*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990, p. 67.

manifested a true interest in the communitarian critique of liberalism, even if he considered it somehow incomplete and having too many defects. In an article published in 1986, he affirmed that “is one of the most hopeful developments in our recent history”<sup>216</sup>. What Lasch appreciated in the communitarian critique was its emphasis, as it appears clear, on the need for community. Between the individual and the state, in fact, there was a huge space, and a crucial one, that the different and multifarious forms of community had to occupy: the family, the churches, spontaneous associations, neighbourhood and so forth. The fact is, however, that the same communitarian critique ends by insisting rather to the monad individual to the community as a whole, as it was monolithic. Moreover, if communitarians tended to criticize the market for occupying every space of human life, at the same time, though, they ended to make a plea for the welfare state as universal solution to all evils: something that brings them closer to the same modern liberals, “a recipe for dependence”<sup>217</sup>, not for Jeffersonian, decentralised self-government. In another occasion, an essay originally published in 1992 and then added to *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995), Lasch

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<sup>216</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism*, “Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal”, vol. 69, n 1-2, Spring/Summer 1986, p. 60. He dealt with the following communitarian books: L.D. Baltzell, 1968 *The Search for Community in Modern America*, Harper and Row, New York 1968; R. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008; A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, 2007 (3rd ed.); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republic Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975; M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982; Th. A. Spragens, *Irony of Liberal Reason*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981; J. Stout, *Flight from Authority*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1981; M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

<sup>217</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Poverty and the Culture of ‘Compassion’*, “Salmagundi”, n. 98-99, Spring-Summer 1993, p. 4.



came back to the communitarian critique<sup>218</sup>. Central themes were, essentially, the relationship between state and market as well as between individuals and community. As for the first, Lasch argued that liberalism tried to restrict “the scope of the market” but doing so they chose a wrong way, namely the expansion of the state by means of a distributive democracy of welfare: “But the remedy often proves to be worse of the disease. The replacement of informal types of association by formal systems of socialization and control weakens social trust, undermines the willingness both to assume responsibility for oneself and to hold others accountable for their actions, destroys respect for authority, and thus turns out to be self-defeating”<sup>219</sup>. What Lasch asked was, essentially, the self-government of society by means of spontaneous and voluntary, namely bottom-up cooperation. Communitarianism, however, ended up, for Lasch, in the same pitfall, only with a different justification. They talked about responsibility, only that, Lasch argued, “is ‘social responsibility’ not the responsibility of individuals (...). In their plea for ‘responsible attention’ – Lasch continued – I hear overtones of ‘compassion’, the slogan of social democracy, a slogan that has always been used to justify welfare programs, the expansion of the state’s custodial and tutelary function”<sup>220</sup>: another way towards dependence. Lasch considered *The Habits of the Heart*, a work written by his friend Robert Bellah and whose title explicitly referred to Tocqueville<sup>221</sup>, as a

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<sup>218</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Communitarianism or Populism?*, cit., then in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., pp. 92-114.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>221</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), v. I, cit., p. 466: “I understand the expression *mores* here in the sense that the ancients attached to the word

promising way for addressing communitarianism<sup>222</sup>. However, as also in his later work, *The Good Society*, critically judged by Lasch as nothing more than a plea for the welfare state<sup>223</sup>, Bellah considered “his” communitarianism simply as an “opposition to the neo-capitalist agenda and to a theoretical liberalism for which autonomy is almost the only virtue” and not “a primary emphasis on small-scale and face-to-face relations”<sup>224</sup>. For Bellah, in brief, the state, and a centralistic one, remained crucial in his perspective: he just asked for vertical subsidiarity, which means that the state decentralizes its powers to a lower level of its structure for facing a decentralised problem. Lasch, instead, to a more radical perspective, which decentralized powers and centres of authority, first of all by eliminating state intervention and replacing it with self-government, namely a sort of horizontal subsidiarity: “A public philosophy for the twenty-first century will have to give more weight to the community than to the right of private decision. It will have to emphasize responsibilities rather than rights. It will have to find a better

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mores; I apply it not only to mores strictly speaking, which could be called habits of the heart, but to the different notions that men possess, to the diverse opinions that are current among them, and to the ensemble of ideas from which the habits of the mind are formed”.

<sup>222</sup> In a letter to “Bob” at the beginnings of 1991, Lasch manifested his appreciation for Bellah’s article concerning the concept of subsidiarity, populism and Catholic social teaching. See Ch. Lasch to Bob (Bellah), 5 September 1991, Lasch Papers, Box 42, Folder 7. I found the article of Bellah in Lasch Papers, Box 42, Folder 8. The essay, entitled *On the Importance of ‘Subsidiarity’ as a Theme in Catholic Social Teaching* will be published in the “New Oxford Review”, May 1992, pp. 5-12. Lasch and Bellah shared their participation in that Catholic and anti-capitalist journal. And Lasch, thanks to its director, Dale Vree, and maybe to the same Bellah, started to read works about the Catholic Social Teaching and the English Distributists as well, who followed and developed ideas about subsidiarity and a human-scale order. It is not a case then if Paul Gottfried, who knew that Lasch was reading thinkers like Belloc, wrote that “his project was to find a religiously based communitarianism that could serve as an alternative to multinational capitalism”: P. Gottfried, *Encounter. My life with Nixon Marcuse, and Other Friends and Teachers*, ISI Books, Wilmington, 2009, p. 181.

<sup>223</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 104 and p. 248. See R. Bellah et al., *The Good Society*, Vintage Books, New York, 1992.

<sup>224</sup> R. Bellah et al., *Preface* to 1996 edition, *Habits of the Heart*, cit., p. XXXIV.

expression of the community than the welfare state. It will have to limit the scope of the market and the power of corporations without replacing them with a centralized state bureaucracy”<sup>225</sup>. Communitarianism was not enough, according to Lasch: it ended for making almost the same errors of liberalism. Its plea for community was an important point: but it considered it monolithically. The attack towards capitalism, then, was in direct direction too: but it asked for the welfare state, which means the most immediate recipe for creating weak individuals dependent on the state.

Populist sensibility as emerged in the late nineteenth-century in US, even if vague and slippery for certain aspects, was, according to Lasch, a third way between liberalism and communitarianism. In an interview he defined it as “a mix of classical republicanism, Lockean liberalism, Puritanism and other elements as well”<sup>226</sup>. Classical republicanism, in Lasch’s perspective, teaches the very idea of virtue, as linked to the restraint of appetites and to the development of individual self-government<sup>227</sup>. In a conference held in 1976, Lasch argued that the very idea of “American Dream” had to do more with republicanism than to liberalism<sup>228</sup>. According the first point of view, a Jeffersonian one, every citizen should have been capable of self-govern, of maturing everyday-life responsibility by means of the care of his own property. The second,

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<sup>225</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 113.

<sup>226</sup> B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit.

<sup>227</sup> Some references of such a tradition for Lasch are: J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, cit.; H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1954), Penguin Books, New York, 2006; H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998; G. Wood. *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969), University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1998.

<sup>228</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Education and the American Dream*, Oklahoma City University, 9 January 1976, Lasch Papers, Box 15, Folder 37.

instead, just insisted on the importance of institutions. And in another conference, this time in 1993, he argued that after the Civil War (1861-1865) the Jeffersonian ideal of a competent, responsible self-governed citizenship, a nation of small yeoman farmers, was replaced by a growing central power which should have provided individuals with a distributive democracy: the contrary of a self-governed democracy<sup>229</sup>. The republican ethic, as Lasch understood it, implied the fullest development of individual capacities, namely the capacity of self-improvement by the cultivation of everyday responsibilities. Lockean liberalism, then, is linked to Lasch's emphasis on property: according to him, it should be noted, populism is synonymous of proprietary democracy. In fact, as he explicitly said, "you had to have certain preconditions in order to make democracy work, the most important of which was the wide distribution of property ownership. Democracy was based on small property and the responsibility that went along with that for the formation of certain habits of mind and character development"<sup>230</sup>. Puritanism, in the end, was a strenuous moral force, in his view, for restraining appetites and desires<sup>231</sup>. As for what Lasch called "other elements", it is difficult to say precisely what he meant. However, we can broadly connect them as cultural conservative elements. As for cultural conservatism, in essence, Lasch recognised a perspective which considers human imperfection an

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<sup>229</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What Was the American Dream?*, cit.

<sup>230</sup> B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibidem*, cit.: "It is perhaps our strongest reservoir of moral idealism". In this vein, Lasch thought that "luxury is morally repugnant" and incompatible with "democratic ideals": Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 22. See also Ch. Lasch, *Calvinism*, in R.W. Fox, J.T. Kloppenberg (eds.), *A Companion to American Thought*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 99-100.

insurmountable condition: “the tradition I am talking about is quite un-utopian, often anti-utopian. It tends to be skeptical of programs for the wholesale rehabilitation of society”<sup>232</sup>. It is, in sum, a perspective hinged on moral realism, as opposed to a therapeutic and or orthopaedic-pedagogic idealism. A perspective which allows persons to live by hope, grace and trust towards life itself because they are conscious that they are limited creatures. A sensibility, as Lasch called it, that instead of insisting, differently from liberals, on expanding appetites and wants, which is a road that leads to unhappiness, restlessness and frustration, is based on sense of limit, loyalty and attachment to what one has got, to “phronesis” as a practical reason, “the moral perfection of life, and the virtues specific to various forms of practical activity”<sup>233</sup>, rather than an instrumental one. In fact, life, according to Lasch, has much more to do with a disposition towards itself than a mere propensity in acquiring objects or things. Life is a matter of virtues rather than desires: a faith that “moved mountains, braved the deep, and tamed the thunder”, the true virtue “had more to with courage and resolution”<sup>234</sup>. What Lasch, associated, certainly by more than some elasticity, for example to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “self-reliance”, William James’ “wonder”, or Jonathan Edwards’ “gratitude”<sup>235</sup>. In Augustinian terms, as absorbed by Lasch

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<sup>232</sup> Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 125

<sup>233</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 254.

<sup>234</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 250.

<sup>235</sup> See R.W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance* (1841), in *Selected Writings of Emerson*, Random House, New York, 1981 (Lasch Papers, Box 51, Folder 18); W. James, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, cit.; J. Edwards, *The Nature of the True Virtue* (1765). Lasch added to these names also Thomas Carlyle, John Milton and Georges Sorel. The huge difference, not to say incompatibility of them is remarkable. However, Lasch’s aim was, in essence, to trace, indeed in a very free and peculiar way, an intellectual road to the reflections on human limitations. See Ch. Lasch, Preface to *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., pp. 14-15.

through Reinhold Niebuhr, “the spiritual discipline against resentment”<sup>236</sup>. In other words, Lasch advocated a humble, realist and faithful perspective that he resumes in two simple but meaningful concepts: hope and limits. The first, and in opposition to a liberal optimism which rests “on a denial of the natural limits on human power and freedom”, “asserts the goodness of life in the face of its limits”<sup>237</sup>. The second, on which the first is hinged, constitutes the inevitable characteristic of very fragile and imperfect creatures.

The populist sensibility, or ethos, it must be noted, was linked by Lasch to the American populist movement of late nineteenth-century<sup>238</sup>. A movement historically rooted, based on “the struggle to preserve the moral virtues conferred by property ownership against the combined threat of wage labour and the collectivization of property”<sup>239</sup>, in which he caught a glimpse of the virtue, wonder, trust, hope and faithfulness he

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<sup>236</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., chap. 9.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 530. See also C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1332.

<sup>238</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Populism*, in R.W. Fox, J.T. Kloppenberg (eds.), *A Companion to American Thought*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 531-532. The most important reference for Lasch was L. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1976, then also published in a shorter version as L. Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment. A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978. Then he also considered S. Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983; J.D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1931; N. Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1962; C.V. Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*, Rinehart, New York, 1938; R. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, cit. As we have previously said, Lasch was very critical of Hofstadter’s point of view about populism, merely seen as a nostalgic and backward-looking movement. Moreover, as he wrote in some notes I found in Rochester, he considered also superficial, because they tended to universalize a historical and contextualized, both in time and space, phenomenon, M. Canovan, *Populism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1981; G. Ionescu, E. Gellner (eds.), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, Macmillan, New York, 1969; Lasch Papers, Box36, Folder 5. For an introduction to Lasch’s ideas about populism see J.K. Lauck, *Christopher Lasch and Praire Populism*, “Great Plains Quarterly”, vol. 3, n. 3, Summer 2012, pp. 183-205. I will deal again with populism in chap. 3.

<sup>239</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 459.

was looking to. In Lasch's opinion, thus, his contemporary tendency of dealing with it as a "makeshift category that included everything that fell outside a liberal or social democratic consensus"<sup>240</sup> was quite misleading. That ethos was, in any case, incompatible with the ideology of progress as permeated throughout the capitalist system.

### ***1.3 Two "Devil Terms": Progress and Capitalism.***

Progress and capitalism constitute, in Lasch's point of view, two very problematic and negative terms. According to him, in fact, they are part of a wider vision that worships change, and radically fights conservation, which was the Laschian key element of a good, well-structured society. Progress, in particular, is a "god term", in the critical sense provided by the philosopher of culture and political thinker Richard Malcolm Weaver, namely an "expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers"<sup>241</sup>. In other words, it is an incontestable word, perhaps the most indisputable term, since it "is the coordinator of all socially respectable effort"<sup>242</sup>: for Lasch, and for Weaver too, it is nevertheless, quite the opposite, a "devil term". Capitalism, that Lasch conceived as a materialist

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<sup>240</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>241</sup> R.M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953), Routledge, New York and London, 2009, p. 212.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214. According to Weaver, a Southern agrarian that, due to his similarities with Lasch, we will consider in chap. 5, other "god-terms" are, for instance, the substantives "science", "efficiency", "knowledge", "modernity", and the adjective "American", which somehow gathers together all the terms mentioned.

ideology<sup>243</sup>, a worldview and a resulting all-embracing system, not merely as a system of production for profit<sup>244</sup>, is just how progress manifests itself. In other words, it is an ideological system based on change for its own sake, restlessness, improvement of established conditions conceived as reactionary, old-fashioned, and therefore it has to be surpassed. Put another way, it is, in Lasch's view, a legacy of the Enlightenment. According to Lasch, such a machinery, grounded on the idea that history necessarily "marches onward and upward" is a very recent invention, dating back to the end of eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment<sup>245</sup>. Lasch thought, for example in opposition to Robert

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<sup>243</sup> On that, among the huge existing literature, see A. Mingardi, *Capitalismo*, Il Mulino, 2023. As the author writes, the term is a fortunate term, even if badly conceived and badly built. Everything that a person does not like, the many think, is caused by capitalism, as it was a living and rational agent, and not a spontaneous process. The author, moreover, suggests to call it for what really is, namely "innovism", since it was born due to the diffusion of a cultural, pro innovation spirit which spread around the Industrial Revolution: on that see the famous trilogy on the "Bourgeois Era" written by the historian of economy D. McCloskey: *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006; *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010; *Bourgeois Equality: How Ideas, Not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016.

<sup>244</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Technology and Its Critics: The Degradation of the Practical Arts*, in S.E. Goldberg, Ch.R. Strain (eds.), *Technological Change and the Transformation of America*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1987, p. 87. On the Laschian anti-capitalist prejudice it is crucial the book written by A. Kahan, *La guerra degli intellettuali al capitalismo* (2010), IBL Libri, Torino, 2019. During all his life, Lasch continued to be viscerally anti-capitalist: he did not consider capitalism as an economic system for free people. In his perspective, rather, capitalism tended to standardize and conform people to consume industrial products. Moreover, its potency expands in every domain, and the result is that materialism becomes something like the new religion of the moderns. The only alternative, according to Lasch, was not to abolish free markets, but to take them back to small-scale, rooted ones. By doing that, people could have rediscovered and experienced, he thought, the necessary independence for a free people. As Kahan notes in his book, in particular by quoting Lasch in the introduction, intellectuals typically oppose capitalism by criticizing its incapacity of providing a moral culture: but the point is precisely that capitalism, or free economy, has another aim, which is to produce wealth and prosperity, through private property, individual creativity and free competition, by serving the needs of consumers. Moral culture is another thing, and it is important, Kahan states, but it can act just beyond the economic moment: better said, it can drive human beings to do the right choices by providing them a moral internal structure. Markets are only a tool in the hands of human beings: intellectuals too often forget that capitalism is not a living hypostasis.

<sup>245</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Progress*, in R.W. Fox, J.T. Kloppenberg (eds.), *A Companion to American Thought*, cit., p. 546.



Nisbet, who considered the idea of progress as originated in classical Greece and developed then in Christian philosophy of history<sup>246</sup>, that stability and conservation constitute the key elements of human world: “What our ancestors sought was stability, not progress”<sup>247</sup>. In a conference held in 1987, Lasch reasoned that the idea of progress was alien to Judean-Christian prophecy and its realism. Human things, according to that view, are made of finite, provisional, contingent substance. Therefore, progress is an erroneous metaphor indicating human condition: “That ideology (...) rests on the illusion that modern civilization can escape from the old rhythms of growth and decline, degeneration and renewal. The sooner we give it up, the sooner we can give posterity something to hope for”<sup>248</sup>. The ideology of progress, which for Lasch becomes quite an idol or secular religion, stimulate human beings for creating “the city of God”, using St. Augustine categories, rather than to compromise with their humble conditions and accept to live in “the city of Man”. Progress as a secular religion, hence, replaces the

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<sup>246</sup> See R. Nisbet, *Progress*, in R. Nisbet, *Prejudices. A philosophical Dictionary*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 238-243; R. Nisbet, *Social Change and History. Aspects of the Western Theory of Development*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1969. Actually, if Lasch was deeply critical of Nisbet in this respect, they shared a basic common vision about the need for authority and community, a rooted and multifarious one, a community of communities, not the national community, which becomes blurred with the state; about the crucial role of the family and the peril of a statism and bureaucratic power if not balanced and checked by a strong society. Nisbet wrote also a letter in which he complimented Lasch with his treatment of it, when Lasch was still not fully cultural conservative: R. Nisbet to Christopher (Lasch), 3 January 1975, Lasch Papers, Box 4, Folder 9. See R. Nisbet, *Community and Power*, formerly *The Quest for Community* (1953), Oxford University Press, New York, 1962; R. Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (1975), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 2000; R. Nisbet, *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (1988), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 2003.

<sup>247</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Progress*, cit., p. 546.

<sup>248</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Historical Background of the Idea of Progress*, cit., p. 28. One of his points of reference for this perspective was Niebuhr’s Christian realism. See for example R. Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1965.

idea that human beings are creatures dependent on forces that are more than human, namely forces beyond his world, and therefore are weak and cannot create anything perfect, with the conceit that, by means of science and technology, they overcome their human condition. Religion, thus, is the very crucial tool – much more than a tool, indeed: it is a deep ethical force for strengthening human soul, heart and mind in the recapturing his very precarious role in this world – for loving life as it really is and not to try to overcome for building one more than human: “Religion urges us to accept our dependence on uncontrollable forces not as a source of despair but as the condition of our being, as such the source of whatever happiness we can accept to enjoy”<sup>249</sup>. Progressive human being tries to enlighten everything, because he cannot accept that there exists something that reason, science or human power cannot master or control: everything can and must be known, since, due to his hybris, he cannot bear the consequences of mystery. The Christian, G.K. Chesterton argued once, on the contrary, “puts the mystery into his philosophy. That mystery by its darkness enlightens all things”<sup>250</sup>. As Blaise Pascal would have said that, by considering human beings as necessarily imperfect creatures, “he who would act the angel acts the brute”<sup>251</sup>. Lasch believed in the inevitable tragic character of human life<sup>252</sup>. Belief in progress,

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<sup>249</sup> Ch. Lasch *The Idea of Progress in Our Time*, 1 April 1987, cit., p. 19. See also *The Idea of Progress in Our Time*, 30 April 1987, cit.

<sup>250</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Blatchford Controversies* (1904), in D Dooley (ed.), *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986, vol. one, p. 383.

<sup>251</sup> B. Pascal, *Thoughts*, cit., n. 358, p. 120.

<sup>252</sup> See for instance O.A. Brownson, *The Philosophy of History* (1843), H.F. Brownson (ed.), *The Works of O.A. Brownson*, vol IV, Thorndike Nourse Publisher, Detroit, 1983; M. De Unamuno, *A Tragic Sense of Life* (1912), Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut, 2021. De Unamuno is not quoted by Lasch, who remained always anchored quite exclusively to American thinkers. However, he surely knew him. In the archive, for

Lasch thought, could take two forms, based on the same premises but different in their radical thrusts. The first is the utopian type of progress, as conceived in particular by the “French apostles of Enlightenment”. The second, instead, is based on an incremental, linear process of “gradual and steady improvement”, which derives from a more moderate Enlightenment. The first notion collects various types and diverse interpretations of Marxism, whereas the second included, *inter alia*, Adam Smith’s and Bernard de Mandeville’s points of view. But the premises and the conclusions, even if the latter with a remarkable difference in emphasis and also tools to be used, are quite similar, Lasch thought. Indeed, according to him, appetites and desires are considered unlimited, the possibility of progress, improvement and growth conditions that can be overwhelmed, the past as something to be rid of<sup>253</sup>. Progress, Lasch wrote, “has its price” and even its advocates know it: however, it remains, in such a view “an offer we have been unable to refuse”<sup>254</sup>. But Lasch esteemed that such a progressive, liberal perspective was to be refused for a rediscovery of a very different way of perceiving human life. “Liberals – Lasch wrote – have not hesitated to side with the centralizing forces in our society against the making forces of particularism; with cosmopolitanism against provincialism; and with an essentially rootless conception of selfhood against a conception of selfhood that recognizes the formative influences not of ‘society’ in the

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instance, I found a thesis of one of his students, R. Newton, who quoted him, together with L. Mumford, J. Ortega y Gasset, The Twelve Southerners, J Huizinga, T.S. Eliot: Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 25.

<sup>253</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Optimism or Hope? The Ethic of Abundance and the Ethic of Limits*, cit.

<sup>254</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Progress*, cit., p. 547.

abstract but of specific folkways and traditions”<sup>255</sup>. Capitalism was how for Lasch progressive ideology empirically appeared: a system which worships change, and contrasts conservation, which aims to centralize powers, isolating at the same time human beings, instead of decentralizing powers in a community of communities, which pursues universals, rather than to rediscover roots and particularities, which substitutes a contractual view of life and non-binding commitments to one made of obligations, loyalty and respect for what is older, which advocates new patterns of life, rather than to explore and reflect on long-standing patterns of traditions. In brief, capitalism is how, for Lasch, the whole modernizing, enlightened project reaches its climax. Instead of recognising the Schumpeterian process of “creative destruction”<sup>256</sup>, namely an ambivalent phenomenon, as the core of capitalism, Lasch blamed it simply for destructing everything without the possibility of letting growing things: if the driving force of capitalism is perpetual change, how can human creations be nurtured and handed down to posterity? The problem of Lasch was to conserve, not to change the world.

Lasch was not always clear in defining capitalism, it must be recognized. Moreover, he sometimes tended to hypostatize capitalism, as if it really existed, thought and acted as only a person could do. And, finally, he also sometimes committed the mistake of believing in necessity – quite paradoxically, as his critique towards the ideology of

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<sup>255</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Response to Joel Feinberg*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>256</sup> J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1943), Routledge, London and New York, 2003.

progress, which would become itself, in his view, ineluctable for its defenders –: he saw capitalism as a machinery which is self-fueling and self-perpetuating. A force, in sum, that could replace every pre-existent force, every check on its development.

Paradigmatically, in a short essay published in 1991, Lasch argued that “capitalism itself corrupts”<sup>257</sup>. According to him, and by reversing Max Weber’s classical thesis about the “spirit of capitalism” fueled by the protestant ethic, in particular the Calvinist ethic<sup>258</sup>, the logic of capitalism is based on the erosion of religious energies. If capitalism in late nineteenth century was still “tempered by a sense of social responsibility inherited from earlier religious traditions”<sup>259</sup>, over the next century, instead, such an ethos was intimately corroded. In another article, in fact, he argued that classical liberalism, a liberalism rooted and limited by some conservative ethos, “relied on the moral and cultural capital of earlier traditions to underwrite its vision of a liberal society much more heavily than it was willing to admit at the time”<sup>260</sup>. “Bourgeois culture”, which fostered, we could say, a liberal-conservative vision, Lasch concluded, “was murdered by capitalism itself”<sup>261</sup>. As such, what he used to call populist sensibility is another way, according to him, for referring to bourgeois culture, which is based on sense of limits,

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<sup>257</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Capitalism Itself Corrupts*, “World & I”, November 1991, pp. 542-43, a response to Stanley Rothman, *American Entrepreneurship: Its Rise and Decline*, “World & I”, November 1991, pp. 509-37.

<sup>258</sup> M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Dover Books, Mineola, 2003.

<sup>259</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Capitalism Itself Corrupts*, cit., pp. 542-543.

<sup>260</sup> B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit.

<sup>261</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Capitalism Itself Corrupts*, cit., p. 543. For the importance role of Protestant ethic in restraining individual appetites and desires, namely for the same individual self-government, which is crucial for democracy itself, see Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., pp. 52-55.

respect for the past, rootedness, loyalty to the family, responsibility and sense of independence that only the care of a propriety could do. These are two crucial points. Firstly, he anchored a bourgeois ethos to some kind of religious vision that could restrain acquisitive appetites of individuals: in this sense, and only in this sense, he could accept some kind of (conservative) liberalism. Secondly, then, that culture, very much at odds with the development of “the culture of consumption”<sup>262</sup> of the degenerated type of unlimited capitalism that he rejected, could be nourished only by a wide distribution of property, in order to let develop mature, responsible and independent individuals: the Jeffersonian idea of citizenship. However, things developed in another way, a road that led to concentration, rather than decentralisation, a road to an extreme industrialism and urbanization, a road that led to the concentration of property in a few hands, a road that led to a mass society, instead of one constituted by independent and self-disciplined people. Unfortunately, his country followed not the Jeffersonian path, hinged on decentralised property, self-governing individuals, independence of small yeoman farmers, namely a wide, responsible and inner-directed middle class supported by traditions and local rootedness as well. The Hamiltonian’s path, made of centralisation and concentration of powers, a powerful Leviathan linked to the big economic interests, industrialization, won on the contrary the dispute<sup>263</sup>. This concentration of power eroded the very

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<sup>262</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Consumption*, in M. Kupied Cayton, E.J. Gorn, P. W. Williams, *Encyclopedia of American Social History* (eds.), Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1993, vol. 2, pp. 1381-90.

<sup>263</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Education and the American Dream*, cit; Ch. Lasch, *What Was the American Dream?*, cit. On that point see, *inter alia*, L.M. Bassani, *Dalla rivoluzione alla Guerra civile. Federalismo e Stato moderno in America 1776-1865*, Rubbettino,

nature of a decentralised society, hinged on property and independence. The growth of big corporations and of bureaucracies, both public and private, but often linked one to each other, Lasch thought, created a standardized society made of people dependent of needs and wants developed by industries themselves: the soul needs were replaced entirely by commodities. Consumerism, in this way, became the key element of the new capitalist system<sup>264</sup>: a well-balanced and structured society made of “heroes”, as Lasch called the independent and responsible middle class, was replaced by a mass of other-directed consumers.

Lasch, therefore, looked at some pre-capitalist, in the sense of “anti-concentrationist”, forms of economies. In a reply to a critique to *The True and Only Heaven* about populism as “proprietary democracy” he received<sup>265</sup>, he answered as follows: “The question I raised was not whether it would be a good idea to return to a pre-market economy but what people said about democracy when it became evident, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, that small property was disappearing. Could the virtues once associated with proprietorship be preserved – Lasch asked critically –, in some other form, under economic conditions that seemed to make proprietorship untenable? I reminded readers that democracy had once been linked, both in theory and in practice, to a broad distribution of property ownership. Before the Civil War it was

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Soveria Mannelli, 2009; L.M. Bassani, *Chaining Down Leviathan. The American Dream of Self-Government 1776-1865*, Abbeville Institute Press, McClenville, 2021.

<sup>264</sup> See in particular Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., pp. 71-74. For an interesting critical assessment see G.R. Beabout, E.J. Echevarria, *The Culture of Consumerism: A Catholic and Personalist Critique*, “Journal of Markets & Morality”, vol. 5, n. 2, Fall 2002, pp. 339–383.

<sup>265</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 15.

generally agreed, across a broad spectrum of political opinion, that democracy had no future in a nation of hirelings. The emergence of a permanent class of wage-earners, after the war, was a profoundly disturbing development, which troubled commentators on American politics far more widely than we have realized”<sup>266</sup>. Property was to him the very kernel of the question: if it lacks, in the sense of its wide distribution, what will become of a well-balanced, good society? What Lasch thought was the necessity of the restoration of a wide distribution of property. In an interview taped in 1990, but published some years later, Lasch started to speak about unspecified “Catholic conservatives” who argued that markets have a limited role, by deploring materialism as a tool by which capitalism, namely a system based on the concentration of powers, can manipulate individuals and therefore there could be imagined some other forms of transaction<sup>267</sup>. Those conservatives were, as it results clear from crossing many Laschian resources, Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton. In an article published in 1990, *Conservatism against Itself*, those British “distributists” were very important to Lasch’s argumentation: they asked for a wide restoration of proprietorship and for preventing huge accumulations of resources in the hands of few<sup>268</sup>. He thought, in essence, that, in order to have a really democratic society, namely self-governed and independent, private property is crucial: “Democracy was based on small property and the responsibility that went along with that for the formation of certain habits of mind and character

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<sup>266</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Reply to Jeffrey Isaac*, cit., p. 102.

<sup>267</sup> P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, p. 134.

<sup>268</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit. Moreover, Lasch looked with interest at guild socialists and syndicalists as well, in opposition to socialism.



development. This was the necessary basis of democratic citizenship, a view clearly articulated for example in Jefferson”<sup>269</sup>. And he continued as follows: “Now, what happens in a society where we have a permanent wage-earning class? This develops a servile rather than an independent state of mind”<sup>270</sup>. That was precisely Belloc’s and Chesterton’s thought. As Robert Nisbet wrote about distributism in the introduction of the classical Belloc’s work, *The Servile State* (1913), “under this system, all people would own property, would be self-supporting and therefore free and able to fend for themselves against efforts of governments to constrict freedom through passage of coercive laws in the name of humanitarianism and social security. Distributism means free individuals and families, with none supporting others”<sup>271</sup>. For Belloc, capitalism was a system in which a minority, and just a minority, possesses private property. In this way those who own it are the capitalists, the others are “proletarians”, namely servile minds and bodies. In order to restore property some ways exist, but only one, to him, could link property, freedom and independence. The first way is what he called “servile state”, according to which a minority who controls the means of production supports then the dispossessed: the result is the loss of freedom. The second way is fiercer than the first, but the result is almost the same: communism means that the state, namely its elites, controls property and

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<sup>269</sup> B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>271</sup> R. Nisbet, *Introduction to H. Belloc, The Servile State* (1913), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1977, p. 22. Nisbet saw with favour Belloc’s ideas, as well as guild socialism and syndicalism, for they contrasted the overexpansion of statism and bureaucracy, and therefore the centralization of power. See also R. Nisbet, *Community and Power*, cit. In this respect, as for in others, Lasch’s and Nisbet’s ideas were close: their common enemy was the centralization of power.

all the workers are its slaves. The third is the proprietary way, according to which the means of production are widely distributed. If property respects such a condition, Belloc argued, there will be enough checks on powers that will naturally tend to emerge. On the contrary, if it is without any restraint, both individually – individuals, Belloc wrote, have really to desire it and acting responsibly for preserving it – and in regulations, which have to check the creation of monopolies and oligopolies, property will fade and a new class of capitalists will emerge: “Private property acting unchecked, that is, in the absence of all safeguards for the preservation of the small man’s independence, tends inevitably to an ultimate control of the means of production by a few; that is, in economics, to Capitalism and therefore, in politics, to Plutocracy”<sup>272</sup>. As Chesterton wrote, property means independence and decentralisation, capitalism means dependence, “prostitution”<sup>273</sup>, and centralisation. Both mainstream conservatives and liberals failed to understand such insights, according to Lasch. The former because they underestimated the peril caused by capitalism, by failing then to see how it corrupted the very roots of a society made of free, responsible and self-disciplined people; the latter since they idolized the state as tool for rebuilding society, without considering the perennial state of servility, dependence and apathy that such an intervention caused to the people. They both failed, moreover, since they did not recognize, in Lasch’s opinion, how corporations and government were actually allied: “a political strategy

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<sup>272</sup> H. Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (1936), IHS Press, Norfolk, 2002, p. 40.

<sup>273</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* (1927), Aeterna Press, New York, 2015, pos. 194 (kindle ed.).

that seeks merely to limit the powers of the state and the welfare agencies, without perceiving the connection between the welfare state and corporate capitalism, will merely substitute ‘private’ for public paternalism”<sup>274</sup>. Decentralisation and democracy, property and independence, according to Lasch, live and die together: *simul stabunt, simul cadent*.

#### ***1.4 An Imaginative Thinker on the Margins.***

As we have seen, Lasch’s critique was mainly, but absolutely not exclusively, towards liberalism, a certain, modern, progressive liberalism. As a matter of fact, Lasch was also at odds with radicalism. Better argued, he was against the radicalism that came out the revolutionist and liberationist years of the sixties. Still, he was deeply critical towards his contemporary conservatism, too much linked to capitalism and economism: in his view, a true conservatism is hinged on continuity and stability, and, as such, is the radical enemy of capitalism, which is based, on the contrary, on change and restlessness.

For some observers Lasch remained therefore an enigma<sup>275</sup>, given the fact that he mixed and blended authors and thoughts different one to

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<sup>274</sup> Ch, Lasch, essay review without title to D. Rothman, I. Glasser, S. Marcus, W. Gaylin, *Doing Good: The Limits of Benevolence*, Pantheon, New York, 1978: Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 3. The essay should have been published in “The Civil Liberties Review”, March-April 1979, but financial problems probably prevented it, as a letter would testify: S. Salisbury to Ch. Lasch, 17 January 1979, Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 3.

<sup>275</sup> D. Moensch, *Freud over Marx: Christopher Lasch’s Antiradical Evolution*, “Journal for the Study of Radicalism”, vol, 11, n. 1, Spring 2017, pp. 163-187.

each other; for others he was simply a seeker<sup>276</sup>, a curious thinker and social critic that was not intellectually restricted, mentally closed: he was anti-ideological. After all, Lasch himself admitted that his perspective, had changed “somewhat in the last dozen years, as a consequence of recent developments”<sup>277</sup>: considered the fact the interview in which he released such statement dated back to 1990, Lasch considered the true and essential turning point his book on the family topic, something we have already insisted on and on which we will return. That demonstrates, moreover, his inclination and readiness to review critically his own positions: what he called “moral realism”, after all, precisely means facing reality as it is, and not as we would like it to be. That clashed precisely with liberal positions that, as we have seen, are quite linked to rationalistic and idealistic plans for rebuilding society. In spite of this, some scholars, from a liberal perspective, continued to consider Lasch as a personality that could have been somehow reconciled with liberalism itself. Kevin Mattson, a disciple of Lasch, for instance, deemed Lasch’s critique as a fruitful occasion for chastening liberalism itself, namely a way for correcting the wrong path it took. However, he admitted that Lasch sometimes – I would say more than sometimes – “sounded like Edmund Burke (or perhaps Russell Kirk)” in his growing cultural conservatism<sup>278</sup>. Christopher Shannon, then, recognised that Lasch grew

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<sup>276</sup> J.B. Elshtain, *The Life and Work of Christopher Lasch*, cit.

<sup>277</sup> P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 133.

<sup>278</sup> K. Mattson, *Christopher Lasch and the Possibilities of Chastened Liberalism*, cit., p. 440. It should be noted that Mattson in writing a very much critical history of American conservatism of the second half twentieth century, dedicated to Lasch the book by stating as follows: “In the memory of Christopher Lasch, my teacher . . . From an apostate, still respectful”: K. Mattson, *Rebel All! A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Postwar America*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2008. Although Lasch himself was very much at odds with his contemporary conservatism, the way in

up in the tradition of the Midwestern progressivism, which Lasch himself did not deny, and his analyses of populism would just testify how he remained absorbed in it, and how populism was nothing but a part of the American liberal tradition<sup>279</sup>. Similarly, David Brown argued that the historical perspective of Lasch, “populist of the heart”, was radically part of the Midwest, whose state of mind is based on populist critique towards capitalism and imperialism<sup>280</sup>. Others have emphasized two intellectual forces or traditions which coexisted in his mentality: torysm, i.e. conservatism, and radicalism. Stuart Weaver addressed Lasch briefly as a “Tory radical”<sup>281</sup>, whereas Fred Siegel, less succinctly, noted that Lasch, since the sixties, tended to present “an intriguing blend of elitist and anarchist sentiments, a ‘Tory manner and radical principles’ redolent of that cantankerous foe of modernity, the radical libertarian Albert J. Nock”<sup>282</sup>. Similarly, some scholars have considered him as a “social conservative of the left”<sup>283</sup>. Thomas Bender, for example, wrote that “it would be wrong to label him a conservative, as many did. He had a

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which Mattson defined himself, “apostate”, suggested how Mattson was critical with the growing conservative positions of his “teacher”. Michael Kramer thought that Lasch remained over the time a socialist: M.J. Kramer, *Looking Back*, “The Point”, 7, 1 November 2013. Ray Haberski, instead, by answering Kramer’s article, considered Lasch “stuck in the middle”: R. Haberski, *Stuck in the Middle with Lasch*, “U.S. Intellectual History Blog”, 15 November 2013.

<sup>279</sup> Ch. Shannon, *Conspicuous Tradition: Tradition, the Individual, and Culture in American Social Thought, from Veblen to Mills*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1996, pp. 181-183.

<sup>280</sup> D.S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier. The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2009.

<sup>281</sup> S. Weaver, *Introduction* to Ch. Lasch, *Plain Style*, cit., p. 15

<sup>282</sup> F. Siegel, *The Agony of Christopher Lasch*, “Reviews in American History”, September 1980, p. 286.

<sup>283</sup> See R. Nieli, *Social Conservatives of the Left: James Lincoln Collier, Christopher Lasch, and Daniel Bell*, “The Political Science Reviewer”, 22, 1993, pp. 198-292. In the same way Lasch was defined by M. Wegierski, essay review to J.Z. Muller, *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997, “The Review of Metaphysics”, Vol. 51, N. 4, 1998, pp. 948-949.

conservative sensibility, but he was a committed democrat”<sup>284</sup>, whereas Ronald Beiner argued that the third populist way followed by Lasch, one which lay in the middle of conservatism and radicalism, actually concealed often a more conspicuous conservative tendency than the radical one<sup>285</sup>. For Andrew Hartman, he simply defied known political labels: he was “a self-styled populist moralist”<sup>286</sup>. Matthew Slaboch, for his own part, noted that Lasch’s populism, based on the critique of progress and optimism, as opposed to sense of limits, rootedness and hope, shared many aspects of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s ideas<sup>287</sup>. Ian Maitland considered him simply a communitarian<sup>288</sup>, whereas George Hawley, writing a book on the right-wing critics of American conservatism, included him in one chapter about the localistic and decentralist perspectives against an age of big concentrations of power: all the authors Hawley considered were, in sum, critics of mainstream “progressive” conservatism. In his discussion, there found place, together with Lasch, the Southern Agrarians and some of their recent epigones such as Richard Weaver and Mel Bradford, Wendell Berry and Russell Kirk, and then also Robert Nisbet, Wilhelm Röpke and others<sup>289</sup>. Patrick

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<sup>284</sup> Th. Bender, *The Historian as Public Moralist. The Case of Christopher Lasch*, “Modern Intellectual History”, 9, 3, 2012, p. 736.

<sup>285</sup> R. Beiner, *Left-Wing Conservatism: The Legacy of Christopher Lasch*, in *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit: Essays on Contemporary Theory*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1997, pp. 139-50.

<sup>286</sup> A. Hartman, *Christopher Lasch: Critic of liberalism, Historian of Its Discontents*, “Rethinking History”, vol. 13, n. 4, December 2009, pp. 499–519.

<sup>287</sup> M.W. Slaboch, *A Road to Nowhere. The Idea of Progress and Its Critics*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2018, chap. 4.

<sup>288</sup> I. Maitland, *Community Lost?*, “Business Ethics Quarterly”, vol. 8, n. 4, 1998, pp. 655-670. A. de Benoist considered him a particular type of communitarian or a left-wing populist: A. de Benoist, *Comunitaristi vs liberali*, in A. Carrino (ed.) *Identità e comunità*, Guida, Napoli, 2005, pp. 90-93.

<sup>289</sup> G. Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2016, chap. 3. In an important work about Southern agrarianism and conservatism, Paul Murphy, though without any substantive argumentation, considered

Deneen, a contemporary intellectual which shares many Laschian ideas, which is quite simple to explain, due to the fact that he is a disciple of Wilson Carey McWilliams, a thinker that Lasch appreciated a lot, wrote that Lasch, at the same time, embraced conservative cultural arguments, by remaining sympathetic to liberal economic positions<sup>290</sup>. I think that Eric Miller had right when spoke about Lasch as a “pilgrim to an unknown land”<sup>291</sup>, namely a lonely thinker that tried to discover unfollowed paths, or maybe just secondary ones. Nevertheless, I think that Lasch can without any doubt be considered a conservative, in his own way. Next chapters, in particular by considering Lasch’s contributions to some journals as well his correspondence, will try to show how his intellectual path moved step by step to some sort of conservatism<sup>292</sup>. A conservatism conceivable, primarily, as stewardship

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Lasch as very close to southern agrarianism’s critique of capitalism: P.V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History. The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 2001, p. 274. I will deal with this interesting relationship in the last chapter, which is hinged on, among others, a comparison between Lasch and Berry, one of the last epigones of the authors of one of the most powerful critiques towards progress: *The Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand. The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2006.

<sup>290</sup> P.J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, cit., chap. 9. See also P.J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, cit.

<sup>291</sup> E. Miller, *Pilgrim to an Unknown Land*, cit.

<sup>292</sup> See some interesting insights in J. Beer, *On Christopher Lasch*, “Modern Age”, Fall 2005, pp. 330-343, now also included in L. Trepanier G. Havers (ed.), *Walk Away, When the Political Left Turns Right*, Lexington Books, Lanham-Boulder-New York-London 2021, pp. 184-206; S. Bartee, *Christopher Lasch, Conservative?*, “The Russell Kirk Center”, 13 May 2012; S. Bartee, *Imagination Movers: The Construction of Conservative Counter-Narratives in Reaction to Consensus Liberalism*, not published Ph.D. dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 19 February 2014. See also A.J. Bacevich (ed.), *American Conservatism. Reclaiming an Intellectual Tradition*, The Library of America, New York, 2020. In a eulogy, about both Kirk and Lasch, and about another thinker, Karl Hess, since they died in the same year, John Judis argued as follows: “Kirk, Hess and Lasch typified the best in American intellectuals: independent, immune to commercial success and popular favour. They also bore out the superficiality of political classifications. Kirk’s conservatism, Hess’s libertarianism and Lasch’s populism were virtually identical in their regard for what Burke termed ‘the little platoon we belong to in society’. They stand as reminders that even the most liberal or progressive philosophy must be anchored in a thoughtful conservatism.”, J.B. Judis, *Three Wise Men*, “New Republic”, 30 May 1994, p. 22.

of those places in which human beings become what they are, according to their human nature but also to their calling<sup>293</sup>, and find a home in which they can responsibly grow: the family, spontaneous and local associations, neighbourhood, churches and so on. Indeed, in Lasch's opinion conservatism begins truly at home. It is based on a moral realism which is rooted in time and place, in a lively intergenerational relationship between past, present and future. As such, it opposes the liberal idea according to which being rooted and attached to some places of the heart and their correspondent traditions means "parochialism, intolerance and inequity"<sup>294</sup>. According to Lasch, rootedness, traditions, particularism constitute the very prerequisite of democracy, that is to say self-government, and the essential means by which develop crucial democratic virtues as judgment, prudence, eloquence, courage, self-reliance, resourcefulness, common sense and sense of limits. Liberals did not understand, Lasch thought, that concrete democracy, namely its everyday practice of self-government and self-discipline, and not the formal process of voting or the welfare state democracy which is another name for mass dependence and servility, is based on rootedness and traditions. By these elements, individuals become part of a real community, made of flesh and blood, they learn fraternity and obligations, as opposed to a mere contractual view of life, and what they hold in common, a common culture which binds in a way much stronger and fervent of any government economic program or rationalistic and

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<sup>293</sup> For the opposition between "calling" and "career" see C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1327.

<sup>294</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Response to Joel Feinberg*, cit., p. 42.



therapeutic plan can ever do. In this way, conservatism for Lasch is another name for the moral realism of ordinary people as opposed to the therapeutic culture of the elite<sup>295</sup>.

If we try to find a similar path, we finish to consider a particular way to conservatism as the most similar to Lasch's understanding of it. In fact, there exists a historical alternative to mainstream American conservatism, by which Lasch meant to describe a progressive stream of it. In the end, the group of "neoconservatives", guided by Irving Kristol, which starting from the eighties guided the conservative movement were far from being *real* conservatives, according to Lasch. Indeed, the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency were liberals rather than conservative: progressive and capitalist to the core. Speaking of the neoconservative journal "The Public Interest", Lasch described it as just another version of "corporate liberalism"<sup>296</sup>. In an article dated back 1984, Lasch wrote that under Reagan, who had promised the defence of traditional values and a more decentralized perspective of politics and economics, nothing was done in this sense, quite the contrary: what he experienced was just the growing influence of "a technical and managerial elite, the centralization of decision making, which leaves ordinary citizens increasingly powerless (...) the relentless pursuit of technical innovation at the expense of mutual aid and of traditional moralities, the substitution of technical expertise and social engineering for experience and practical reason"<sup>297</sup>. The moral reformation promised by Reagan, Lasch argued in

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<sup>295</sup> See P.A. Lawler, *Moral Realism Vs Therapeutic Elitism*, cit.

<sup>296</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 8 December 1979, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 13.

<sup>297</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Great American Variety Show*, "New York Review of Books", 2 February 1984, p. 40.

another article, has failed to materialize: “notwithstanding his lip service to ‘traditional values’, his policies have continued to undermine them”<sup>298</sup>. “Ritual reference to ‘traditional values’ – Lasch wrote at the beginnings of *The True and Only Heaven* – cannot hide the right’s commitment to progress, unlimited economic growth, and acquisitive individualism”<sup>299</sup>. The forgotten middle class, the so called “Middle America” that Reagan seemed to defend, could not be safeguarded by someone who, instead of promoting the centrality of the family, local and traditional cultures, a more humble and decentralized way of life as key elements for a Jeffersonian democracy, was instead advocating for more centralized powers and more capitalism: there were precisely the hostile elements, Lasch thought, towards a conservatism well understood. If we unite all these intellectual footsteps, we approach the so-called paleo-conservative movement<sup>300</sup>.

Paleo-conservatism, a scholar noted, “has represented an authentic opposition voice to the dominant cultural and political forces of our times”<sup>301</sup>. By that it is meant to describe a particular perspective which emphasized more the importance of culture than economy for a good,

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<sup>298</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Reagan’s Victims*, “New York Review of Books”, 21 July 1988, p. 7.

<sup>299</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 22. In another page, Lasch wrote as follows: “Reagan played on the desire for order, continuity, responsibility, and discipline, but his program contained nothing that would satisfy that desire. On the contrary, his program aimed to promote economic growth and unregulated business enterprise, the very forces that have undermined tradition”, *ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>300</sup> For an introduction see J. Scotchie, (ed.), *The Paleoconservatives: New Voices of the Old Right*, Transaction Publishers New Brunswick, 1999; P. Gottfried, *Paleoconservatism*, in B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 651-652; G.H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, ISI Books, Wilmington 2006 (1st ed. 1976), pp. 567-570; P. Allitt, *The Conservatives. Ideas and Personalities throughout American History*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2009, pp. 245-252; G. Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 178-206;

<sup>301</sup> J. Scotchie, *Introduction to Id* (ed.), *The Paleoconservatives*, cit., p. 14.

well-structured society. Western and Christian inherited traditions are considered the cultural origins to be safeguarded from the perils of capitalist and socialist modernity. Whereas, in fact, some sort of pre- or anti-capitalist order is based on a common inherited culture – namely Christian and typically Western – modernity, both capitalist and socialist, tends to produce fragmentation and disintegration. As such, only culture can strictly unite a people, by insisting though on the peculiar individuality of each its participants. Economy, instead, leads to a barbarized world made of atoms and sand particles. Moreover, paleo-conservatives tend to be at least skeptical, but more appropriately enemies of the managerial and top-down programs of reform. Indeed, “for them, the culture war is a grand battle royal waged between a mostly rural and small-town Middle America and their Washington-Manhattan-Hollywood tormentors”<sup>302</sup>. As such, they consider as a point of reference for a good human order a decentralised and typically Jeffersonian self-governing republic rather than a mass democracy. To some extent, therefore, they cross the typical Mid-West hostility towards big business, big government, big concentrations of powers and centralised politics and the Southern agrarian critique of capitalism (and socialism as well) and modernity. A paleo-conservative exponent wrote about the republican, Jeffersonian democracy as follows – a description that had many similarities with Lasch’s, indeed: “A republic is (...) a form of government in which people govern themselves not just periodic voting but by actually taking part in government at all levels all the time and also

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<sup>302</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

(...) by governing themselves in a private, non-political sense. A republic is not an easy form of government to maintain (...). It requires immense self-discipline (...) constant and continuous attention and involvement in public affairs, a high enough level of education that citizens can understand and take part in public affairs intelligently and most of all independence. Independence means being in a position to take responsibility for yourself and your family and your livelihood supporting yourself, defending yourself, controlling yourself, governing yourself”<sup>303</sup>.

However, though they were traditionalist, similarly to Lasch, they were sometimes too much nostalgic about the past to rediscover and to put again at the heart of their contemporary times. Lasch’s idea of tradition, on the contrary, should not be read as a nostalgic plea of a past order. Nostalgia was for Lasch the other side of the belief in progress. Both share a simplistic and, thus, erroneous view of the past, as something frozen and static. “Seemingly irreconcilable, the nostalgic attitude and the belief in progress” share “an eagerness to proclaim the death of the past and to deny history’s hold over the present”<sup>304</sup>. Still, “both find it difficult to believe that history still haunts our enlightened, disillusioned maturity. Both are governed, in their attitude toward the past, by the prevailing disbelief in ghosts”<sup>305</sup>. In sum, both nostalgic and progressive attitude share a common, simplistic vision of human life, although the former is positive and the latter negative, about the past.

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<sup>303</sup> S. Francis, *Partisan Conversation*, “Southern Partisan”, Third Quarter, 1996, p. 35

<sup>304</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 118.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibidem*.

They are, in other words, the two faces of the same coin: “nostalgia freezes the past in images of timeless, childlike innocence”, on the one hand, whereas “the idea of progress, although it perceives ignorance and superstition where nostalgia perceives charming simplicity, encourages an equally lifeless and undifferentiated sense of the past”<sup>306</sup>, as the flip side of the same coin.

It happens that Lasch, due to his essays published in the eighties, drew the attention of some paleo-conservatives and of a journal referable to them, “Chronicles”<sup>307</sup>. They blamed, as Lasch did, the neo-conservatives to be liberals and progressive, in the end<sup>308</sup>. For the shared basic assumptions about the conservative idea, Thomas Fleming and Paul Gottfried wrote to Lasch<sup>309</sup>. In a first letter, the director of “Chronicles”, Thomas Fleming, wrote to Lasch that he appreciated a lot his critical arguments towards mainstream conservatism included in *What’s Wrong with the Right*. In the letter, he said, “while I agree with most of your

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<sup>306</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>307</sup> See chap. four in which I provide some pieces of information about it.

<sup>308</sup> On that see in particular a sort of counter-history of the American conservative movement, seen with the eyes of a paleo-conservative: P. Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1993 (revised edition). Moreover, they argued that the only neo-conservative interest was power: they just wanted to marginalize anyone on their right. On that point, it is important to remember that the paleo-conservatives were furious for the fact that in 1981 Reagan chose one of theirs, William Bennett, instead of a Southern paleo-conservative, Melvin E. Bradford, for chairing the National Endowment for the Humanities.

<sup>309</sup> Actually, they were not the only two paleo-conservatives to do so. Another one, Claes Ryn, wrote a letter to Lasch in 1992 in order to express his contiguous intellectual position. He also sent him one of his books, C. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism. America as Revolutionary State* (1991), National Humanities Institute, Bowie, 2011 (the original title, as it was sent to Lasch, was *The New Jacobinism: Can Democracy Survive?*). See correspondence C. Ryn-Ch- Lasch, 27 January-14 February 1992, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 1. In the book, Ryn argued for a democracy based on moral realism and decentralized structure of power as opposed to Jacobin democracy, as advocated by neoconservatives, made of therapeutic culture of elites, centralization, statism and foreign imperialism. It is now available, since some months, the last books of Ryn’s, which collects some of his previous volumes, such as the above-mentioned one: C. Ryn, *The Failure of American Conservatism and the Road Not Taken*, Republic Book Publishers, Washington, 2023.

assessment, you do give short (or should I say no?) shrift of the remnants of the older, traditionalist right. The old right, as exemplified by writers like Richard Weaver, and T.S. Eliot, was skeptical of progress and, at best, cautious in its appreciation of capitalism”<sup>310</sup>. After some time, Fleming wrote again to Lasch. In fact, he manifested a warm appreciation for Lasch’s contribution to the radical and conservative journal “New Oxford Review”, in particular for his article *The Obsolescence of Left and Right: On the Exhaustion of the Idea of Progress*<sup>311</sup>. Moreover, he enclosed an essay written by one of his magazine’s contributors in order to let Lasch see how “Chronicles” found similarities with his thought<sup>312</sup>, an article Lasch manifested his appreciation for<sup>313</sup>.

At the same time, Lasch had some correspondence with another paleo-conservative, Paul Gottfried. Actually, as Gottfried himself remembered, he came to know, at least personally quite late, at a

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<sup>310</sup> Th. Fleming to Ch. Lasch, 17 September 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 33. In the same letter, then, he let Lasch observe that the magazine had given spaces in its columns to Wendell Berry’s radical-conservatism: a thinker that will be the focus of chap. five. Fleming proposed to Lasch to contribute to the magazine too, but Lasch answered that he did not have much time for it: Ch. Lasch to Th. Fleming, 14 October 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 33.

<sup>311</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Obsolescence of Left and Right: On the Exhaustion of the Idea of Progress*, “New Oxford Review”, April 1989, 6-15. The determining Lasch’s contribution to the review will be the focus of chap. four.

<sup>312</sup> The reference is to S. Francis, *Left, Right, Up, Down*, “Chronicles”, September 1989. However, it should be noted that not every contributor of “Chronicles” had the same partially positive opinion of Lasch. For instance, the reviewer of Lasch’s *The True and Only Heaven* blamed Lasch to be a Calvinist, following therefore the idea that human nature is completely corrupted and denying, as a consequence of that, that the Catholic Original Sin could in any case let individuals some margins of liberty: L. Rockwell Jr., *Lamentations of a Recovering Marxist*, “Chronicles”, August 1991, pp. 27-29 (Lasch Papers, Box 35, Folder 8). The comment is only partially true. Lasch was influenced by a Calvinist idea of human nature. Nevertheless, he thought that individuals possessed the freedom of acting responsibly and in the right direction. What he considered radically negative was, instead, the cultural atmosphere of modern times, which tended to erode the cultural and psychological foundations of freedom itself.

<sup>313</sup> Ch. Lasch to Th. Fleming, 17 October 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 21.

conference organized by the journal “Telos” in 1990<sup>314</sup>. Like Fleming, he wrote to Lasch by expressing appreciation for one of his contributions appeared in the “New Oxford Review”<sup>315</sup>. In the answer, Lasch declared what had already been stating elsewhere, namely that both the right, the contemporary mainstream conservatism, and the left were on the wrong path in order to reflect about a human-scale order and the “Middle America” linked to it: “Conservatism is just as deeply compromised by its enthusiasm for capitalism, it seems to me, as the left is compromised by its enthusiasm for the Enlightenment project of building a whole new world from scratch”<sup>316</sup>. Moreover, Lasch noted, it seemed that a sort of conservative consensus could be referable to the magazine directed by William Buckley, the “National Review”. But Gottfried did not agree with Lasch. In fact, as much as Lasch, Gottfried was very critical of Reaganite: he did not consider himself “a soldier in the Reagan non-revolution”<sup>317</sup>. Gottfried tended to lead Lasch back to Marxism: something, however, Lasch denied in the answer<sup>318</sup>. The problem, for Gottfried, consisted not so much in capitalism, but in the managerial,

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<sup>314</sup> P. Gottfried, *Encounters*, cit., p. 180. Actually, Gottfried wrote also that he originally met Lasch when he was a student, in 1969, and Lasch gave a lecture. We will speak about “Telos” in the third chapter.

<sup>315</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Obsolescence of Left and Right: On the Exhaustion of the Idea of Progress*, cit., P. Gottfried to Ch. Lasch, 8 July 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 21. He attached also some of his articles dealing critically with neoconservatism, a common enemy, so to speak. For instance, P. Goffried, *Toward a New Fusionism*, “Policy Review”, Fall 1987, pp. 64-70; Id, Review to H.J. Ausmus, *Will Herberg: From Right to Right*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1988, Id, “Society”, December 1988, pp. 94-96; Id, *Conservatives in the New Left*, “The World and I”, August 1989, pp. 406-409.

<sup>316</sup> Ch. Lasch to P. Gottfried, 28 August 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 21. Lasch wrote also that he agreed with Paul Piccone, the director of “Telos” and a common friend as well, who considered conservatism, contemporary conservatism, not at all conservative, but rather liberal.

<sup>317</sup> P. Gottfried to Ch. Lasch, 6 September 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 21. On that point see especially P. Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, cit.

<sup>318</sup> Ch. Lasch to P. Gottfried, 17 October 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 21.

therapeutic culture of liberal elites that destroyed any resistance of society by imposing a Jacobin, centralistic, rationalistic project on it<sup>319</sup>. According to Lasch, however, the therapeutic, managerial culture was precisely fostered by the capitalist system, which tended to erode the true conservative elements of a good society, such as the family. In fact, Lasch thought, corporate capitalism was much more than a simple economic system of production: it was, in his point of view, a catch-all system which embraced every aspect of human life. Indeed, Lasch considered capitalism the very enemy of a democratic Jeffersonian society, hinged on traditions, decentralization, small-scale market: a capitalist system which tends to replace family and traditional values with a consumerist ethic, could not be defended from a conservative point of view<sup>320</sup>.

Nevertheless, Lasch, differently from his full participation to the “New Oxford Review”, to which he was almost totally sympathetic, as we will see, remained skeptical of the type of conservatism promoted by “Chronicles”<sup>321</sup>. In a letter to Dale Vree, the director of the “New Oxford Review”, Lasch noted how the paleo-conservatives, that he called “the Rockford crowd” due to the fact that the magazine “Chronicles” was edited by the Rockford Institute, were too less critical of capitalism and too much apologetic of Christendom<sup>322</sup>. This is quite debatable, as capitalism, in particular the contemporary capitalism of big business and

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<sup>319</sup> P. Gottfried to Ch. Lasch, 6 September 1989, cit.

<sup>320</sup> On this point, interesting critical comments are included in G.R. Beabout, E.J. Echevarria, *The Culture of Consumerism*, cit.

<sup>321</sup> Remember, however, that Lasch sent an article which was then published in “Chronicles” in 1990: Ch. Lasch, *The New Class Controversy*, June 1990, pp. 21-25. He was also invited to a conference organized by the magazine for December 1992, but in archive I found no trace of Lasch’s answer: Th. Pappas to Ch. Lasch, 4 August 1992, Lasch Papers, Box 7b, Folder 17.

<sup>322</sup> Ch. Lasch to Dale (Vree), 2 December 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7b, Folder 3.



big government together allied, was a critical point for the paleo-conservatives. As for the second point, instead, even Lasch, by the end of his time, as we will observe, put a growing emphasis on Christian tradition. It remains the fact, and that appears undisputable, that Lasch, maybe for his own attitude of solitary intellectual pilgrim maybe because he was not truly convinced of any existing cultural alternative, did not fully fit the description of paleo-conservative. As a matter of fact, he mixed his own typical Mid-West hostility to big business and big government, to capitalism and statism, with the agrarian critique of modernity, materialism, scientism and technology (in a word: the ideology of progress). As such, he can be better described, plainly, as a particularly vehement anti-capitalist conservative. For this reason, we will see, in the last two chapters, how his conservative vision, from a cultural point of view, came closer to other American – better said, Mid-Western and Southern – authors, such as, for the first type, Russell Kirk, and for the second Richard Weaver and Wendell Berry. In addition to that, it will be interesting to find points of contact – and there are, indeed – between his vision with the one, typically conservative, from a social and cultural perspective, of the German “humanist” economist and sociologist, Wilhelm Röpke<sup>323</sup>.

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<sup>323</sup> I use Röpke for at least a pair of reasons. Firstly, I consider diriment his conservative point of view really, in particular his distinction between “centrism” and “decentrism”: two radically antithetical visions of order that we will deal in the last chapter with (on that see *A Humane Economy. The Social Framework of the Free Market* (1958), Regnery, Chicago, 1960). Secondly, also because, though he was not American, he nevertheless became central for the conservative renaissance of the fifties. Among other things, and this is not a secondary point, he became a friend of Russell Kirk – they both cited each other in their books – and Kirk himself was crucial in order that Röpke’s “spiritual testament”, *Jenseits von Angebot und Nachfrage* (1958), was translated into English. Moreover, his ideas echo in Weaver and Berry as well. As, of course, in Lasch’s reflections, even if, and this a pity, Lasch never quoted him.

Lasch's vision, as for the above-mentioned thinkers, cannot be simply reduced to some sort of nostalgia for a mythical or "celestial" past: he did not believe in heaven on this earth, as the same title of his book on progress well shows, neither in the past, nor in the present or in the future<sup>324</sup>. Human condition is a matter of radical dependence of its own precarious and fragile condition: a crooked timber cannot be made straight, Immanuel Kant would have said. To the nostalgia for a past by then lost, Lasch preferred a more humble and human memory of it, in the sense that the past is inextricably linked to the present: by its formative influence the present is forged<sup>325</sup>. But by no means in uncritical way. Rather, Lasch wrote, "part of the value of tradition, we can now see, is that it commemorates past achievements (by no means uncritically) and makes us all parties to those achievements"<sup>326</sup>. In an article published in 1988 Lasch argued that "traditionalism, as I understand it, does not call for a restoration of the past. It holds that shared memories – not shared values – are what constitute a community, even if those memories are often divisive. Without a sense of our collective past, transmitted in stories, myths, and rituals – Lasch concluded – we can achieve little understanding of ourselves even as individuals"<sup>327</sup>. Traditions, Lasch

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<sup>324</sup> The title of his book *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., is taken by a short story written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Celestial Railroad*, 1843, in which the author satirized the idea, typical of some philosophies like transcendentalism, that perfection is available to human beings on the earth, thanks to their supposed inherent good nature.

<sup>325</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Memory and Nostalgia, Gratitude and Pathos*, "Salmagundi", n. 85-86, Winter-Spring 1990, pp. 18-26; C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1331; Ch. Lasch, *The true and Only Heaven*, cit., pp. 282-283. Lasch's criticism of nostalgia made him critical of Edmund Burke's positions: see Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, pp. 127-132. Actually, they are much closer than Lasch thought: see J.R. White, *Burke's Prejudice: The Appraisals of Russell Kirk and Christopher Lasch*, "The Catholic Social Science Review", vol. 3, 1998, pp. 89-110. In fact, their difference is much more a question of degree than of essence.

<sup>326</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>327</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Response to Fischer*, cit., p. 5.

thought, are what binds, although not uncritically, generations and real communities: “strictly speaking – Lasch wrote in a guide to written English for his students – tradition refers to the transmission of beliefs, customs, or rules, especially by word of mouth, from generation to generation”<sup>328</sup>. Differently to conventions, which “come and go”, traditions “hang on tenaciously”<sup>329</sup>. And they are part of a rooted democratic community, made of concrete individuals, because they teach them, though imperfectly, how to move. In opposition to the idea that democracy was ruled by some kind of elite, guided by an artificial and rationalistic culture, pivoted on an orthopaedic-pedagogic ethic, G.K. Chesterton wrote in his *Orthodoxy* (1908) as follows: “in short, the democratic faith is this: that the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves – the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state (...). I have never been able to understand where people got the idea that democracy was in some way opposed to tradition. It is obvious – Chesterton continued – that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record (...). Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead”<sup>330</sup>. That conception of democracy, a democracy rooted in the past, in the everyday life of common people, the “democracy of the dead”, meant precisely how people need moral realism, rootedness, and traditions, which is another

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<sup>328</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Traditional, Traditionally*, in *Plain Style*, cit., p. 111.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>330</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908), in D. Dooley (ed.), *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, cit., vol. one, pp. 250-251.

way, therefore, to recognise human limitations and fallibility: the common sense typical of the ordinary people conservatism.

## **Chapter 2 - Christopher Lasch and “democracy”: Traditions, Independence, Localism.**

Indeed, socialism and progressivism more and more appear to be different versions of the same reformist, managerial, technocratic and modernizing ideology.  
Christopher Lasch<sup>331</sup>

In this chapter, I am going to deal with Lasch’s contribution to the journal “democracy”. Founded and directed by the radical political theorist, who taught at Princeton University, Sheldon Wolin, its first and most basic aim, as its director put it in the editorial of the first number, consisted in helping to “repair the democratic fabric where it has been rent and to invent and encourage new arrangements that will point the way toward a better society”<sup>332</sup>. According to Wolin, it was crucial to connect political radicalism with cultural conservatism, that is to say to revitalize a sense of participatory and decentralized democracy with the critique towards capitalist system. Although its publication went on for just three years, from 1981 to 1983, such a journal was an important step for the maturation of Lasch’s political thought. By his active contribution and as a member of its editorial board as well, Lasch took part to a cultural project aimed at criticizing the pervasive liberal tendencies of the political, cultural and economic establishment of the US. Even though the journal had deliberately left-wing positions, it nevertheless manifested some conservative nuances, from the cultural point of view, which

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<sup>331</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 7 February 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 14.

<sup>332</sup> Sh. Wolin, *Why democracy?*, «democracy», 1, January 1981, p. 4.

expressed the development of Laschian thought as well. In fact, it was quite a pluralistic journal.

In the first part of it, I will focus on the theoretical premises of the journal, namely the critical points that “democracy” would have touched, according a radical and populist perspective – and a cultural conservative one, even if this aspect was not appreciated by all the participants in the journal<sup>333</sup>. By doing so, I will argue that “democracy” was a true experiment against its time. Indeed, its foundation coincided with the first years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. And the journal was quite antithetical to his political conservatism, which, actually, was based on a progressive and liberal ideology. Secondly, I will consider the idea of democracy of Lasch and the journal, by examining all the Laschian articles appeared in it as well. In the end, I will dedicate myself to consider the Laschian participation in “democracy” as a crucial step for his intellectual maturation, in particular for what concerns his ideas about the importance of traditions, the sense of independence and localism. Indeed, during the life of the journal, Lasch was experiencing a deep development, culturally speaking. As he wrote in a letter, dated July, 9<sup>th</sup> 1980, Lasch thought that some cultural positions should be taken seriously from the left, even for learning from them<sup>334</sup>.

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<sup>333</sup> See for example G. Schulman, *The Pastoral Idyll of democracy*, “democracy”, 3, August 1983, pp. 43-54.

<sup>334</sup> Ch. Lasch to J.B. Elshtain, 9 July 1980, cit.

## ***2.1 “democracy” Against Its Time: A Radical and Populist Journal in a Politically Conservative Era.***

During the eighties, as it well known, political conservatism is quite successful in the US. In 1980, in fact, Ronald Reagan defeated the democratic opponent, Jimmy Carter, and became thus President of the country. In those years, actually already towards the end of 1979, a new cultural project was developing. It would have been strongly critical of contemporary liberalism and political conservatism as well<sup>335</sup>. In 1981 the first number of such a cultural project saw officially the light: the journal “democracy” was available to the public. Founded and directed by Sheldon Wolin<sup>336</sup>, political theorist at Princeton University, “democracy” was a quarterly journal, namely composed by four numbers per year<sup>337</sup>. However, for a few reasons, the life of the journal would have been quite short. Its publication continued until 1983, when logistic, editorial and maybe primarily economic problems put a definitive end to it.

Journal headquarters were fixed in New York, 43 West 61<sup>st</sup> Street<sup>338</sup>.

However, in the second half of 1983, the journal was obliged to move

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<sup>335</sup> Ronald Reagan, actually, did not consider himself a conservative, but rather a liberal allied with conservatives. See R. Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, Harper Collins, New York, 2007. About the history of conservatism see at least G.H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, cit. For a critical discussion of the “neoconservative” turn in the eighties see P. Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, cit.

<sup>336</sup> See Sh. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, cit; *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds. The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001; *Democracy Incorporated, Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2008; *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, edited by Nicholas Xenos, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016. In the latter book, some of Wolin’s essays published in “democracy” were collected.

<sup>337</sup> In 1981 and 1982 the month of publication were January, April, July and October. In 1983, instead, February, May, August and November.

<sup>338</sup> Sh. Wolin to Editorial Board, 17 July 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 13.

elsewhere because of the reconversion of the building into condominiums<sup>339</sup>. Besides, its publisher, Max Palevsky, decided to stop to provide financial support to that cultural project. Wolin and the editorial director, Nicholas Xenos, tried to make an agreement with the Cambridge University Press, but they failed<sup>340</sup>. They pushed for an economic effort of the publisher. On the contrary, the latter did not want neither to pay the members of the editorial board for their work neither the authors of the articles published in the journal. And this was precisely the most fundamental problem of “democracy”: it had very high standards as for the economic level. Each article published was paid three hundred dollars, and for an essay review the journal paid only fifty dollars less. In addition to all that, “democracy” covered travelling expenses to the editorial board members, when they had to meet in New York, as well as their work for the journal. In October 1983, hence, Wolin admitted that there were no more funds for such an economic effort<sup>341</sup>.

Actually, already at the end of 1982 the director asked for a steadier engagement by all the members of the editorial board, in order to promote more largely its cultural project, so that it could have gained more funds. The editorial board was constituted by academic figures such as, in alphabetic order, Joyce Appleby, Jerry Berman, Lawrence Goodwyn, William Kornhauser, Robert Lekachman, David Noble, Hanna Pitkin,

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<sup>339</sup> Sh. Wolin to Editorial Board, 10 June 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 6.

<sup>340</sup> Sh. Wolin to Editorial Board, 15 November 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 6.

<sup>341</sup> Sh. Wolin to Editorial Board, 13 October 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 6. However, the director considered essential for “democracy” to pay his contributors, since it tended to commit most of its articles, and not simply to accept free contributors through the mail: Sh. Wolin to Editorial Board, 15 November 1983, cit. This is very easy to explain: Wolin wanted specific contributors, that he personally chose, for specific themes. A very high standard to keep, indeed.



Joel Rodgers, Thomas Fergusun e Stanley Sheinbaum. Among the most active, or perhaps the most zealous was surely Christopher Lasch. Indeed, even after some years of the conclusion of “democracy”, and in a letter primarily addressed to Lasch for inviting him to hold a lecture at Princeton University, Wolin warmly remembered Lasch’s contribution to “democracy”: “I feel that I have never thanked you properly for your help in the ‘democracy’ venture”<sup>342</sup>.

Those of “democracy”, in any case, were years of an intellectual change in Lasch’s thought, even if always keeping an anti-capitalist prejudice. He was distancing from the left, without, nonetheless, coming into contact with political conservatism. He had already published *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977) and *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) as well. And some years later he would have published *The Minimal Self* (1984). By these critical works, Lasch was already become a “maverick”, very difficult to classify, at least according to the usual political parameters. In a letter addressed to Wolin, towards the end of 1983, therefore when “democracy” was going to cease its activities, Lasch declared how much by then the left was far from being representative of the common and ordinary people and of a democracy conceived as self-government of local communities as well<sup>343</sup>. This tendency was already seen and emphasized in many occasions. In a letter to Wolin, dated February 1980, for example, Lasch praised for a revitalization of the

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<sup>342</sup> Sh. Wolin to Kit (Ch. Lasch), 12 October 1985, Lasch Papers, Box 57, Folder 10. Kit was the nickname used, as I have already mentioned, by his friends. Wolin started to name him in this manner already at the end of 1979.

<sup>343</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 30 September 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 6. Moreover, he added negative comments about leftist magazine, like “The Nation” and “New Republic”, for their growing distancing about these themes.

populist tradition, conceived as a form of self-government and communitarian cooperation. On the contrary, Lasch wrote, “socialism and progressivism more and more appear to be different versions of the same reformist, managerial, technocratic and modernizing ideology”. They dismiss, Lasch continued, such a pre-industrial, for some aspects romantic and traditional way of life as petty-bourgeois and naïve. The left had definitely accepted science and modern technology as the future horizon: rather, to Lasch, a true democracy should have rediscovered some form of the traditional and local way of lives and, in brief, an anti-enlightened vision<sup>344</sup>. In another letter, dated December 1981, Lasch dealt critically with the managerial and progressive idea that the family had to be externally, namely from experts, advised. Lasch criticized the approach of Lerner, according to whom the family was in need of external assistance and was brainwashed by the right. But the left, Lasch argued, was misplacing its attention. The family is a traditional form of community, probably the first and most important of all, and aims at being independent and self-governed. Liberalism does not understand such an aspect, since considers that point of view as backward-looking. Rather, it considers more government spending, expansion of human services, federally funded child care and in general the welfare state – Lasch calls it “political capitalism”, precisely for describing the strong

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<sup>344</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 7 February 1980, cit. In such a letter, he explicitly opposed the “militaristic technocratic utopia” contained in the pages of E. Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009 to W. Morris, *News From Nowhere* (1890), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, “which was written in reply to Bellamy” and “was dismissed as hopelessly nostalgic, backward-looking-looking, and unrealistic”. All opinions that he deemed, quite critically, “standard terms of progressive abuse”

and pervasive linking point between politics and economics, the therapeutic state – as the panacea of all social maladies. This managerial, professional and therapeutic ideology, according to Lasch, was thus aggravating the distance between the Democratic Party and the common people. Indeed, it was quite at odds with the of democracy conceived as self-government and independence of its members<sup>345</sup>.

In a letter to the editorial board, dated December 1979, Wolin wrote about the ultimate aim of the cultural project he founded: “The journal is committed to the revitalization, perhaps the re-creation of democracy”<sup>346</sup>. According to him, the main problem of the contemporary form of democracy was that it had replaced its true meaning, namely the self-government of the people, with some form of centralistic managerialism and paternalistic elitism – an argument well close to Laschian ideas. Therefore, it was the moment to choose the name of the journal. In the same letter, Wolin offered some suggestions: “Public Good”, “New Democracy”, or just “Democracy”, “Public Domain”, “Political Renewal” or “Public Concerns”. Lasch answered immediately. The next day he wrote that the new journal did not remind, even if only in the title, a neoconservative journal like “The Public Interest”<sup>347</sup>. And in the same letter, he discussed the cultural premises which, according to him, the

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<sup>345</sup> Ch. Lasch to M. Lerner, 8 December 1981, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 23. That letter is an answer to a letter, dated 9 July 1981, of Lerner himself, chair of the organization “Friends of Families”, in which he had asked Lasch for helping such an organization in the safeguard of the social programs for poor people. Social programs that the Reaganian right, Lerner wrote, wanted to dismantle. A thing Lasch did not dislike, since the welfare state and helping professions were, to him, an essential part of the problem of the invasion of the family and an erroneous element of a good society.

<sup>346</sup> Sh. Wolin to Editorial Board, 7 December 1979, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 13.

<sup>347</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 8 December 1979, cit. Actually, his direct answer to Wolin’s letter was dated 13 December 1979. But Lasch already dealt with the title topic in the previous one.

journal had to start from<sup>348</sup>. First of all, Marx remained a starting point, due his understanding of modern history and culture. But too many Marxists had rigidified his analyses in a sort of all-embracing ideology, a sort of sectarian and Manichean pseudo-religion: “under these conditions (...) it becomes necessary to look elsewhere for genuinely radical ideas”. Secondly, Lasch thought, “a just and decent society” was simply “incompatible with the preservation of corporate capitalism”. In this sense, Lasch thought, a top-down approach to such problems had to be rejected. Otherwise, it would have followed the same elitist, centralistic and managerial approach of therapeutic liberalism. Democracy, Lasch noted, had to be primarily a government “of the people”, and “not for the people”. Thus, that change should have started from the bottom, that is to say from small and local communities that tried daily to self-govern themselves. Thirdly, he criticized, again, “The Public Interest”, “whose conservatism”, to him, “in any case is a crankier version of corporate liberalism”<sup>349</sup>. In the following letter, Lasch expressed his final favour for the name “Democracy”, considered the best, and “Renewal” as second choice<sup>350</sup>.

Wolin, also due to Lasch’s contribute, chose “democracy”. That name not only transmitted more clearly its primary interest, but also, without capital “d” it indicated a tradition that emerged from the bottom and that is lived and nurtured every day and by the common people: it

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<sup>348</sup> In a following letter, Lasch argued that Marxism, due to its overemphasis to economic terms, it tended to converge with liberalism: Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 29 December 1979, Box 7d, Folder 13.

<sup>349</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 8 December 1979, cit. He explicitly mentioned Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol.

<sup>350</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 13 December 1979, cit.

was quite the opposite idea of neoconservatism, according to which the democratic ideal was a universalist principle, an abstract term to spread, an “exportable commodity”. According to Lasch, democracy was, as much as Tocqueville’s insights, a state of mind and character, a social condition which everyone lives in his particular and rooted dimension. Therefore, it is also a practice – in the sense attributed to it by a scholar Lasch appreciated a lot, Alasdair MacIntyre – by which every participant nurtures some form of virtue<sup>351</sup>. Democratic participation, Lasch thought, does not mean to go voting, but to live everyday independently and cooperating, at the same time, with other people, and in so doing persons acquire education and responsibility<sup>352</sup>. “Democracy”, Lasch later wrote in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995), “works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friend and neighbours, instead of depending on the state”<sup>353</sup>. Democratic habits, he thought, such as “self-reliance, responsibility, initiative”, are best cultivated, moreover, locally and by a small holding

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<sup>351</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, cit., p. 187: “By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended”. Democratic practice, for Lasch, conceived primarily as cultivation of self-government, was meant to elevate men, namely to make them excellent in their own practice of democratic life. In a letter, Lasch speaks very positively about that book to Wolin: Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 10 August 1981, Lasch Papers, Box 6, Folder 2. Two years later, Lasch also invited MacIntyre to speak at Rochester University on March, 21<sup>st</sup> 1983: Ch. Lasch to A. MacIntyre, 24 January 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 1. In the same year, he wrote in a letter that he had already read three times the book: Ch. Lasch to Jack, 23 March 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 1.

<sup>352</sup> See. A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, cit., vol II, chap. 4 and 5 about the importance of localism and forming associations against the risk of despotism and centralistic power.

<sup>353</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., pp. 7-8.

property: in that way a sense of independence can deeply grow and fully develop itself.

In a document I found in Rochester, the most important topics that defined the essence of “democracy” were stated<sup>354</sup>. The document blamed American democracy for causing “the disassociation of citizens from their government”<sup>355</sup>. “The legitimacy of our politics”, it can be read, “rests on little more than occasional elections in which vast sums of money are spent in the manipulation of opinion, the corruption of public discourse, and the creation of dependence through the encouragement of political adolescence”<sup>356</sup>. “Freedom”, the document argued, “is probably in greater jeopardy today than at any other time in America history”<sup>357</sup>. A system of social control – both political and economic – of surveillance and harassment were by then pervasive. The journal, therefore, tried to revitalize an everyday democratic disposition by the rediscovery of local traditions, common people customs, plain ways of life and anti-enlightened, i.e. not entirely rationalistic, ways of thought. This common-man tradition, even if pluralistic in its structure, was opposed to those elites that wanted to impose their perspectives *erga omnes*. Political conservatives, on the one hand, claimed to be the representatives and keepers of tradition and past. However, they showed that they were too much linked to the ideology of progress and capitalism. On the other hand, liberals, totally rejected traditions, by considering them nostalgic and backward-looking: they wanted to free the people from prejudices

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<sup>354</sup> Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 11, six pages.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibidem*.

and past constraints, according to a liberationist perspective. But, similarly to political conservatives, even if in a stronger way, since they considered the legitimate heirs of the Enlightenment, they deemed progress as a dogma that could have led to a modern, that is to say better, society. Therefore, the journal tried to insist on a cultural platform that would have linked political radicalism to cultural conservatism, by uniting their common anti-capitalist judgment: on the one hand, he criticized the present state of democracy; on the other hand, he aimed at re-establishing the Jeffersonian tradition of decentralism and localism. The chosen subtitle was “A Journal of Political Renewal and Radical Change”.

As Wolin stated in his first editorial opening the first number of the journal, democracy lay in a very bad state: “Every one of the country's primary institutions – the business corporation, the government bureaucracy, the trade union, the research and education industries, the mass propaganda and entertainment media, and the health and welfare system-is antidemocratic in spirit, design, and operation. Each is hierarchical in structure, authority oriented, opposed in principle to equal participation, unaccountable to the citizenry, elitist and managerial, and disposed to concentrate increasing power in the hands of the few and to reduce political life to administration”<sup>358</sup>. Against the growing control of

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<sup>358</sup> Sh. Wolin, *Why democracy?*, cit., p. 3. This essay follows in part the document I quoted earlier. In the editorial, Wolin also explicated the structure of each number of the journal: brief editorial of its director; a “Theme Note” in which the focus of the number is described; the focus section, usually constituted of three or four articles; a section called “Explorations”, in which some key points of democracy are examined; the books reviews section, called “Contested Terrains”; a conclusive part, called “Classics of Democracy”, devoted each time to a different thinker that is considered crucial for democracy. Moreover, the journal occasionally hosted some articles of the public, if considered meaningful in the questions the journal raised.

political capitalism, which strictly connected the political power of government with the economic power of big corporations, and against the scientific dogma and the dominion of technology, “radicals”, Wolin wrote, “need to cultivate a remembrance of things past for in the capitalist civilization, which Schumpeter saw as based upon the principle of ‘creative destruction’, memory is a subversive weapon”<sup>359</sup>. He made quite explicit that the journal “cannot offer recipes or specific policies”: “but we can bring a critical approach that will illumine what is at stake for the future of democracy in current debates”<sup>360</sup>. According to him, as much as Lasch, who never planned a rationalistic and therapeutic blueprint, for otherwise the result would have been to emulate the typical conduct of liberals and neoconservatives, the only option was to oppose the liberal option and to mix political radicalism to cultural conservatism. Wolin expressed such an intention in the following way: “The ideology of progress fostered by science and capitalism – it can be read in Wolin’s article – depends upon the steady elimination of historical consciousness and of the customs, sensibilities, and textures of everyday life nourished by that consciousness; just as it depends upon the emasculation of the critical function of theory. What is at stake simultaneously is the past and the future. Radicals cannot leave the past to the conservatives; they need to remind themselves that they, too, have a past rich with democratic experience and wisdom, and that the arts of conservation have as much to do with learning how”<sup>361</sup>.

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<sup>359</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4,

<sup>360</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 4-5.



Lasch started to work on such a cultural project with alacrity since the very beginnings of it. Wolin, in fact, charged him with the task of writing an essay for the first number of January 1981. He thought that in such a democratic current crisis, as they were living, no one better than Lasch, he wrote in a letter to him, could have dealt with such a crucial topic<sup>362</sup>.

## ***2.2 Christopher Lasch and Sheldon Wolin: Democracy and Its Enemies.***

In that letter, Wolin invited to Lasch to think to a radical agenda devoted to deal with problems like centralization, bureaucratization, technological innovation and so forth. They constituted some of the main problems that a democracy, the political theorist thought, had to necessarily face at those time. The first essay of Lasch, *Democracy and the "Crisis of Confidence"*, was the result of such a reflection and it constituted perhaps his most meaningful contribution to "democracy", together with his second essay *Mass Culture Reconsidered*<sup>363</sup>. The first article started with some general considerations about the "crisis of confidence" that pervaded the nation. What Lasch observed was a general state of widespread apathy: a very perilous psychological state which, according to the classical reflections of Tocqueville, could have led either

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<sup>362</sup> Sh. Wolin to Kit (Ch. Lasch), 3 January 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 13.

<sup>363</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Democracy and the "Crisis of Confidence"*, "democracy", 1, January 1981, pp. 25-40; *Mass Culture Reconsidered*, "democracy", 3, October 1981, pp. 7-22. In the same number of Lasch's first essay, the main section included the following articles: Sh. Wolin, *The People's Two Bodies*, pp. 9-24; L. Goodwyn, *Organizing Democracy: The Limits of Theory and Practice*, pp. 41-60; D. Dickson, *Limiting Democracy: Technocrats and the Liberal State*, pp. 61-79.

to anarchy or to despotism<sup>364</sup>. The discourse made by the President Jimmy Carter in July, 15<sup>th</sup> 1979 – the so called “malaise speech” but officially called “Crisis of Confidence”: it was live and nationally broadcast – a few months before Reagan won the elections, had touched some points, according to Lasch, that steered his analyses in the right directions. Carter saw that the political participation to national political life was sicked of apathy. However, instead of insisting on that, he passed “to criticize the spirit of self-seeking and pursuit of material possessions” and called for more sacrifice: not the right way, according to Lasch. “Democracy”, Lasch stated, “survives as an ancestral memory even as it disappears from political practice. The disparity between practice and profession-between centralized bureaucratic and corporate power and the ideal of a self-governing society-remains a sensitive issue that cannot be altogether ignored so long as our political traditions retain even the lingering force of an historical myth”<sup>365</sup>. Actually, Lasch esteemed Carter, even if not entirely: “A very modest humble man, with a lot of not very highly developed intellectual interests”<sup>366</sup>. He received an invitation for a private dinner at the White House by his advisor Jody Powell and

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<sup>364</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, cit., vol II, p. 1294: “You cannot say in an absolute and general way that the greatest danger of today is license or tyranny, anarchy or despotism. Both are equally to be feared and can emerge as easily from the same single cause, which is general apathy, fruit of individualism; this apathy means that the day when the executive power gathers some strength, it is able to oppress, and that the day after, when a party can put thirty men in the field, the latter is equally able to oppress. Since neither the one nor the other is able to establish anything lasting, what makes them succeed easily prevents them from succeeding for long. They arise because nothing resists them, and they fall because nothing sustains them. What is important to combat is therefore much less anarchy or despotism than apathy, which can create almost indifferently the one or the other”.

<sup>365</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Democracy and the “Crisis of Confidence”*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>366</sup> R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 12.

he accepted<sup>367</sup>. Carter had read Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism* as well a similar book, Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976)<sup>368</sup>. In his book Lasch had dealt with the collapse of psychological inner resources that are premises for a free and responsible individual, a theme he would have continued dealing in *The Minimal Self* with, as well as some institutional problems. Lasch had observed that a powerful paternalistic and therapeutic power was emerging. A power quite at odds with the very concept of democracy itself<sup>369</sup>. For Lasch, democracy meant, primarily, a Jeffersonian but also a Tocquevillian self-government of local and small communities. Therefore, it was not an idealistic and abstract principle: it was lived in the everyday life practice of association and mutual cooperation<sup>370</sup>. On the contrary, the

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<sup>367</sup> Together with him also other intellectual figures were invited such as the sociologist Daniel Bell. See R. Wightman Fox, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., pp. 12-13; E. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, cit., pass. 2902-2912.

<sup>368</sup> D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, New York, 1976.

<sup>369</sup> In the same period, just to remind it, Ch. Lasch wrote *Life in the Therapeutic State*, cit.; *The Bill of Rights and the Therapeutic State*, cit.; *On Medicalization and the Triumph of the Therapeutic*, cit.

<sup>370</sup> Jefferson's influence on Lasch is quite direct and simple to trace. See for example Ch. Lasch, *The Jeffersonian Legacy*, in L. Weymouth (ed.), *Thomas Jefferson: The Man, His World, His Influence*, Putnam's Sons, New York 1973, pp. 229-45. For what concerns Tocqueville's influence on him, despite there are considerable meeting points, as I have already said, Lasch was skeptical about the above-mentioned thinker. Perhaps because he considered the French an aristocrat, perhaps he deemed him too much liberal-conservative. However, both of them tried to emphasize both the qualities and the defects of democracy, although in that Tocqueville was more realist than Lasch. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, actually, Lasch considered crucial Tocqueville's analysis about the perils of growing individualism in democratic times. Differently to him, however, Lasch emphasized that nowadays narcissism cannot be conceived as an "untrammelled individualism" because of the total invasion of privacy of the person: the difference between them, therefore, are due to the different historical context in which their analysis take place. As Lasch wrote, "The critique of 'privatism', though it helps to keep alive the need for community, has become more and more misleading as the possibility of genuine privacy recedes", *ibidem*, p. 9. And again: "It is the devastation of personal life, not the retreat into privatism, that needs to be criticized and condemned", *ibidem*, p. 25. In any case, they both emphasized the importance of virtues, sense of limits, the crucial role of associations and localism, and the primary characteristic of democracy as self-government. Moreover, it can be said that for Lasch the very essence of democratic character was an aristocratic virtue: not aristocratic in the sense of status, rather of cultivation of some qualities that are, so to speak, anti-modern and pre-democratic. On some linking points between the two see P.A. Lawler,

contemporary political, economic and educational system was creating quite the opposite: a “servile state” made of plenty of “other-directed” individuals, “servile minds”, “uprooted consumers”<sup>371</sup>.

In a following letter to the meeting with Carter, Lasch wrote to his advisor. Lasch was in search of the key element of the crisis. In his opinion it was the apathy, the indifference, the cynicism, even reinforced by the mass media system which considered citizens as clients and consumers: the only remedy to it was “a genuine political participation”<sup>372</sup>. And how could it be realized? Lasch answered in another letter. The remedy consisted in “a more democratic distribution of wealth and power”: “I’m not advocating for a centrally imposed equality of condition, but its opposite: the kind of decentralisation that would break up existing concentrations of power and approximate the general diffusion of property regarded by the Founding Fathers as the indispensable underpinning of republican institutions”<sup>373</sup>. All these were the themes Lasch focused on in his essay for “democracy”. What Lasch advocated was a grass-roots politics in antithetical opposition to

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*Moral Realism Vs Therapeutic Elitism*, cit.; J.B. Elshtain, *Limits and Hope*, cit. It is to be noted that Lasch was also invited by the University of Chicago, for the “Tocqueville Series”, in order to speak *Individualism and Intimacy: The Critique of the Patriarchal Family*, in February, 1<sup>st</sup> 1984, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 28. In that lecture, however, he remained quite skeptical about Tocqueville’s treatment of the family: he thought that Tocqueville was in favour of an opener and freer concept of the family institution. An argument that his discussant, Mary Ann Glandon, refused. In any case, the relationship between Tocqueville and Lasch would deserve more attention and a specific essay.

<sup>371</sup> The reference to the “servile state” is to H. Belloc, *The Servile State*, cit.; to the “other-directed individual” is to D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, cit; to the “servile mind” is to K. Minogue, *The Liberal Mind* and K. Minogue, *The Servile Mind*, cit.; to the “uprooted consumer” is to S. Weil, *The Need for Roots* (1949), Routledge, New York and London, 2002.

<sup>372</sup> Ch. Lasch to Mr. Powell, 10 June 1979, Box 20, Folder 6. Another meeting was organized for July 13rd, but Lasch was not invited.

<sup>373</sup> Ch. Lasch to Pat (Patrick Caddell, Carter’s electoral analyst), 18 July 1979, Box 20, Folder 6.

bureaucracy. The latter, Lasch wrote, “discourages grass-roots initiatives. Increasingly people live and work in large impersonal organizations over which they have no control. Scientific technology has replaced traditional a customary know-how and rendered people dependent on experts. Citizens now take part in politics merely as consumers”: the government has substituted its limited role with a “benevolent paternalism”<sup>374</sup>. In its symbiosis with economic power, Lasch saw the germs of a new despotism based on a tutelary complex that reduced citizens to consumers and clients. The new social discipline machinery was based on plenty of narcissistic figures by then deprived of the very essence of morality itself, because of the same modern and capitalist mechanism: work ethic, sense of sacrifice and of limits, capacity of self-government, moral restraints based also to religion sentiments, respect for the past and intergenerational continuity. A centralistic society could not answer to such a crisis: it was part of the problem, and a fundamental one. Instead, it was a human scale society, decentralised and locally based, republican in its idea of participatory democracy, and culturally conservative in its binding commitments that Lasch looked at: the ties of home and neighbourhood, which in a Marxist vision were just “rural idiocy” to wipe out, were on the contrary sources of the true sense of responsible and self-governing freedom for Lasch <sup>375</sup>. His hope, hence, assumed populist tones. In a lecture he held in 1979, Lasch had criticized the fact the spirit of Enlightenment had drained every sort of resisting force to it. This had conquered all the political spectrum, from the left to the right, even the

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<sup>374</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Democracy and the “Crisis of Confidence”*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

conservatives, which actually should have resisted such a temptation, by opposing some kind of traditionalism: liberalism was then become the key element of politics. According to him, therefore, “political radicalism increasingly has to identify itself with values usually identified with cultural conservatism. Political conservatives have too long monopolized the values of family, law and order, patriotism and continuity, and it is time to for radicals (if it is not already too late) to reclaim the ground they have ceded to their political opponents”<sup>376</sup>.

Such a position was essentially embarrassing for the left from which Lasch came, and he was abandoning – or he had already done it. In a letter of June 1980, and addressed to his friend of Abruzzi extraction Paul Piccone, director of the journal “Telos”, a cultural project he much contributed to<sup>377</sup>, Lasch affirmed that left, “long time before”, simply “read out” him for his nostalgic point of views<sup>378</sup>. In fact, already in the first part of the seventies, he had already had some troubles with the left-wing journal “Partisan Review”, whose he was even a contributing editor<sup>379</sup>. In that occasion, in 1972, the journal invited some of his contributors, like Lasch, for commenting a document, *A Statement on the New Cultural Conservatism*, in which it described the cultural

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<sup>376</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Knowledge*, cit. A partially revised version of the text was published as *The Conservative ‘Backlash’ and the Cultural Civil War*, in G. Blum, *Neo-Conservatism: Social and Religious Phenomenon*, Seabury Press, New York 1981, pp. 8-11.

<sup>377</sup> I will deal with it in the next chapter. In my interpretation, in fact, Lasch’s contribution to “Telos” was one of the major steps towards a new configuration of his political thought. Piccone was very much influenced by him. Even if in not all aspects, he shared his interest for populism as opposed to managerial and therapeutic liberalism, and moved himself, quite as Lasch, towards some kind of cultural conservatism. See for example P. Piccone, *Postmodern Populism*, “Telos”, vol. 103, 1995, pp. 45-86.

<sup>378</sup> Ch. Lasch to Paul (Piccone), 30 June 1980, Box 19, Folder 5.

<sup>379</sup> In the sixties he had also written a brief article for the journal: Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to symposium ‘On Vietnam’*, in “Partisan Review”, 32, n. 4, 1965, pp. 630-32.

conservatism that, according to the journal, was spreading<sup>380</sup>. “Partisan Review” considered that form of conservatism, which was connecting itself to political conservatism, a radical menace. The journal, on the contrary, hoped for new forms of culture and art, new experiments in the domain of values. Lasch answered in a very critical manner. According to him, cultural conservatism and political conservatism were not the same thing: the former could exist without becoming part of the conservative political movement. It has to be noted that Lasch, at the beginnings of the seventies, was quite critical of the liberationist movement coming from the sixties. In a letter to the journal, therefore, he wondered if there was still any sense to remain part of that cultural project<sup>381</sup>. This is just to demonstrate how difficult it was the relationship with the left for Lasch, at least since the seventies.

Coming back to the essay appeared in the first number of “democracy”, Lasch concluded it as follows: “A radical movement capable of offering a democratic alternative to corporate capitalism will have to draw on traditions that have been dismissed or despised by twentieth-century progressives and only recently resurrected both by scholars and by environmentalists, community organizers, and other activists. It will have to stand for the nurture of the soil against the exploitation of natural resources, the family against the factory, the romantic vision of the individual against the technological vision, localism over democratic centralism. Such a radicalism would deserve

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<sup>380</sup> The document is in Lasch Papers, Box 14, Folder 14. The intervention of Lasch will be published then as Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to symposium “On the New Cultural Conservatism”*, cit.

<sup>381</sup> Ch. Lasch to Mr. Phillips, 2 February 1972, Lasch Papers, Box 14, Folder 14.

the allegiance of all true democrats”<sup>382</sup>. The traditions of which he spoke in such an article were basically those who could be cultivated locally and in communitarian, decentralist way. Democracy, so conceived, as a human scale order is deeply rooted. As such, by its rootedness, by the very essence of democratic, active and daily life, the subjects of such an order can develop a stricter self-government and the democratic habits required to it in order that it can adequately live: the more every citizen can self-govern himself the less external intervention is thus required. In such sense, democracy means independence and capacity of self-discipline. Nevertheless, such a sane structure, built from the bottom-up, was threatened by technological development too. Following in part the insights of the “Frankfurt School”, Lasch conceived the expansion of capitalism and of technology as means by which personal freedom become anything but a pale memory. The people, externally besieged, become less and less “inner-directed”, to quote Riesman, and the traditions which had nurtured their inner sources are externally replaced by rational and modern ways of life. As Tocqueville had observed in the nineteenth century, well before the development of the type of capitalism Lasch experienced in twentieth century, technology and an absolute political power that ties up with them, an increasingly power would have emerged in democratic times. The thinker of Norman extraction considered traditional bonds as checks to it – firstly, in particular, the religious and spiritual sentiment. However, in democratic times citizens becomes more individualist and self-centred. Traditional forms of bonds

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<sup>382</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Democracy and the “Crisis of Confidence”*, cit., p. 40.



become weaker, common purposes become rarer, faith and religion sentiments, which temper human appetites, becomes the exception: “I think that, in the democratic centuries that are going to open up, individual independence and local liberties will always be a product of art. Centralization will be the natural government.”<sup>383</sup>. Between the individual and the political power, in sum, nothing remains and the result is a subject particularly vulnerable to external control. Thus, Tocqueville wrote, by imagination but also perspicacity, as follows: “I want to imagine under what new features despotism could present itself to the world; I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and his particular friends form for him the entire human species; as for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he is next to them, but he does not see them; he touches them without feeling them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if he still has a family, you can say that at least he no longer has a country”<sup>384</sup>. This is basically how Tocqueville expected democratic individuals to be: a herd made of lonely elements, devoid of any strong commitment, lacking in principles and bonds – with the exceptions of the passion for equality and the sovereignty of the people. And thus he continued, by describing the type of power that could emerge from such a situation: “Above those men arises an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their

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<sup>383</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, cit., vol II, p. 1205.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1249-1250.

fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-sighted and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood; it likes the citizens to enjoy themselves, provided that they think only about enjoying themselves. It works willingly for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent for it and the sole arbiter; it attends to their security, provides for their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, settles their estates, divides their inheritances; how can it not remove entirely from them the trouble to think and the difficulty of living?"<sup>385</sup>. And he ended by remarking once more the pervasiveness and the mild-totalitarian character, quite an oxymoron, of such a new despotism that reminds a lot the bureaucratic, therapeutic state that Lasch in his time described: "After having thus taken each individual one by one into its powerful hands, and having molded him as it pleases, the sovereign power extends its arms over the entire society; it covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated, minute, and uniform rules, which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot break through to go beyond the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them and directs them; it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupifies, and finally it reduces each nation to being nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the

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<sup>385</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1250-1251.

shepherd”<sup>386</sup>. Tocqueville could have not imagined the developments of the last century and half. Lasch, instead, updated such an analysis.

In his first essay published in “democracy”, he spoke”, in fact, of a “psychological manipulation and surveillance” system<sup>387</sup>. By “the redefinition of political authority in therapeutic terms”, a topic that Lasch started well before and in particular in the book about the family, the consequence is “the rise of a professional and managerial elite that governs society not by upholding authoritative moral standards but by defining normal behaviour and by invoking allegedly nonpunitive, psychiatric sanctions against deviance”<sup>388</sup>. A progressive vision, which became possible by the new conceptions of social science as a set of neutral, objective and therefore absolutely right ideas about human beings, informed then the new machinery of social control. A system which combined benevolence – the mild power which Tocqueville spoke about, but now became possible and even quite necessary by the support of the new authority of science – with an absolute power, just because of its “scientific” legitimation. And the left, Lasch thought, embraced such a vision, already since the invasion of the family during nineteenth century<sup>389</sup>. The left, he continued, tried, quite successfully, to replace the moral authority of traditional forms of community, i.e. primarily the family, with some kind of impersonal and rational form of them. The problem is, Lasch thought, the family let the young nurture some essential

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<sup>386</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1252.

<sup>387</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Democracy and the “Crisis of Confidence”*, cit., p. 31. The other analyses about the therapeutic state made by Lasch will be part of the next chapter.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>389</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit.

qualities and virtues, such as self-control and self-discipline, the same respect for traditional form authority and so forth. By doing so, Lasch judged that the very essence of mature and responsible liberty was impossible: “The dissolution of authority brings not freedom but new forms of domination”<sup>390</sup>.

Wolin was fairly sympathetic to Laschian ideas<sup>391</sup>. He also spent the most part of his contributions published in the first number of “democracy” to criticize technology as well to deal with the problem of apathy of the dependent citizens on the state and the mass media<sup>392</sup>. Moreover, he considered the American constitution as betrayer of the Declaration of Independence (1776) as well as of the Articles of Confederation (1777). These documents, according to Wolin, formed what he called “the first American body politic”. By means of them, democratic revolution came into being and all established modes of authority were rejected. The result was a “conception of the body politic as participatory, democratic, and egalitarian”<sup>393</sup>. The ratified Constitution (1788), the “second body politic”, instead, “aimed to reverse the direction of the country, to set it against the democratic and participatory politics

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<sup>390</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

<sup>391</sup> Actually, Wolin was much more critical of the very concept of authority. For Lasch, not all forms of authority were to be criticised: in this he was very realist. Wolin, instead, considered the concept of authority as incompatible with democracy, because of its intrinsic relationship with elitism: Sh. Wolin to J.B. Elshtain, 23 June 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 6, Folder 2. Moreover, Wolin considered some part of Hannah Arendt’s ideas as quite incompatible with democratic ones. Lasch, on the contrary, judged Arendt one of his most powerful sources of influence: see the letter Ch. Lasch Jeffrey Isaac, 22 March 1990, Box 7b, Folder 6. See also P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit. Some papers written by Arendt are also in Lasch Papers Archive Box 57, Folder 17: for example, H. Arendt, *Religion and Politics*, “Confluence”, vol. 2, 3, September 1957, pp. 105-126; *Christianity and Revolution*, “The Nation”, 22 September 1945, pp. 288-289.

<sup>392</sup> Sh. Wolin, *Why democracy?*, cit.; *Theme Note*, pp. 7-9; *The People’s Two Bodies*, cit.

<sup>393</sup> Sh. Wolin, *The People’s Two Bodies*, cit., p. 13.

flourishing in the states”<sup>394</sup>. It firstly constructed a national government based on representation, and not on democracy, Wolin continued. And secondly, it broke the democratic principle of localism and decentralism by replacing it with a centralized system of government. Therefore, also the very structure of the nation changed deeply, also from the economic point of view, by “evolving from a society of small-scale producers and small farmers into an integrated economy dominated by large corporations and monopolies and characterized by the concentration of economic wealth and power in a small number of giant firms”<sup>395</sup>. In essence, for Wolin his contemporary democratic problems lay at the very beginnings of the foundation of the US. An analysis that is well complementary to what Lasch stated in an essay of 1982, *The Bill of Rights and the Therapeutic State*<sup>396</sup>.

However, as every pluralistic cultural project, also “democracy” had not a unitary and uniform vision of things. In a letter of 1981, Lasch wrote that editorial board was split, even “not acrimoniously” into two parts: on the one side, half of it was Marxist and did not want to continue criticizing Marxism; on the other side, there was a group, which included Lasch, that wanted to “go even further in trying to break out of the orthodox left-wing pieties, to challenge every form of ‘enlightened’ thinking”<sup>397</sup>. Lasch, moreover, did not appreciate the fact that the journal simply underestimated the crucial of problem of the emergence of a

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<sup>394</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>396</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Bill of Rights and the Therapeutic State*, cit. See also Ch. Lasch, *The Jeffersonian Legacy*, cit. Actually, it would have also crossed the reflections on populism and federalism in the journal “Telos”. See chap. 3.

<sup>397</sup> Ch. Lasch to Richard Fox, 28 December 1981, Box 6, Folder 14.

professional-managerial class that ended to impose “new forms of cultural domination, new types of social control”<sup>398</sup>: a reflection Lasch had been considering since the seventies.

In the remaining issues of 1981, “democracy” dedicated to the theme of populism and grass-roots politics<sup>399</sup>, a topic well considered by Lasch, and in the third to political economy, with a particular critical editorial of Wolin towards Reagan’s administration, whose power structure is based on “corporate capitalism, managerial bureaucracy, and science-technology”<sup>400</sup>. In the fourth number, Lasch wrote an essay, and a very important one: *Mass Culture Reconsidered*<sup>401</sup>. The last number of the year was devoted, in the main issue, to the topic of *Culture Vs Democracy*. In his usual editorial, Wolin criticised vehemently Reagan’s new federalism. According to him, in fact, the decentralization of political power towards the periphery “does not bring government ‘closer’ to the people in any save a metaphorical sense”<sup>402</sup>. It is a simple administrative reform which tends to replace a bureaucratic institution for another. Democracy, Wolin wrote, requires that the separation between government and governed “be dissolved and replaced by the recognition of a variety of institutions, from official to informal, spontaneous, and temporary ones, in which people participate because there are things being considered and decided that are of importance to their lives”<sup>403</sup>.

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<sup>398</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>399</sup> For what concerns the second number of 1981, see in particular H.C. Boyte, *Populism and the Left*, “democracy”, 2, April 1981, pp. 53-66.

<sup>400</sup> Sh. Wolin, *Editorial*, “democracy”, 3, July 1981, p. 4. In it, Wolin declared that Reagan is essentially a liberal: a position which Lasch quite shared.

<sup>401</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Mass Culture Reconsidered*, cit.

<sup>402</sup> Sh. Wolin, *Editorial*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3.

According to him, we could say, what really matters is not vertical subsidiarity but rather horizontal subsidiarity: bureaucratic institutions must be replaced, if possible, with the variety of associations and institutions which are formed by the people. In the introduction to the main theme of the number, a very rich edition of the journal<sup>404</sup>, which included also the review of a book which Lasch warmly recommended, and whose author, Wendell Berry, influenced him a lot<sup>405</sup>, Lasch addressed the point that the market, in its pretension of expanding cultural pluralism and consumer freedom of choice, actually leads to “the standardization of products and thus ends by restricting the range of available choices”<sup>406</sup>. The problem, Lasch thought, was the industrialization which tended to concentrate power in a few hands, creating monopolies and oligopolies, and thus contributing to wipe out a human scale society: “In cultural life as in the provision of material goods and services, industrialization means the destruction of artisanal activity and craftsmanship, debasement of standards, erosion of popular culture, and the weakening of autonomous, informal agencies of cultural transmission like the kinship group, the neighbourhood, and the voluntary association. In a society dominated by huge corporations, the

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<sup>404</sup> See in particular Sh. Wolin, *The New Public Philosophy*, pp. 23-36; C. Blake, *Aesthetic Engineering*, pp. 37-50; M. Rogin, *Ronald Reagan's American Gothic*, pp. 51-59; T. Gitlin, *New Video Technology: Pluralism or Banality*, 60-76; M. Fischer, *Deconstruction: The Revolt Against Gentility*, pp. 77-86.

<sup>405</sup> S. Hahn, *Agriculture and Political Culture*, pp. 99-109 book review to W. Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, Avon Books, New York, 1978. In that book the Southern poet and essayist addressed the topic of human scale society, a very dear topic to Lasch. Lasch wrote to Wolin speaking about it as a “very important” book, 6 April 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 13. I consider Berry’s influence on Lasch crucial. Therefore, I will deal with it in the last chapter.

<sup>406</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Theme Note*, cit., p. 6.

democratization of culture is a delusion”<sup>407</sup>. The market, ultimately, leads to the destruction of a traditional world which is pre-existing to it. Its assumed power of liberation creates new forms of domination, and the presumed cultural pluralism it stimulates becomes nothing more than a standardization without standards, very much at odds with a democratic culture “embedded in everyday habits and awareness”<sup>408</sup>.

In the essay Lasch started by criticizing some progressive positions about education. John Dewey, for example, is considered responsible by Lasch to have proposed “antiauthoritarian educational reforms” in order to “encourage critical, scientific habits of mind”. Thorstein Veblen, then, considered crucial the “intellectually emancipating effects of industrial routine”<sup>409</sup>. Each of them, hence, positively deemed the emancipative effect of some kind of enlightened vision in replacing traditional ways of thought and past values linked to old attachments. Freedom, for them, simply meant to cut roots. “All these positions”, Lasch thought, “have rested on a central set of premises concerning the dissolving effects of modernity on ‘traditional’ modes of thought. The democratization of culture, it has appeared, presupposes either a program of education or a social process (or both) that tears people out of familiar contexts and weakens kinship ties, local and regional traditions, and attachments to the soil”<sup>410</sup>. Such a progressive perspective, in essence, “views the sense of

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<sup>407</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>409</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Mass Culture Reconsidered*, cit., pp. 8-9. Lasch quotes explicitly the following essays: J. Dewey, *Science as Subject Matter and as Method*, “Science”, new series 31, 28 January 1910, pp. 121-127; Thorstein Veblen, *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization*, “American Journal of Sociology”, 11, 1906, pp. 585- 609; Karl Mannheim, *The Democratization of Culture* (1933), in Kurt H. Wolff (ed.), *From Karl Mannheim*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1971, pp. 271-346.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.



place and the sense of the past as completely reactionary in their political implications, ignoring the important role they have played in democratic movements and popular revolutions”. And Lasch concludes as follows: “Not only does it exaggerate the liberating effects of uprootedness, it upholds an impoverished concept of freedom. It confuses freedom with the absence of constraints”<sup>411</sup>. Now, in Lasch’s opinion, two ways of dealing with the conception of Enlightenment and its effects in culture and individuals were possible. The first considers crucial for individuals and their cultures particularism and continuity, stability and tradition, in order to provide people with the necessary psychological, spiritual and inner resources for rootedness and orientation. This was the traditionalist

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<sup>411</sup> *Ibidem*. This is a very delicate theme. Of course, two crucial contributions about that are B. Constant, *The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns* (1819), Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 2011 (ebook edition) and I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), in Id, *Liberty*, cit. For Lasch, it seems, the true freedom presupposes a psychological and moral structure that make the individual capable of exercising it. He does not deny – or perhaps he simply did not stress appropriately – the importance of what Constant called “liberty of the moderns” and, by echoing him, Berlin called “negative liberty”. But he insists on the fact that, without those pre-conditions, liberty is simply mutilated. To some extent, Lasch seems to have a Stoic conception of it. In other words, the more I can restrain my appetites and desires, and thus be capable of guiding properly my actions, the more I am free to do good, moral, responsible choices. But Berlin, on that point, was lapidary: “Spiritual freedom, like moral victory, must be distinguished from a more fundamental sense of freedom, and a more ordinary sense of victory, otherwise there will be a danger of confusion in theory and justification of oppression in practice, in the name of liberty itself. There is a clear sense in which to teach a man that, if he cannot get what he wants, he must learn to want only what he can get, may contribute to his happiness or his security; but it will not increase his civil or political freedom. The sense of freedom in which I use this term entails not simply the absence of frustration (which may be obtained by killing desires), but the absence of obstacles to possible choices and activities - absence of obstructions on roads along which a man can decide to walk. Such freedom ultimately depends not on whether I wish to walk at all, or how far, but on how many doors are open, how open they are, upon their relative importance in my life, even though it may be impossible literally to measure this in any quantitative fashion. The extent of my social or political freedom consists in the absence of obstacles not merely to my actual, but to my potential, choices - to my acting in this or that way if I choose to do so. Similarly absence of such freedom is due to the closing of such doors or failure to open them, as a result, intended or unintended, of alterable human practices, of the operation of human agencies; although only if such acts are deliberately intended (or, perhaps, are accompanied by awareness that they may block paths) will they be liable to be called oppression. Unless this is conceded, the Stoic conception of liberty ('true' freedom - the state of the morally autonomous slave), which is compatible with a very high degree of political despotism, will merely confuse the issue.”, I. Berlin, *Introduction to Five Essays on Liberty*, in Id, *Liberty*, cit., p. 32.

way of analysis, followed for example by José Ortega y Gasset<sup>412</sup>. The second way of inquiry, which Lasch tended to use, is focused instead on the explanation why “the homogenized mass culture of modern societies gives rise not to enlightenment and independent thinking but to intellectual passivity”<sup>413</sup>. The former, in essence, the traditionally conservative one, considered that the masses had overthrown the power of the elites and; the latter, instead, considered that the people continued to be subjected by elites thanks to the growing connection between political, economic and cultural power. Actually, to a watchful eye, Lasch stayed in the middle of the two analyses. On the one hand, his perspective was radical because he saw how the progressive elites had maintained power by dominating the people by cultural, economic and cultural means: capitalism would have become the lever, the therapeutic lever by which replacing the moral and real order of the common people with a new one, based on standardization, cultural conformism and the creation of induced wants. On the other hand, and in opposition to radical analysis and similarly, instead, to the conservative one, Lasch conceived traditional bonds and local rootedness as bulwarks of a human scale society based on a limited, and not liberationist, and real, not idealistic, conception of freedom. Cultural homogenization and conformism could

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<sup>412</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), W.W. Norton & Co, New York, 1957.

<sup>413</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Mass Culture Reconsidered*, cit., pp. 9-10. In doing this, Lasch used some works such as M. Horkheimer, *Art and Mass Culture*, “Studies in Philosophy and Social Science”, 9, 1941, pp. 290-304; D. Macdonald, *A Theory of Popular Culture*, “Politics”, 1, February 1944, pp. 20-23; M. Horkheimer, Th.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cit.; Irving Howe, *Notes on Mass Culture*, “Politics”, 5 (spring 1948): 120-23; L. Lowenthal, *Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture*, “American Journal of Sociology”, 55, 1950, pp. 323-332; D. Macdonald, *A Theory of Mass Culture*, “Diogenes”, 3, Summer 1953, pp. 1- 17.

only be contrasted by a rooted society, a society with multiple and various authorities, with a strenuous respect for continuity, stability and past, a society which resisted to assimilation, uprooting and modernization<sup>414</sup>. As Tocqueville had said, if there is no longer something between individuals and the power of the centre, a despotism would have risen: “The weakening of almost every form of spontaneous popular association does not destroy the desire for association. Uprootedness uproots everything except the need for roots.”<sup>415</sup>. Lasch thought, with Simone Weil, that “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”<sup>416</sup>. “The first of the soul’s needs, the one which touches most nearly its eternal destiny, is order; that is to say, a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones”<sup>417</sup>. And that order spontaneously derives from natural associations the persons belong to: “human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural

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<sup>414</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>416</sup> S. Weil, *The Need for Roots*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

part”<sup>418</sup>. If these natural and multiple roots were destructed, just by the uprooting and modernizing forces the left by then was stimulating, Lasch wrote, by quoting Weil, there would be remained nothing “apart from the State, to which loyalty can cling”<sup>419</sup>.

In the second number of the second year of activities of “democracy”, Lasch dedicated a short essay in reply to a critique, published in the same issue, that his previous article on mass culture had received. The sociologist Herbert Gans, in fact, opposed to the radical-conservative vision described by Lasch a classical left-egalitarian perspective<sup>420</sup>. Gans thought that left should be devoted to the absolute elimination of all forms of inequalities: economic, political, social, sexual and racist ones. Gans’ idea was that modernization remains a crucial and positive process of enlightening the masses, by liberating them from some form of rural idiocy hopelessly reactionism. Gans, moreover, missed a crucial point in Lasch’s essay, as Lasch himself stated. Indeed, Lasch would have not sustained at all that the remedy was to create a society exclusively composed by intellectuals: “I can’t imagine a less attractive prospect than a society made up of intellectuals”<sup>421</sup>. His point was not that mass culture was not high enough, namely an intellectual culture of sort. Rather, it was the very idea of intellectual culture to be discarded. In fact, intellectuals, as he emphasized in many occasions, constituted by then a sort of enlightened class that was detached from

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<sup>418</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 123.

<sup>420</sup> H. Gans, *Culture, Community and Equality*, in “democracy”, 2, April 1982, pp. 81-87.

<sup>421</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Popular Culture and the Illusion of Choice*, “democracy”, 2 April 1982, p. 88.

reality and from the concrete people: instead of recognizing a moral and cultural order, rooted in place and in traditions, which existed before them, they aimed at replacing it with a new, artificial one based on what they deemed right and appropriate. For this very reason, Lasch considered a radical decentralization, based on local autonomous and traditionally rooted communities the best option for the future<sup>422</sup>. Such a perspective, as it is clear, was at odds with the liberal one, which, as he pointed out in a brief article published in the third number of 1982, just asked for an uprooted vision, based on a morally neutral ethic which could not speak of any binding commitment<sup>423</sup>. As Lasch would have put in his essay *The Culture of Narcissism Revisited* (1990), included the year after in the afterword of the paperback edition of *The Culture of Narcissism*, “The best defenses against the terrors of existence are the homely comforts of love, work, and family life, which connect us to a world that is independent of our wishes yet responsive to our needs”<sup>424</sup>. What it was needed, Lasch thought, was “the moral realism that makes it possible for human beings to come to terms with existential constraints on their power and freedom”<sup>425</sup>. A moral realism that could be nurtured only in a locally and decentralised manner, by rootedness and common traditions.

In his last contribution<sup>426</sup>, published in the first number of the last year of activities of “democracy”, in 1983, insisted on the topic of the

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<sup>422</sup> *Ibidem.* p. 92.

<sup>423</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Prospects for Social Democracy*, “democracy”, 3, July 1982, pp. 28-32.

<sup>424</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism Revisited*, cit., p. 248.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 249.

<sup>426</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Doris Lessing and the Technology of Survival*, “democracy”, 1, February 1983, pp. 28-36.

psychological survival in threatening and troubled times: a theme which would have been the following year the core of *The Minimal Self*. According to Lasch, the writer Doris Lessing was the typical character, a liberal one, who, because of the menaces of the times, nuclear, climatic and so forth, the best option consisted in being free of burdens: the family, the past, cultural heritage, friends. “Survivors, after all, – Lasch wrote – have to learn to travel light”<sup>427</sup>. This strategy, that Lasch would have called “Shedding It All: The Spiritual Discipline of Survival”<sup>428</sup>, was however judged by him wrong. According to Lasch, only by having those communitarian and fraternal bonds a person could have survived. It is by them, after all, Lasch thought, that it can be fostered hope, by leaving despair and resignation, typical attitudes of uprooted people, behind.

### ***2.3 A Cultural Step Towards What? Christopher Lasch Between Radicalism, Populism and Cultural Conservatism.***

In 1980, Lasch had written an article about a thinker, Lewis Mumford, who influenced a lot his crossing ideas about radicalism and cultural conservatism<sup>429</sup>. Mumford, Lasch wrote, had dealt with the human condition as it truly is: a precarious and fragile one. But in a democratic society, fragile men united locally and in a decentralist way

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<sup>427</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

<sup>429</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Lewis Mumford and the Myth of the Machine*, cit. See the following Mumford's books: *Technics and Civilization* (1934), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010; *The Condition of Man*, Harcourt Brace, San Diego, 1944; *The Conduct of Life* (1951), Mariner Books, Boston, 1960; *In Name of Sanity*, Harcourt Brace, 1954; *The Myth of the Machine* (1967-1970), Harcourt Brace, San Diego, (two volumes). About him see also the following essay published in “democracy”: C. Blake, *Lewis Mumford: Values over Technique*, “democracy”, 1, February 1983, pp. 125-137.

together in order to self-govern. At the same time, he noticed that the spread of scientific world, the growth of the state and bureaucracy, the development of technology and the emergence of a new capitalist elite were emerging. What was formed, then, was something never experienced before. A “megamachine” which was made of political, cultural and economic elites. By means of the power of the Leviathan and the development of the techno-industrial machinery, a new absolute power, much mightier and more pervasive than in the past, could guide common men which, at the same time, had become more individualist, without strong bonds and without faith, the only checks to it. The idolatry of technological power had replaced the cooperation between imperfect men, religious sentiment was replaced by human power over nature, a tragic sense of life was replaced by the belief in progress. All of these elements, Mumford thought, had been nurtured by liberalism. And Mumford, Lasch noted, argued for a radical and conservative awaken: radical in its critique towards the modern world; conservative in its traditional and common life commitments. Human being was replaced by the machine-man: in essence, Mumford struggled for a return to a more human scale society. In the “Lasch Papers Archive”, moreover, I found a Mumford’s paper about nationalism and regionalism<sup>430</sup>. In such an article, which was hugely underlined and commented by Lasch, Mumford argued that the only strong and possible reaction to the growing centralizing power of national state could have been a regional reaction. “Regionalism”, it can be read, “emphasizes the corporate unity and the

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<sup>430</sup> L. Mumford, *Nationalism or Culturism? A Search for the True Community*, “The Menorah Journal”, vol. III, 3, June 1922: Lasch Papers, Box 48, Folder 14.

independence of the local community, focused on its local capitals, as opposed to the unity which is supposed to exist within the frequently imaginary boundaries of the State”<sup>431</sup>. Mumford considered the modern national state, huge in dimension and centralized in power, as an insurmountable obstacle to the cultivation of values of a true community. A common culture of a true community, which he called “culturism”, “is rooted in the integrity of the local community”: within it would have been possible to cultivate “its common meeting places, its common literature, its common leaders and intellectuals”<sup>432</sup>. In sum, a regional perspective could have developed a “cultural integrity”<sup>433</sup>. However, in contrast with the culture promoted in a national, centralized state, made of what he called “fake communities”, the “real communities” are constituted by diversity, and not uniformity, instead of a single aim there are a multiplicity of them, instead of a rigid, rational and centralistic order there is the possibility of a flexible adjustment<sup>434</sup>. In essence, Mumford described the outline of a humane scale order, constituted by true, because of its concreteness and rootedness in localism, communities: a federal order made of decentralised pluralistic communities<sup>435</sup>. This was precisely what Lasch was looking to.

Indeed, as Mumford did, he criticized not only the very concept of a centralized power, opposing a radical conception of decentralisation to it: in an essay he explicitly wrote, quite in a libertarian tone that would

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<sup>431</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 137.



have not disliked Murray Rothbard<sup>436</sup>, “a society in working order has to be largely self-policing and to a considerable extent self-schooling as well”<sup>437</sup>. But he was looking to forms of associations which could have allowed people to live in a true democratic way, namely by the everyday life exercise of self-government, and not according to rationalistic, therapeutic, artificial plan engineered by uprooted elites. In essence, what Lasch considered populism was exactly an ethos or a sensibility that could be nurtured only in small-scale societies, united by a common culture, and strengthened by the responsibility everyone should have acquired day by day. What Lasch feared was a centralizing political, economic and cultural Leviathan that by its tutelary and therapeutic power could have made independent and self-governed people dependent upon it, namely a proletary herd. In opposition to the modernizing and “proletarianizing” tendencies of his time, the liberationist and progressive project, Lasch considered the rediscovery of roots, traditions, and common life the crucial levers by which a sense of independence could be awakened again<sup>438</sup>. “Independence”, Lasch wrote in a later essay, “was the populist watchword. Populists regarded self-reliance (which of course does not preclude cooperation in civic and economic life) as the essence of democracy, a virtue that never went out of demand. Their quarrel with large-scale production and political centralization was that they

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<sup>436</sup> It is not just a case if Rothbard in an article quoted favourably Lasch about the sociologist’s critique towards the growing separation between “arrogant liberal intellectual elite” and the common people: see M. Rothbard, *Egalitarianism and the Elite*, “The Review of Austrian Economics”, vol. 8, n. 2, pp. 39-57. It must be noted, besides, that Lasch and Rothbard shared the participation to the journal “Telos”, which around his maverick director, Paul Piccone, assembled plenty of different and anti-conformist personalities.

<sup>437</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Fragility of Liberalism*, “Salmagundi”, n. 92, Fall 1991, p. 14.

<sup>438</sup> See E. Lasch-Quinn, *Introduction* to Ch. Lasch, *Women and the Common Life*, cit.

weakened the spirit of self-reliance and discouraged people from taking responsibility for their actions”<sup>439</sup>. Independent persons meant to Lasch, in other words, the only appropriate people of a true and concrete democracy.

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<sup>439</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Reply to Jeffrey Isaac*, cit., p. 102.

### **Chapter 3 - Society as the Patient. Christopher Lasch, the New Paternalism and the Populist Sensibility in the Eighties.**

A society in working order has to be largely self-educating, self-servicing, self-policing. It has to be quite literally able to take care of itself.

Christopher Lasch<sup>440</sup>

In this chapter, I will consider some crucial themes in Lasch's intellectual development and political thought. The family, as we have already stated, was considered by Lasch the very basis of democracy. By means of it, to a certain extent, individuals learn to act as moral agents, that is to say to develop those inner resources that let them be capable of doing choices and maturing those responsibilities linked to them. Lasch, therefore, deemed the erosion of the family as a very perilous phenomenon, since it contributed to the crisis of self-government and the right exercise of liberty, self-reliance and inner-direction: "The nuclear family provided the child with the emotional security he needs in order to grow up"<sup>441</sup>.

Moreover, the crisis of the family and its authority opened the space, and a huge one indeed, for new artificial and top-down powers, such as new paternalisms based on therapeutic culture. The family, in fact, was considered by progressives as a backward-looking and obsolete institution, full of prejudices and irrationality: "Almost everyone agreed

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<sup>440</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Society as the Patient*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>441</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Future of the Family*, cit., p. 2.

that the family promoted a narrow, parochial, selfish, and individualistic mentality and thus impeded the development of sociability and cooperation”<sup>442</sup>. The rationalizing project of elites, however, does not consider that moral ideals are a “sediment”, quoting Michael Oakeshott, “suspended in a religious or social tradition”<sup>443</sup> that the family contributes to transmit to the new generations: without that institution, individual becomes a “narcissist”, in the sense gave by Lasch, namely an agent incapable of becoming a moral, responsible agent, lacking his anthropological fundamental structure of acquiring the capacity of morality: “First, we do our best to destroy parental authority (because of its alleged abuse), then we sentimentally deplore the scarcity of ‘good homes’, and we end by creating substitutes which complete the work of destruction. And it is for this reason that (...) we have the spectacle of a set of sanctimonious, rationalist politicians” that do “their best to destroy the only living root of moral behaviour”<sup>444</sup>: rationalists, in their desperate and starving aim to substitute traditions with the rationalization of the whole human life erode the very sources of morality and self-government.

In the third part, I will deal with Lasch’s relationship with the journal “Telos” and its director and founder, Paul Piccone, a friend of Lasch. Lasch, Piccone and “Telos”, even though with some differences, shared almost the same cultural trajectory. From original cultural positions connected with the New Left, they shifted, pushed by reality

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<sup>442</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>443</sup> M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

and historical development, to a peculiar cultural position, which they called populism<sup>445</sup>: a sort of third way between liberalism and mainstream conservatism, made of radicalism and cultural conservatism, political decentralization and defence of local, cultural traditions in order to revitalize the Jeffersonian tradition of self-government.

### ***3.1 The Erosion of the Family and Its Consequences.***

The family was not simply a research interest or an institution among others, in Lasch's opinion. It was the first and fundamental pivot of a society: better, it constituted its very moral framework<sup>446</sup>. The family teaches stability and discipline: it transmits the young the need "for love or to make close and lasting ties as an adult"<sup>447</sup>. It was impossible to think, according to Lasch, to replace its moral authority with some artificial, rationalistic power from above. The family could not be replaced without creating some deep psychological and moral troubles. "For the fact – Lasch believed – is that families perform indispensable services that cannot be entrusted to other agencies without endangering society. It trains self-reliance, the basis of democratic citizenship, and it

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<sup>445</sup> Actually, Piccone provided several labels for it, but the substance remained the same: "federal populism", "populist federalism", "postmodern populism", see for instance P. Piccone, *The Crisis of Liberalism and the Emergence of Federal Populism*, "Telos", 89, Fall 1991, pp. 7-44; *Postmodern Populism*, cit.; *Interview*, "Telos", 117, Fall 1999, pp. 133-166.

<sup>446</sup> Due to Lasch's essential interest in the theme of the family, someone even called him "family man": A.J. Bacevich, *Family Man* (2010), in *Twilight of the American Century*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2018, pp. 138-147. In an interview to the popular magazine "People", after the publication of *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., Lasch remarked how the family, his own family was central in his own life, B. Rowes, *Gratification Now Is the Slogan of the '70s, Laments a Historian*, cit.

<sup>447</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Future of the Family*, cit., p. 3.

helps to protect the interest of the individual against the state. Instead of reforming the family, as so many radicals misguidedly propose, we need to take the more radical step of reforming the institutional pressures that now threaten to destroy the family”<sup>448</sup>.

In 1977 Lasch published his book on the family which, even though it continues nowadays not to be the most considered among his books, was deemed by its author the most important and the most complex to conclude as well<sup>449</sup>. Together with the critique of liberalism, the family was the most Laschian theme<sup>450</sup>. The family could link the generations, namely the past, the present and the future as a historical continuity based on stability. If the past, Lasch observed, was so much scorned, after the students’ revolt of the Sixties, that was also, or maybe mainly imputable to the attack towards the family, conceived as the most authoritarian institution ever existed<sup>451</sup>. In a letter dated March 1981, Lasch explained how the family and parental authority were crucial for democracy itself. In fact, that institution theoretically provided the personal equipment for exercising an adult and responsible freedom, which is, and could not be

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<sup>448</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>449</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, cit., p. 1320.

<sup>450</sup> As a matter of fact, many of his essays had as focus precisely the family, for instance: Ch. Lasch, *The Emotions of Family Life*, cit.; *What the Doctor Ordered*, cit.; *The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World*, cit.; *The Waning of Private Life*, in “Salmagundi”, n. 36, Winter 1977, pp. 3-15; *Authority and the Family—I: Permissiveness, and Growing State Control*, cit.; *Authority and the Family—II: Controlling Society a New Way*, cit.; *The Siege of the Family*, cit.; *Family and Authority*, in B. Richards (ed.), *Capitalism and Infancy: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Politics*, Humanities Press Atlantic Highlands, 1984, pp. 22-37. And contributions to conferences as well: *The Nuclear Family and Its Critics*, cit.; *The State of the Family*, cit.; *Individualism and Intimacy: The Critique of the Patriarchal Family*, cit.; *The Family and Its Friends*, cit.

<sup>451</sup> In the preface of *The Culture of Narcissism* he wrote as follows: “the devaluation of the past has become one of the most important symptoms of the cultural crisis to which this book addresses itself, often drawing on historical experience to explain what is wrong with our present arrangements. A denial of the past, superficially progressive and optimistic, proves on closer analysis”, *ibidem*, p. XVIII.

otherwise, necessarily limited. In other words, the family is the prerequisite for developing an inner-directed and independent personality: if this training institution is invaded by external forces and it is no longer capable of such a role, the young is likely to develop dependence, rather than independence, in perennial waiting for the surrogates of the family to tell what to do<sup>452</sup>. The result would be, therefore, a mortal wound to the very inner structure of human beings, to the detriment of democracy itself, which is based on self-government: the erosion of the family, and in general of authority, of natural and bottom-up authority, “could be expected to have important effects on personality, the most disturbing of which would presumably be a weakening of the capacity for independent judgment, initiative, and self-discipline, on which democracy had always been understood to depend”<sup>453</sup>.

According to Lasch, the family, “as the chief agency of socialization”, provided the basic cultural structure of the young: “it not only imparts ethical norms”, by parental teachings, but rather “it profoundly shapes his character”<sup>454</sup>. Among the many institutions that exist, the family, moreover, “is the most resistant to change”<sup>455</sup>. As a matter fact, by means of it a sense of continuity and stability is perpetuated. If rationality and self-control are crucial elements, Lasch thought, by appreciating Riesman’s exposition of the inner-directed individual, the family, however, helps to cultivate specific rooted loyalties and obligations, which are in strong antithesis to political,

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<sup>452</sup> Ch. Lasch to Jean (Bethke Elshtain), 19 March 1981, cit., p. 3.

<sup>453</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 31.

<sup>454</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

cultural, and economic attempts of centralizing projects. As he wrote later, at the beginnings of *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), “my study of the family suggested a broader conclusion: that the capacity for loyalty is stretched too thin when it tries to attach itself to the hypothetical solidarity of the whole human race. It needs – Lasch continued – to attach itself to specific people and places, not to an abstract ideal of universal human rights”<sup>456</sup>. Lasch, as it should be clear, did not mean to indicate the family as a real “haven in a heartless world”<sup>457</sup>. Unfortunately, in the human world, made of imperfection, limitedness and crookedness, it cannot exist a total secure haven from a threatening reality. However, Lasch thought, it remains the strongest check to the Leviathan and bureaucratic expansion as well to the consequential cultural conformism and general apathy that tended to grow<sup>458</sup>.

As such, the theme of the family was, in Lasch’s opinion, a primarily moral matter: from its solidity and strength it derives directly the preservation of democracy. For most Americans, and in particular for what Lasch called the “Middle America” of the common, ordinary individuals, “family life continues to represent a stabilizing influence and

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<sup>456</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>457</sup> A consumption ethic, he thought, consumed an ethic hinged on affection and strong, long-term commitments: “As the world grows more menacing and insecure and the family fails to offer protection from external dangers, all forms of loyalty become increasingly attenuated”, Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless world*, cit., p. XXIV. See the whole introduction to Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless world*, cit., pp. XIX-XXIV. See moreover Ch. Lasch, *The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World*, cit.

<sup>458</sup> Actually, Lasch feared a lot the growing union of statism and capitalism. The family risked, according to him, to be consumed by their complementary powers. Their mixture nurtured more and more individuals who became then dependent on those powers and more apathic: “The family, drained of the emotional intensity that formerly characterized domestic relations, socialized the young into the easygoing, lowkeyed encounters that predominate in the outside world as well”, Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a heartless world*, cit., p. XXIII. That is quite similar to what Tocqueville argued in his masterpiece about apathy as the key leading both to despotism or anarchy: A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, cit., vol II, p. 1294.



a source of personal discipline in a world where personal disintegration remains always an imminent danger”<sup>459</sup>. But for the elite, in particular liberal elite, family was just the expression of a past to be removed and overcome: the family oppressed the liberty of individuals<sup>460</sup>. They were not conscious, because of their ideological blindness, about the moral crucial role exercised by the family. On the contrary, conservatives, Lasch argued, were blind from the economic point of view. Capitalism, or the market, was for Lasch one of the main problems of the erosion of the institution of the family<sup>461</sup>. In fact, the former is based on change and radical instability, whereas the latter hinges on stability and affection: therefore, the market jeopardized the very meaning of the family, as source of stability, continuity and perpetuity of traditions. Conservatives, according to Lasch, were in the right direction by struggling for the preservation of the family. However, they were incapable of deriving the consequences of that premise: that market, at least a large-scale market, was not compatible with the family and the structure of a good, stable and well-structured society as Lasch conceived it<sup>462</sup>. Its emphasis on change and short-term commitments, namely desires to be satisfied, eroded the very element which characterized the family: consumption replaces affection, according to a strictly-speaking economic point of view<sup>463</sup>.

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<sup>459</sup> Ch. Lasch *The Family and Its Friends*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibidem*, p.

<sup>461</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Invasion of the Family by the Market*, “World & I”, November 1990, pp. 479-89; Ch. Lasch, *Capitalism Itself Corrupts*, cit.

<sup>462</sup> See for example P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., p. 125.

<sup>463</sup> He spoke briefly of it in the paperback edition of *Haven*. He wrote that some conservative observers, by reviewing the book, appreciated his arguments but did not fully understand their implications, namely the substitution of a large-scale market with a small-scale one: Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. XIII. His main reference was to G. Gilder, *The Therapeutic State*, “National Review”, 17 February

However, as we have said, Lasch partially agreed with conservatives, at least because they understood that the family was not the enemy of a good society, but rather the most important friend of it. For that very reason, his main critical point of reference was the liberal part<sup>464</sup>. Indeed, liberalism, according to Lasch's interpretation, tried since the nineteenth century to substitute the family with artificial, external forces. The history of modern society could be even considered, according to Lasch, as "the assertion of social control over activities once left to individuals or their families"<sup>465</sup>. By the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism, then, the family started to be included in big industrial organization, with the consequence of losing its autonomy and independence. As a matter of fact, Lasch argued, they were "proletarianized"<sup>466</sup>, in the sense that cultural development of progressivism, social science and pedagogy deemed the family incapable of absolving its role of educator: parochialism, prejudices, religious sentiment, traditional values were to be replaced with universalism, humanitarianism, belief in science and enlightened values. Education should have been by then a task of those who were "enlightened" about the true direction to give to the children, the future of a rationalized and planned society<sup>467</sup>.

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1978, pp. 221-222 (Lasch Papers, Box 17, Folder 52). Other reviews are included in the same box and same folder.

<sup>464</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. XIII-XIV.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XX.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 12-21.

<sup>467</sup> On that point, it is interesting to report a thought of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a progressive sociologist who wrote, in 1903, as follows: "There is no more brilliant hope on earth today than this new thought about the child (...) children as a class, children as citizens with rights to be guaranteed only by the state; instead of our previous attitude toward them of absolute personal ownership – the unchecked tyranny, or as unchecked

In general, Lasch thought, the process of rationalization of human existence had a more remote origin. Liberalism, in fact, was an heir of the Enlightenment and from that powerful intellectual source it derives an elitist perspective to be opposed to the point of view of the common people and ordinary folks. An enlightened vision, therefore, by the cultural effort of progressive elites, had replaced reason to tradition, science to religion, power of the state to the authority of particular, spontaneous and bottom-up loyalties. As such, liberalism was for Lasch at odds with the family. Its vision was made of abstract and rationalized individuals, rather than specific and tradition-rooted individuals; in antithesis to religion as foundation and source of relief for the humble and precarious human condition it put science as machine of an unlimited and endless progress; the contract and the ideology of nonbinding commitments substituted obligations and bonds of natural affect. All that, he thought, could open the door of the worst despotism imaginable, because not based on corporal punishment and violent harshness, but on a therapeutic paternalism. He could write then, in a letter of the end of 1981, “liberalism’s difficulty in explaining how an institution based on particularistic and affective principles can prepare people for life in a universalistic, instrumental society is probably one of the things that pulls liberalism against its own inclination toward collectivist solutions”<sup>468</sup>. In other words, particularistic, rooted and spontaneous forms of affection

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indulgence, of the private home”, *ibidem*, p. 14 (Lasch’s quotation is from Ch. Perkins Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, New York, 1903).

<sup>468</sup> Ch. Lasch to Jean (Bethke Elshtain), 7 December 1981, cit.

and devotion lacking, an artificial and all-pervading power would emerge by oppressing society in much worse way.

That was the heritage, as we have already spoken of, of Jeremy Bentham. As he wrote in a worksheet, dated 1981, he considered liberalism as essentially divided in two antithetical tendencies: the first which saw society from bottom-up, the second from a top-down perspective<sup>469</sup>. According to Lasch, the true liberalism was the Jeffersonian and populist one. The other, however, was the type of liberalism that took roots among elites because it gave power to them, which was called by Lasch “Whig-progressive-philanthropic”. It was the project of Bentham, and before him, of Descartes and Bacon, of building a better society, without considering human beings as living creatures, but rather as manipulable objects. This type of liberalism, made of rationalism and progressivism, according to Lasch, triggered the invasion of the family by its substitution with the helping professions and the state. That created the basis for replacing self-control and inner-direction based on tradition, the “superego”, with the “superstate”<sup>470</sup>. As Lasch wrote at the end of *Haven in a Heartless World*, “Today the state controls not merely the individual’s body but as much of his spirit as it can pre-empt: not merely his outer but his inner life as well; not merely the public realm but the darkest corners of private life, formerly inaccessible to political domination. The citizen’s entire existence has now been subjected to

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<sup>469</sup> Lasch Papers, Box 34, Folder 11. The worksheet was conceived as a sort of conceptual map for developing a book on the history of liberalism: that would have opposed two opposite perspectives on society and human beings, one more humble, the Jeffersonian, based on self-government, the other, made of hybris, based on the realization of an enlightened project of radical modernization of human world.

<sup>470</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 189.

social direction, increasingly unmediated by the family (...). Society itself has taken over socialization or subjected family socialization to increasingly effective control. Having thereby weakened the capacity for self-direction and self-control – Lasch warned – it has undermined one of the principal sources of social cohesion, only to create new ones more constricting than the old, and ultimately more devastating in their impact on personal and political freedom”<sup>471</sup>.

### ***3.2 The New Paternalism and the Therapeutic State.***

The family, as we have seen, was considered by Lasch a crucial lever by which inner sources, self-control and self-discipline could be developed<sup>472</sup>. In the face of the liberal revolt against the family, Lasch argued, it is important instead to stress the value of family constraints because they allow “a full understanding of freedom itself, one that gives beyond the equation of freedom with unlimited choice and ‘nonbinding commitments’”<sup>473</sup>. However, the right understanding of the human condition and its limited freedom or, by said in other words, of individuality and selfhood conceived as “tension, division, conflict”<sup>474</sup>, was eroded by the invasion of the institution. A natural system of

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<sup>471</sup> *Ibidem*. About it, see also a manuscript entitled *Social Cohesion and Culture: Mechanisms of Social Control and Cohesion*, without no date but referable probably to the second half of seventies, in which Lasch argued how an authority considered as legitimate managed to obtain obligation and loyalty, whereas an artificial power could not, but it compensated that lack with manipulation and appeal to presumed scientific facts: Lasch Papers, Box 48, Folder 27.

<sup>472</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Why the Left Has No Future*, cit.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>474</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 258. See also Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism Revisited*, cit.

internalizing constraints and checks to individual expansion was replaced by a rationalized and artificial system. But it could not be as much effective as the family system. Indeed, the family provided a full understanding of human condition as a limited and ambivalent one: life, in other words, can be described in a dialectical way, so that there could not be love without discipline, liberty without sense of limits, joy without pain, harmony without conflict, good without evil<sup>475</sup>. Human life and the reality in which it lies, could not be read in a monistic manner, Lasch thought<sup>476</sup>: the family provided therefore the moral sources for interpreting it as a conversation of opposed poles and conflicting elements that it necessarily included.

On the contrary, the erosion and substitution of such a traditional, because it emerges from bottom-up in the everyday life, system of constraints expunged the possibility of maturing the moral sense typical of human beings<sup>477</sup>. Inner-direction, in fact, presupposes the direct and concrete discovery of moral sense: it can be acquired only personally and during the difficulties of life itself. Liberty and freedom of choice, in other words, must be integrated in a psychological and cultural structure that can be nurtured just by a direct, active experience of the actor. If some specialists replace the family as key actor of such a training, the individual will be a half-individual, because his characteristics will be

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<sup>475</sup> See for example Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>476</sup> See J. Bethke Elshtain, *Limits and Hope: Christopher Lasch and Political Theory*, "Social Research", vol. 66, n. 2, Summer 1999, pp. 531-543.

<sup>477</sup> See for instance Ch. Lasch, *Moral Choices in Society: Family and Morality*, "Daily News", Bowling Green, Kentucky, 6 February 1977, pp. 28-29 (Lasch Papers, Box 17, Folder 13). The article was requested by the sociologist Philip Rieff, who edited a series of articles on the topic: see the correspondence between Rieff and Lasch, 13 January-16 January 1976, Lasch Papers, Box 17, Folder 13.

much more similar to other-directed rather than inner-directed, sustained by traditions, subject<sup>478</sup>. The liberal elite, the one ascribable to what Lasch called the “Whig-progressive-philanthropic” perspective of liberalism, adopted, however, precisely such a scheme of rationalized morality: a capillary, but mild, system of moral supervision had to replace the traditional, natural familiar morality that everyone experienced in the everyday life, since it was by then reputed obsolete, nostalgic, anti-enlightened. That was the origin of the “therapeutic state”<sup>479</sup>.

In particular, thanks to the influence of Philip Rieff’s works<sup>480</sup>, Lasch came to understand how every culture and society needs a symbolic centre, that is to say a system of controls, checks and constraints that gives cohesion, unity and a certain degree of self-control to a particular cultural group. The traditional symbolic centre, at least until the nineteenth century, was the church and religion. But after the Enlightenment and the development of science, the legislative hall took their place and then it was the moment, towards the end of that century, of the hospital. In sum, religion was replaced by politics, which, subsequently, was replaced by science, medicine and a therapeutic conception of society. An orthopaedic-pedagogic way of looking to

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<sup>478</sup> See for instance, Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., pp. 89-90.

<sup>479</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Early Nineteenth-Century Humanitarianism and the Origins of the Therapeutic State*, cit. That manuscript was originally proposed to two reviews, “The New England Quarterly” and the “American Quarterly”. However, it was not accepted because it was deemed too vague: correspondence 2 May 1983-26 August 1983, Lasch Papers, Box 24, Folder 2. According to Lasch, instead, it should have served as a starting point for three-volume history of liberalism. The problem, for Lasch, consisted in the fact that liberalism followed the wrong path, namely, as noble heir of Enlightenment, it tried to pursue a modernizing, “centrist”, rationalistic project for re-building society from top-down. About that, see P. Gottfried, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State*, Princeton University Press, 1999. In the volume Gottfried, which quoted repeatedly Lasch, provided a better historical framework for understanding the rising of the therapeutic state.

<sup>480</sup> The main reference is to Ph. Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, cit.

culture was assumed by liberalism, a new ideology of paternal and therapeutic authority. The result was the development of an intrusive and capillary power over society: “the apparatus of mass tuition – the successor to the church in a secularized society – undermined the family’s capacity to provide for itself and thereby justified the continuing expansion of health, education, and wealth services”<sup>481</sup>. State’s powers were then conceived as “surrogate parent” and the children were “children of the state”<sup>482</sup>. A humble conception of politics, conceived by Pope Jean Paul II as “prudent concern for the common good”<sup>483</sup>, or, by quoting another figure which Lasch appreciated a lot, Alasdair MacIntyre, as ordinary practice towards the cultivation of self-excellence<sup>484</sup>, was substituted by a therapeutic technic for creating an enlightened society devoid of conflicts<sup>485</sup>. Society was conceived, in other words, as a sick organism that needed to be straightened. It was

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<sup>481</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16. Lasch emphasized the concept by quoting a thought a nineteenth-century typical progressive thinker, Jenkin Lloyd Jones: “The state is but the coordinated parentage of childhood, yielding to the inexorable logic of civilization that will compel co-partnership, co-operation, corporate life and conscience”, *ibidem*. For Lasch, on the contrary, the state was the enemy of the family and of a “decentrist” social vision based on voluntary and spontaneous cooperation.

<sup>483</sup> Pope Jean Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 14 September 1981, 20, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html). Lasch came to be interested in the political thought of Karol Wojtyla by means of Dale Vree, the director of a review he contributed to, and he was much sympathetic to, during the second half of the eighties, “New Oxford Review”. See next chapter.

<sup>484</sup> See A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, cit. See Ch. Lasch to Sh. Wolin, 10 August 1981, cit. Two years after that letter, Lasch invited the philosopher to give a lecture at the University of Rochester, in date 21 March 1983: Ch. Lasch to A. MacIntyre, cit. In another letter, also dated 1983, Lasch wrote that he had already read three times the book: Ch. Lasch a Jack, 23 March 1983, cit.

<sup>485</sup> See for instance Ch. Lasch, *Democracy vs. Therapy*, “New York Review of Books”, 18 December 1980, pp. 67-68; Ch. Lasch, *The Mismeasure of Man*, in *Women and the Common Life*, cit., pp. 137-152, originally published in “New Republic”, 19 April 1993, pp. 30-35.



conceived as a “patient”<sup>486</sup> to be supervised and redressed by the help of the “progressive clergy”<sup>487</sup>: “Enlightened opinion now identified itself with the medicalization of society: the substitution of medical and psychiatric authority for the authority of parents, priests, and lawgivers, now condemned as representative of discredited authoritarian modes of discipline”<sup>488</sup>.

The old morality of good and evil, of right and wrong, was to be replaced by an impersonal, neutral, because based on “scientific facts”, and enlightened system which could have led to a-conflictual social relations<sup>489</sup>. “The new religion of health, though based on modern science and technology”, however, “was no more tolerant of other religions than was Christianity itself”<sup>490</sup>: “the medical mode of salvation, no less than its predecessors, asserted exclusive rights to virtue and truth”<sup>491</sup>. The difference, and not an unimportant one, was that new power was based on “scientific”, namely provable and demonstrable, truths. Moreover, this new type of authority was diffused by the state as well. As such, it did not accept any reactions or rivals: the new paternalism was therefore much worse of that Tocqueville had already spoken of<sup>492</sup>. The new

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<sup>486</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Society as the Patient*, cit. The text, in a revised form, was then published as an article: Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Poverty and the Culture of Compassion*, cit. See also Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., pp. 97-100.

<sup>487</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 169.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 169.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>492</sup> See previous chapter. In general, Lasch thought that the problem of his time was not referable to an unlimited individualism, as Tocqueville observed in his time. The problem of the new century, and a much more ominous one, was the total invasion of the privacy, therefore the impossibility of experiencing privatism. For this very reason, he argued, the trouble was not primarily the decline or collapse of freedom, but rather “the gradual weakening of its cultural and psychological foundations”: Ch. Lasch, Ch. Lasch, *1984: Are We There?*, cit., p. 62. In a letter, he wrote precisely that the problem

paternalism, therefore, aimed at making more and more dependent the individuals on its powers, but for their own sake, as a sign of benevolence<sup>493</sup>. The therapeutic mode of thought, by its very nature, nurtured a “therapeutic morality” which, in turn, “encourages a permanent suspension of moral sense”<sup>494</sup>. That was in antithesis, Lasch thought, to the very nature of democracy seen as self-government. The new paternalism rejected the idea that society is made of free and responsible individuals, in the sense that they are led to mature necessarily their inner self-government by making their own experiences and errors through personal experience. On the contrary, it conceived them as crooked creatures that, in order to be redeemed, they were to be straightened by a rationalistic therapy<sup>495</sup>.

According to Lasch, even the *Bill of Rights* (1791), the document which had to strenuously safeguard individual liberties could have not

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of his time was not the privatization, but rather the invasion of the private life: Ch. Lasch to Nick (Xenos), 20 July 1981 Lasch Papers, Box 6, Folder 10.

<sup>493</sup> If Lasch saw in Bentham’s vision the prodromes of a rationalistic and engineering perspective to be imposed on society, he considered in his century John Dewey, for whom he however entertained ambivalent sentiments, and his epigons the followers of such a Whig-progressive-philanthropic ideology. See also next chapter on this point.

<sup>494</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Bill of Rights and the Therapeutic State*, cit., p. 197. The essay was actually composed of two previous essays. The first was conceived as a review to D. Rothman, I. Glasser, S. Marcus, W. Gaylin, *Doing Good: The Limits of Benevolence*, Pantheon, New York, 1978 for the publication in the number of March-April 1979 of the “Civil Liberties Review”, but because of some financial problems it was not published: see letter from S. Salisbury to Ch. Lasch, 17 January 1979, cit. The second was conceived for the magazine “Inquiry” as a review, never published per se, to I. Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, New York, Pantheon, 1978: letter from R. Raico to Ch. Lasch, 9 December 1977, Lasch Papers, Box 16, Folder 3.

<sup>495</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., pp. 222-224. On that point, it is important to underline how Lasch deemed dangerous the influence of Th. Adorno et al, *The Authoritarian Personality*, cit. Such a book contributed to diffuse the idea, among liberal elites, that the family was authoritarian and was to be replaced by some form of enlightened authority. The result, however, was for Lasch ruinous: “the reestablishment of political despotism in a form based not on the family but on its dissolution. Instead of liberating the individual from external coercion, the decay of family life subjects him to new forms of domination, while at the same time weakening his ability to resist them”, Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 91.

resisted the force of such a new paternalism. The men who drew up it thought of the menacing forces of governments which “always tend to aggrandize their own power at the expense of the rights of citizens”<sup>496</sup>. But if “all agreed on the inevitability of an adversary relation between the people and the state”, “they could not have foreseen the rise of a new kind of state that claims to understand the citizens’ needs better than the citizens themselves understand them and that justifies its increasingly intrusive intervention in their lives in the name of medical authority”<sup>497</sup>. Such a new paternalism, in fact, could take roots by becoming more and more intrusive and capillary in the everyday-life individuals. Its very foundation, based on the mixture of state’ and corporate capitalism’s powers, let individuals’ resistance to it make increasingly difficult. But for Lasch the hope was still there. His conception of democracy as self-government, a social order that moves from bottom-up by means of localism, rootedness in places and traditions, and a horizontal, even before than vertical, subsidiarity just need the rediscovery of a strong ethos for facing the therapeutic state. The cleavage of his time, he believed, lay precisely in a different, radically different way of conceiving society: either an independent society made of free and responsible individuals that moves from bottom-up, or a machine dependent on the tutelary power of the new paternalism made of servile minds.

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<sup>496</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Bill of Rights and the Therapeutic State*, cit., p. 195.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibidem*. See also Ch. Lasch, *Life in the Therapeutic State*, cit.; *On Medicalization and the Triumph of the Therapeutic*, cit.

### **3.3 Christopher Lasch, Paul Piccone and “Telos”: Populism, Federalism and the “New Class”.**

Starting from all we have just spoken of, Lasch’s interest in populism is quite easy to explain. Indeed, “populist sensibility”<sup>498</sup> constituted the opposition to the “therapeutic sensibility”<sup>499</sup>. The former was anything but the result of the moral realism of ordinary people: the plain and common people that try every day to live their own life, supported by religious sentiment, communitarian rootedness and humble sense of limits<sup>500</sup>; the latter was, on the contrary, the result of the invasion of the family and of private life by the total rationalization of the elites in order to create a technocratic society managed by them<sup>501</sup>. Populism, whose interest can be traced since the earliest works of Lasch<sup>502</sup>, was not a political project, an ideology or a rationalistic plan to impose to whole society: on this point, Lasch himself argued several times its conceptual limits and its inability to provide efficient and universal answers to social, political, economic problems<sup>503</sup>. Rather, it was the democratic,

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<sup>498</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>499</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>500</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism Revisited*, cit.

<sup>501</sup> See what the British political philosopher Michael Oakeshott argued about the therapeutic state as a version of what he used to call “*universitas*”, namely “an association incorporated in terms of ‘enlightened’ conduct”: “Here, the state is understood to be an association of invalids, all victims of the same disease and incorporated in seeking relief from their common ailment; and the office of government is a remedial engagement. Rulers are *therapeutae*, the directors of a sanatorium from which no patient may discharge himself by a choice of his own”, *On Human Conduct* (1975), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 197, 308.

<sup>502</sup> Indeed, he already devoted one chapter in his *The Agony of the American Left*, cit., chap. 1, *The Decline of Populism*. Actually, before that he had already written a review to two books on populism, N. Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1962 and to W.T.K Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962, in “Pacific Historical Review”, cit.

<sup>503</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 532.

Jeffersonian ethos for self-government<sup>504</sup>. It was, therefore, a state of mind and character according to which society is seen from bottom-up, and not technocratically, as a living creature made of several individuals and families that try to live in their own way and pursuing their own plans of life and happiness. For this reason, it was quite at odds with rationalistic plans. According to a rationalistic and therapeutic point of view, some scheme of good life or common good could be pursued, at least by imposing, from who knows better due to his privileged, enlightened point of view, a particular social vision to all. This meant, as a consequence of that, a radical centralization in terms of politics, economics and culture: on the contrary, populism, in Lasch's view, was radically devoted to decentralization and localism.

This is quite easy to explain. Lasch was critical of contemporary tendency of liberals of discrediting populism as a universal ethos based on a backward-looking, nostalgic and reactionary vision. However, this came to become simply as a political instrument of propaganda based on a moralistic prejudice. Moreover, Lasch argued in *The True and Only Heaven*, populism could not be used universally, otherwise lacking its deep meaning: "Torn out of its historical context – the struggle to preserve the moral virtues conferred by property ownership against the

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<sup>504</sup> This was already clear in a contribution that Lasch addressed to Piccone for a symposium of "Telos" about the meaning of narcissism. According to him narcissism meant precisely the abandonment of self-control and self-government due to the invasion of the inner life of the individual: "our consumer culture and our system of social control undermine the capacity for autonomous action", Ch. Lasch, *Narcissism and the Problem of 'Morale'*, "Telos", 44, Summer 1980, pp. 124-125. After the reading of the article, Piccone answered to Lasch by catching the deep implications of what Lasch argued: narcissistic personality means "rejection of all responsibility", P. Piccone to Chris (Lasch), 3 July 1980, Lasch Papers, Box 5, Folder 19. Narcissism, in other words, meant to them the lack of independence which necessary for self-government and therefore for democracy itself: the result is the "servile state".

combined threat of wage labour and the collectivization of property – ‘populism’ became a makeshift category that included everything that fell outside a liberal or social democratic consensus”<sup>505</sup>. Indeed, populism in Lasch’s view was a very rooted and limited American political phenomenon: by decontextualizing it, populism would have meant nothing to him<sup>506</sup>. In this respect, Lasch considered crucial a book by the historian Lawrence Goodwyn<sup>507</sup>. Goodwyn had rebuilt a history of the agrarian revolt of the South and Midwest, of the end of nineteenth century, against political and economic centralization. In essence, Goodwyn resumed, the central issues of the populists were three, and were based on the refusal of some developments of modernity: “first, land ownership in America; second, the hierarchical nature of the nation’s basic financial structure; and third, the consuming threat that corporate centralization poses to the democratic heritage itself”<sup>508</sup>. In sum, they advocated not for communism, but rather for a radical, Jeffersonian condition of property ownership: material, and specifically land property was considered crucial as a bulwark against government and power centralization, as well as an instrument for responsibility, independence

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<sup>505</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 459. On this point, for instance, as I read in his archive, he deemed “superficial” the analyses contained in M. Canovan, *Populism*, cit.; G. Ionescu, E. Gellner (eds.), *Populism*, cit., Lasch Papers, Box36, Folder 5. As we have already said, Lasch attributed to Hofstadter one of the most important influences for the negative, namely reactionary, interpretation of populism.

<sup>506</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Populism*, in R.W. Fox, J.T. Kloppenberg (eds.), *A Companion to American Thought*, cit.

<sup>507</sup> L. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, cit., then also published in a shorter version as L. Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment. A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, cit. It is not a case that Goodwyn, like Lasch, contributed both to “democracy” and to “Telos”. See for example L. Goodwyn, *Organizing Democracy*, cit.; L. Goodwyn, *Rethinking “Populism”: Paradoxes of Historiography and Democracy*, “Telos”, 88, Summer 1991, pp. 37-56.

<sup>508</sup> L. Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, cit., p. 344.

and liberty. Property ownership, in other words, was intrinsically part of human beings and contributed to form their inalienable dignity.

Populism, in Lasch's interpretation, thus meant self-government, radical decentralization and resistance to the liberalism of the "new class"<sup>509</sup>. Precisely on this issue, namely the opposition between populism and liberalism, Lasch intellectually met the political theorist of Abruzzi origins, Paul Piccone, and the journal he founded in 1968, in Buffalo, New York, "Telos"<sup>510</sup>. Following a very similar intellectual pilgrimage to Lasch, Piccone had a left-wing intellectual background. In particular, he was a scholar of the "Frankfurt School" and was, to some extent, referable to the New Left. However, he matured a quite critical perspective of the left and his journal became an intellectual platform, so to speak, devoted to elaborate a sort of radical and conservative, both against left and right, counter-proposal to mainstream conservatism or neoconservatism, and liberalism<sup>511</sup>: he rejected both statism and

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<sup>509</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The New Class Controversy*, cit. About the theme of the "new class", in the archive there is a whole folder containing worksheets, notes and photocopies of essays and parts of books dealing with it: Lasch Papers, Box 53, Folder 1.

<sup>510</sup> On the peculiar, intellectual history of the journal under the direction of Piccone see the whole monographic number of the magazine "Fast Capitalism", vol. 5, 1, 2009, pp. 1-94, then expanded and published as book: T. Luke, B. Agger (eds.), *A Journal of No Illusions: Telos, Paul Piccone, and the Americanization of Critical Theory*, Telos Press, New York, 2011 (contributions by T.W. Luke, R.J. Antonio, A. Sica, R. Jacoby, J. Dangler, M.P. Worrell, R.A. Berman, S.G. McNall, S. Turner, R. D'Amico, E. Chaves, B. Agger). Several authors contributed to "Telos" directly.

<sup>511</sup> In a letter dated 1989, Lasch asked Piccone if there were not the moment for allying with some conservatives against mainstream conservatism and liberalism: Ch. Lasch to Paul (Piccone), 28 August 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7b, Folder 3. Piccone wrote as follows in an essay: "If conservatism ever made any sense in the US, it was in terms of conserving the cultural particularity typical of the colonial experience. In this sense, American conservatism, until its capitulation to the New Deal cultural hegemony and neo-conservatism, was always in some sense populist", *Postmodern Populism*, cit., p. 84. It was "always in some sense populist" because it was rooted, traditionally oriented and attached to the specific cultures of decentralized group. In another article, Piccone argued that perhaps "the most important political issue today" consisted in the radical decentralization, de-bureaucratization, and the following re-empowering of individuals and communities against the rationalizing project of the liberal New Class. in other words, the real political cleavage of his time was, in his opinion, New Class vs populism:

corporate capitalism, since, like Lasch, he saw how they tended to go together for creating centralized structures in order to erode people independence and self-government. In general, as he admitted in an interview, “Telos thrives outside a mainstream which mostly does not understand it, does not appreciate it, and because of the widespread prosperity generated by new technological innovations, need not to take it seriously”<sup>512</sup>. He could then organize conferences and publish articles from a very broad range of intellectual perspectives: from libertarians like Murray Rothbard to paleo-conservatives like Paul Gottfried. Piccone repeatedly praised Lasch’s influence both on him and his journal<sup>513</sup>. Nevertheless, he was also critical, in some respects, of his works.

For, in Piccone’s opinion, in particular with reference to a contribution Lasch had provided to the number Summer, 1991 of “Telos”<sup>514</sup>, which was actually the transcription of a conference organized by the journal on the April of the same year, Lasch’s argumentation of populism lacked “clarity concerning means to guarantee effective decentralization and real local autonomy” and

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P. Piccone, *The Crisis of American Conservatism*, “Telos”, 74, Winter 1987-1988, pp. 3-29. For a somewhat contemporary analysis see D. Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, Hurst, London, 2017.

<sup>512</sup> See P. Piccone, *Interview*, cit., p. 140. Already in 1980, Lasch wrote a letter to Piccone in which he said the left had expunged him from it, due to his being a “hopeless reactionary”: Ch. Lasch to Paul (Piccone), 30 June 1980, cit. A label, considered how Piccone was also radical and cultural conservative at the same time, that could be addressed to him as well.

<sup>513</sup> See for instance *ibidem*, p. 143; P. Piccone, *From the New Left to the New Populism*, “Telos”, 101, Fall 1994, pp. 186-187. See also P. Piccone, *Introduction*, “Telos”, 97, Fall 1993, pp. 5-8, whose whole number was by Piccone dedicated to Lasch, because he was just dead (see also in the same number the eulogy by R. Jacoby, *Christopher Lasch (1932-1994)*, pp. 121-123).

<sup>514</sup> The reference is to Ch. Lasch, *Liberalism and Civic Virtue*, “Telos”, n. 88, Summer 1991, pp. 57-68. The conference was held on 5-7 April.



therefore his account remained, in Piccone's view, "far too abstract"<sup>515</sup>. Nevertheless, they both shared a vision which they called populist in antithesis to liberalism. According to them, populist sensibility mixed radicalism with cultural conservatism, political, economic and cultural decentralization and rootedness, local traditions and Jeffersonian democracy. Piccone, moreover, used to add federalism to populism as a key element of it. In fact, he called it indifferently "federal populism" or "populist federalism"<sup>516</sup>. According to him, accordingly, there were a sort of continuity between federalism and populism. Today, Piccone noted, federalism came to mean centralization. But originally federalism meant exactly the opposite: radical decentralization and radical self-government<sup>517</sup>. But the Civil War (1861-1865), ended with the imposition of a unitary North scheme to all the states of federation<sup>518</sup>. At that time, Piccone noted, "federalism began to refer no longer to the limited authority of the centralized government over the various federating units concerning a clearly spelled-out number of tasks, but to the unlimited hegemony of the centre over the states, now practically degraded to mere administrative branches"<sup>519</sup>. This process well explained the growing

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<sup>515</sup> P. Piccone, G. Ulmen, *Populism vs. the New Class*, "Telos", 88, Summer 1991, pp. 24-25.

<sup>516</sup> P. Piccone, *The Crisis of Liberalism and the Emergence of Federal Populism*, cit.; *From the New Left to the New Populism*, cit.; *Postmodern Populism*, cit.; *Interview*, cit.

<sup>517</sup> About the original meaning of federalism the works of Daniel Elazar are crucial. See for instance D.J. Elazar, *Exploring Federalism*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa and London, 1987.

<sup>518</sup> In the syllabus of a course that he held in the fall of 1991, a course in the history of industrial America, he noted how the Civil War and the following process of industrialization eroded the very essence, the roots of a traditional, Jeffersonian, republican democracy, by replacing it with political centralization and large-scale economic organizations: Lasch Papers, Box 52, Folder 8. See also the syllabus of another course, in Spring 1993: Lasch Papers, Box 53, Folder 6.

<sup>519</sup> P. Piccone, *Interview*, cit., p. 152. On this process see L.M. Bassani, *Dalla rivoluzione alla Guerra civile*, cit.; L.M. Bassani, *Chaining Down Leviathan*, cit.

centralization of powers, the emergence of the “new class” and the erosion of decentralized reactions, such as populism, just considered nostalgic or backward-looking. Against the centralizing impulses of Hamiltonian tendency, both the authors preferred a Jeffersonian vision of society<sup>520</sup>. “Can a populism predicted on local autonomy, direct democracy and genuine federal modes of organization supplant the nation and its agents (the New Class) in a postmodern world of high tech, substantial economic integration and instant communication?”<sup>521</sup>. Both Lasch and Piccone hope so. Only in a peculiar mixture of radicalism and cultural conservatism, as in populism they found place, could lie, according to them, a different, fruitful approach to social life. An approach that could answer to the natural human being’s need for a human-scale order.

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<sup>520</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Education and the American Dream*, cit.; *What Was the American Dream?*, cit.; P. Piccone, *Postmodern Federalism*, cit.; P. Piccone, *Interview*, cit.

<sup>521</sup> P. Piccone, *Postmodern Populism*, cit., p. 85.

## **Chapter 4 - Between Radicalism, Conservatism and Anti-Capitalism. Christopher Lasch and the “New Oxford Review”.**

That cultural conservatives should oppose capitalism almost goes without saying. The free market is the great destroyer of tradition. It fosters a rootless, restless mode of life. It promotes change for the sake of change. Its ideal embodiment and symbol is the bulldozer, by means of which the real estate interests plough under the past and put it up for sale.

Christopher Lasch<sup>522</sup>

In this chapter I will consider the crucial contribution of Lasch to the journal “New Oxford Review”. I have just said crucial for two reasons. First of all, because Lasch was one of the most significant and also industrious contributors the journal. Secondly, which is the most important reason, since Lasch’s participation to the journal founded by Dale Vree marked, in my interpretation of Lasch’s thought development, a fundamental step that testifies his growing cultural conservatism over the years. Indeed, Lasch was as much influenced by Vree and the anti-capitalism and the Christian spirit of the journal as was the reverse. In fact, the “New Oxford Review” started to praise Lasch since his book about the family. Vree himself reviewed it, by commending it: a book which could have been fairly appreciated by a Christian written by a socialist, as Vree considered him at the time<sup>523</sup>.

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<sup>522</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to ‘Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism’*, cit.

<sup>523</sup> D. Vree, *A Socialist for Decency: Could It Be?*, “New Oxford Review”, May 1978, pp. 18-19. As for other articles published in that journal, which were very hard to find even for the university library, I examined them directly in the archive in Rochester, and therefore I will indicate where I found them. In this case, Lasch Papers, Box 17, Folder 52.

And perhaps he was right. But Lasch's deep and radical thought changes were maturing precisely in those years. Lasch's arguments about the importance of recognising limits, which was so much linked to a religious vision about human condition that we have already spoken about; his critique of progress and science as part of a gnostic vision, espoused by a liberalism and capitalism; his growing interest for Brownson, a thinker who started himself as a socialist and became over the years Christian and conservative, but no less radical, precisely as Lasch's intellectual journey; his treatment about populism and conservatism and the obsolescence of the classical political labels of left and right; all these themes found in the pages of the "New Oxford Review" a cosy and friendly place in which Lasch could express freely and without any prejudices.

I will start, thus, precisely dealing with Lasch's wandering experiences from a few typical journals of the left, some of the which I have already spoken about, by noting how he left, since the seventies, his native, so to speak, cultural area of reference. These episodes help only to testify how Lasch could no longer be part of a cultural area, at least since from *The Haven in a Heartless World* (1977)<sup>524</sup>: as he would have said, he was becoming more conservative than the so reputed conservatives, who were considered by him nothing but progressive and pro-capitalism liberals.

In the second part of the chapter, after an introduction for tracing a cultural outline of the journal, I will fully penetrate into Lasch's

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<sup>524</sup> P. Brawer, S. Benvenuto, *An Interview with Christopher Lasch*, cit., pp. 133-134.

contributions to the journal. I will consider, therefore, all the articles he published from 1986 to 1993 and the correspondence Lasch had with Vree, which I found in archive. I will moreover speak of Lasch's reception in the journal, by dealing with the reviews of his books and articles that pushed him very close to a traditionalist and anti-capitalist conservative vision. Indeed, much closer than the neoconservative movement of the eighties, as a contributor of the journal, James J. Thompson Jr, a southern and traditionalist scholar, argued<sup>525</sup>.

In the end, I will wonder if Lasch, also and foremost by his contribution to the "New Oxford Review", approached to a conservative vision, without losing, at the same time, his radical, critical eye of contemporary liberalism and pro-market conservatism. In fact, what is to be conserved if everything that should be conserved has already swept away? Such a radical-conservative perspective linked him to everyone who was critical of the liberal culture, in particular some paleo-, not neo-, conservatives of his time, such as Paul Gottfried himself argued. As the director of the journal argued in his editorial in memory of Lasch, after he was dead, "One of the central themes of Kit's thought, which made him anathema to ideologues of both Left and Right, was that cultural libertarianism and economic libertinism go hand-in-hand"<sup>526</sup>. Radicalism and conservatism, through populism, were for Lasch a possible answer, although an imperfect and not so clear one to the cultural malaise he witnessed over the years.

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<sup>525</sup> See J.J. Thompson Jr., *American Conservatism's Lost Soul*, "New Oxford Review", April 1987.

<sup>526</sup> D. Vree, *Christopher Lasch: A Memoir*, "New Oxford Review", April 1994.

#### ***4.1 Christopher Lasch: A Disappointed Thinker, A Seeker of Ideas.***

As we have seen in detail in the first chapter, Lasch was critical of liberalism since the very beginnings of his intellectual journey. Nevertheless, he did not stop considering himself a part of the cultural tradition of departure. As he argued in a late interview, in fact, “if I seem to spend a lot of time attacking liberalism and the Left, that should be taken more as a mark of respect than one of dismissal”<sup>527</sup>. A tradition, he thought, cannot be considered a set of definite and monolithic dogma. Rather, it is something you argue with or against, with respect and a watchful eye. But that does not imply you cannot criticize it, or even distance from it. So Lasch did it, by conceiving liberalism year after year, in particular after the sixties, untenable, unsustainable and unbearable, as Milan Kundera would have said about the “being”. We can well argue that Lasch crossed all the left spectrum, from realist liberalism to radicalism. However, the experiences in the New Left and in the radical movement of the late sixties constitute a turning point. He remained deeply disappointed by them<sup>528</sup>: student’s revolt against the whole system and the principle of authority, so much supported by intellectuals like

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<sup>527</sup> C. Blake, Ch. Phelps, *History as Social Criticism*, p. 1311. This is also testified by the several articles in which he continued to focus on liberalism. In addition to all his books, which in a way or another speak also of liberalism, see for instance Ch. Lasch, *Liberalism in Retreat*, in D. Maclean and C. Mills (eds.), *Liberalism Reconsidered*, Rowman and Allanheld, Totowa, 1983, pp. 105-16; *The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism*, in “Soundings”, n. 69, Spring-Summer 1986, pp. 60-76; *Why Liberalism Lacks Virtue*, cit.; *The Fragility of Liberalism*, cit.; *Liberalism and Civic Virtue*, cit.; *The Culture of Poverty and the Culture of Compassion*, cit.

<sup>528</sup> Lasch recognized how some positions of the radicalism of the time were right, such as the critique of instrumental reason, of technological domination and so on. However, New Left’s position for the omen of a “cultural revolution”, Lasch laconically affirmed, is “the easiest to caricature”: *The Minimal Self*, cit., p. 199.

Herbert Marcuse, who invoked even a violent strategy of the “Great Refusal”<sup>529</sup>, were not, according to Lasch, the right road to take. That radicalism was to him sterile and to some extent ridiculous, not to say foolish and perilous. Cultural liberationists were not conscious that authority did not mean authoritarianism; that total anarchy cannot be reached, because a principle of authority has to take place somewhere, precisely in order to give a centre and assure an inner as well external order to communities; that, in sum, as he would have stated in his book on the family, “the dissolution of authority brings not freedom but new forms of domination”<sup>530</sup>.

Such an anti-culture, the one of the cultural liberationists, Lasch thought, was not really interested in democratizing society, namely to give it a more self-governed, decentralised and responsible accent. Rather, they aimed at an absolutistic liberation of the individuals from pre-existent forms of authority: their project was, in brief, to set human beings free from their very condition made of imperfection and fragility. According to Lasch, an individual devoid of any particular ties, of any specific and rooted bonds can be more easily occupied by an artificial and distant power. Only an individual rooted and attached to traditions, local cultures and specific places of the heart can effectively resist authoritarian temptations, since he develops some inner resources, rooted in traditions, that prevent him to become an other-directed part of a

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<sup>529</sup> H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), Routledge, New York, 2002. In opposition to the total rejection of what existed, Lasch, as cultural conservative, deemed the rediscovery of some crucial element, such the family, the key for a better world: a radical-conservative point of view.

<sup>530</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 184.

massified herd<sup>531</sup>. In order to resist artificial powers, people, Lasch thought, need to develop such inner-resources: without such an inner order inside the person, there could not be an external, sane, political order<sup>532</sup>. The atrophy of some virtues such as sense of limits and prudence, capacity of judgment and eloquence, self-reliance and independence, resourcefulness and common sense, which can only be acquired practically and in the everyday life, was for him “a loss potentially fatal to the future of democracy”<sup>533</sup>.

Against a cultural liberationist approach, one that the left, broadly speaking, had introjected by then, Lasch invoked a return to cultural conservatism and ordinary virtues of the common people. For this reason, he was quite at odds with some cultural journals and reviews in which he has been writing since the sixties. One of them, as we have already noted, was the “Partisan Review”. In 1971, the editors of the journal asked some contributors, Lasch included, an opinion about what the “Partisan Review” considered a menace: a growing cultural conservatism close to

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<sup>531</sup> The references to inner-directed and other-directed individuals are to D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, cit. For a classical account of authoritarian, better totalitarian movement as composed of a mass of other-directed grains of sand see H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Penguin, London, 2017.

<sup>532</sup> The need for order, a rooted order, is a crucial theme in Lasch. To that end, an “inner check”, as Irving Babbitt would have said, has to be matured and nurtured. Some notes on Babbitt are in Lasch Papers, Box 34, Folder 10. However, Babbittian’s “inner check” was too abstract tool for Lasch. A real inner check, conceived as self-control, cannot be anything but rooted in a particular and concrete context, as well historically grounded. In this sense, a democratic order, namely decentralised, localist and traditional-hinging, a Jeffersonian and Tocquevillian one, was for Lasch the best alternative choice for developing self-governed and inner-directed individuals. Contemporary democracy was for Lasch a wrong way: it was, for him, top-down administered organization. Instead, he was looking, “in the name of the ‘Jeffersonian tradition’” for a “community of intelligent, resourceful, responsible, and self-governing citizens”: Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 76. On this point, see also Ch. Lasch, *A Reply to Isaac*, cit.

<sup>533</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Response to Joel Feinberg*, cit., p. 42.



political conservatism<sup>534</sup>. Lasch totally disagreed with the journal, as he wrote in a letter and in his answer that it will be published in 1972, and estimated cultural conservatism as a crucial element of a good society<sup>535</sup>. According to him, cultural conservatism and political conservatism were in fact not the same thing: the former could exist without becoming part of the conservative political movement. The latter, according to Lasch, was not conservative at all, because it tended to identify conservatism with the defence of capitalism, which is the lever by which every long-term commitment and traditional loyalty is replaced by absolute freedom of choice. In this sense, contemporary conservatism, which for Lasch was just another name of liberalism, was not conservatism at all: what did conserve a system, such the capitalist system sustained by so called conservatives, that was hinged on the overcoming of the past and traditions? Could be really called conservative a political thought that considered the ideology of progress the pivot of its political program?

The idea of progress, of absolute freedom of choice and unlimited economic expansion, which are at odds with a conservative ethos, Lasch thought, were the main points of reference of liberals and neoconservatives. Indeed, they were the basis of the neoconservatism of Ronald Reagan during his presidency in the eighties. In an article

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<sup>534</sup> The document that Lasch received, entitled *A Statement on the New Cultural Conservatism*, is in Lasch Papers, Box 14, Folder 14.

<sup>535</sup> Ch. Lasch to Mr. Phillips, 2 February 1972, cit. Lasch's manuscript, which is five pages long, is in Lasch Papers, Box 14, Folder 14. It was published as Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to symposium 'On the New Cultural Conservatism'*, "Partisan Review", cit. After that article, Lasch published just a few articles in the journal: Ch. Lasch (with N. Birnbaum), *America Today: An Exchange*, "Partisan Review", 42, n. 3, 1975, pp. 361-73 now in E. Kurzweil (ed.), *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, pp. 268-80; *The Narcissistic Personality of Our Time*, cit.; *Modernism, Politics, and Philip Rahv*, "Partisan Review", 47, n. 2 1980, pp. 183-94.

published in 1988, Lasch noted how Reagan endorsed a type of discourse based on the defence of traditional values and the family, on the defence of the typical communitarian life of “Middle America”. At the same time, quite antithetically and inconsistently for Lasch, he praised free market and capitalism: that was incompatible with traditions, family values, and communitarian life that Reagan promised to embody and safeguard: “The ties of kinship and marriage obligations that override considerations of personal advantage and cannot be discharged simply by a prearranged schedule of payments. By contrast, the market – no respecter of persons – reproduces individuals to abstractions, anonymous buyers and sellers whose claims on each other are determined only by their capacity to pay. The family depends on an active community life, whereas the market disrupts communities by draining off their best talent”<sup>536</sup>. Reagan could well exploit the political space that the left had abandoned several years ago, by endorsing on the contrary a therapeutic point of view over society, a society that was to be straightened. According to Lasch, as expressed in an article dated back to 1986, the left “no longer stands for common sense, as it did in the days of Thomas Paine. It has come to regard common sense – the traditional wisdom and folkways of the community – as an obstacle to progress and enlightenment. Because it equates tradition with prejudice it finds itself increasingly unable to converse with ordinary people in their common language. Increasingly it speaks its own jargon, the therapeutic jargon of social science and the service professions that seems to serve mostly to deny what everybody

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<sup>536</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Reagan's Victims*, cit., p. 7.

knows”<sup>537</sup>. As we have already reported, in 1980 Lasch wrote to his friend Paul Piccone, director of the journal Lasch himself contributed to, “Telos”<sup>538</sup>, the left had already expelled him due to his positions considered “hopeless reactionary”<sup>539</sup>. In another letter, addressed to another of his friends, Sheldon Wolin, director of another journal Lasch much contributed to, “democracy”<sup>540</sup>, Lasch wrote as follows: “The idea of a ‘left’ carries so much baggage that is no longer of much use, and doesn’t in any case commit people, in itself, to any very deep feeling for democracy, that a case could be made for dropping it as an idea that has outlived its historic usefulness”<sup>541</sup>. In another article, published in 1986 as well, Lasch he added to that another critique to the left, *Why the Left Has No Future*. The left has radically undermined everything that is not freely chosen, because it would be, so to speak, authoritarian: “By defining the individual as a rational calculator of his own advantage, liberal ideology made it impossible to conceive of any form of association not based on the calculation of mutual advantage; that is, on a contract. There is no place in liberalism, or at best an insecure and precarious place, for those forms of association based on spontaneous cooperation”<sup>542</sup>. The very problem is that the family, the essential element of a sane society, is based on another assumption, an antithetical one. Whereas for a liberal point of view every relationship and association are based on a contractual perspective, the family, and the marriage, hinge on sacrifice,

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<sup>537</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What’s Wrong with the Right*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>538</sup> See chap. 3.3.

<sup>539</sup> Ch. Lasch to Paul (Piccone), 30 June 1980, cit.

<sup>540</sup> See chap. 2.

<sup>541</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sheldon (Wolin), 30 September 1983, cit.

<sup>542</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Why the Left Has No Future*, cit.

loyalty, deep commitment. In sum, on the one hand, there is a weak basis for every relationship and association, because they have to be regarded as simply chosen; on the other hand, in Lasch's opinion, the family has to be regarded as "a promise not as a contractual obligation but as a test of character"<sup>543</sup>, a much stronger and more rooted commitment, which is also the very element of self-government and, thus, of democracy itself.

But Lasch's radical and irreconcilable disagreement with the left manifested in other intellectual places as well. In the sixties and seventies, Lasch participated a lot in the pages of the typical left-wing magazine "The New York Review of Books". Suffice it to say that in those decades Lasch published almost forty articles there<sup>544</sup>, whereas in the eighties just five, of which only one in the second half of the decade<sup>545</sup>. As a matter of fact, Lasch had manifested different opinions in comparison of those expressed by the magazine already in the sixties. In 1965, the magazine asked Lasch to write an article about populism. But the work that Lasch wrote was deemed not apt to be published. The article was too favourable

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<sup>543</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>544</sup> A significant, and still not completed list includes: *Herbert Croly's America*, "New York Review of Books", 1 July 1965, pp. 18-19; *Democratic Vistas*, "New York Review of Books", 30 September 1965, pp. 4-6; *The Banality of Liberalism*, "New York Review of Books", 11 November 1965, pp. 36-37; *Divorce American Style*, "New York Review of Books", 17 February 1966, pp. 3-4; *Liberals and Communism*, "New York Review of Books", 29 December 1966, p. 26; *Burned Over Utopia*, cit.; *Emancipated Women*, cit.; *Culture of Poverty*, "New York Review of Books", 9 May 1968, pp. 40-42; *The New Politics: 1968 and After*, cit.; *The Future of Radicalism*, "New York Review of Books", 12 September 1968, pp. 42-43; *Can the Left Rise Again?*, cit.; *Populism, Socialism, and McGovernism*, cit.; *Inequality and Education*, "New York Review of Books", 17 May 1973, pp. 19-25; *Freud and Women*, "New York Review of Books", 3 October 1974, pp. 12-17; *The Family and History*, "New York Review of Books", 13 November 1975, pp. 33-38; *The Emotions of Family Life*, cit.; *What the Doctor Ordered*, cit.; *The Narcissist Society*, cit.; *The Siege of the Family*, "cit.

<sup>545</sup> *Life in the Therapeutic State*, cit.; *Democracy vs. Therapy*, cit.; *Happy Endings*, "New York Review of Books", 3 December 1981, pp. 22-24.; *The Great American Variety Show*, "New York Review of Books", 2 February 1984, pp. 36-40; *Reagan's Victims*, cit.

to a populist politics, conceived as grass-roots and self-governed democracy, and too critical of contemporary elitist liberalism<sup>546</sup>. Lasch's expressed the opinion according to which democracy was the antithesis of politics as therapy – an antithesis he briefly and paradigmatically explained in an article published on that magazine in 1980<sup>547</sup> – a conception instead typical of the contemporary, enlightened liberalism, as we have already seen. Actually, Lasch's books as well were quite at odds with the cultural line of "The New York Review of Books". *Haven in Heartless World* was accused of "uncritical nostalgia", by the author who reviewed Lasch's book for that magazine<sup>548</sup>. Moreover, Lasch was also charged of idealizing the family, dating back to a presumed, but never existed, golden age of it. In a reply that Lasch addressed to the magazine, he wrote that the reviewer did not understand anything of his book, by omitting considerations of the new paternalism of the therapeutic state, which had replaced the paternal authority of the family, and by manifesting the classical clichés of the pervasive liberal mind of his time: "a spirit of dull conformity" typical of the progressives<sup>549</sup>.

But Lasch quarrelled with the magazine in another occasion. In fact, Lasch proposed an article about gnosticism in 1992<sup>550</sup>, which however was rejected because of its incompatibility with the magazine's

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<sup>546</sup> See Lasch Papers, Box 10, Folder 2.

<sup>547</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Democracy vs. Therapy*, cit.

<sup>548</sup> D.B. Davis, *The Invasion of the Family*, "New York Review of Books", 23 February 1978, pp. 37-39 (Lasch Papers, Box 17, Folder 52).

<sup>549</sup> The manuscript of Lasch's reply is in Lasch Papers, Box 17, Folder 52. The quotation is taken from p. 8 of the document.

<sup>550</sup> That was essentially a review essay about the book of H. Bloom, *The American Religion. The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, Simon and Schuster, 1992. See Lasch Papers, Box 31, Folder 12.

cultural line<sup>551</sup>. The tone of Lasch's answer to the letter he had received was furious. According to him, who had already written some articles about the theme of gnosticism, as he pointed out<sup>552</sup>, the magazine had become, just like the most part of liberal and left-wing intellectuals, anti-pluralist: "It's been obvious for some time that you no longer tolerate a very wide range of political opinion in your pages"<sup>553</sup>. And he concluded caustically, by considering the magazine nothing but an extension of the Democratic Party: "But it comes as something of a surprise, I must say – perhaps it shouldn't – to learn that the party line extends even to such seemingly esoteric matters as the gnostic religion. Hasn't it occurred to you that this ideological strait-jacket makes for a pretty dull and predictable magazine?"<sup>554</sup>. Actually, Lasch had long been thinking that liberal intellectuals were exhausted in their arguments: better, their arguments were no longer real arguments, but just stereotypes, slogans, feeble and vacuous refrains.

In reply to two very critical reviews to *The True and Only Heaven*, both written by liberal intellectuals<sup>555</sup>, Lasch noted how the accusations of nostalgia and of a backward-looking perspective towards him were not new, but they revealed, once again, the total detachment of liberal elites from the common people: "These polemics exemplify, once again, the agony of the American Left – its inability to assimilate new information;

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<sup>551</sup> See letter from Bob to Kit (Ch. Lasch), 28 July 1992, Lasch Papers, Box 31, Folder 12.

<sup>552</sup> The references are to the articles appeared in the "New Oxford Review", which we are going to speak of.

<sup>553</sup> Ch. Lasch to Bob, 4 August 1992, Lasch Papers, Box 31, Folder 12.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>555</sup> M. Kazin, *The People, Right and Wrong*, "Tikkun", 6, n. 5, 1991, pp. 37-40; B. Ehrenreich, *Through a Class Darkly*, "Tikkun", 6, n. 5, 1991, pp. 40-42.

its bafflement in the face of unfamiliar points of view; its attempt to force new arguments into the old categories of debate (...). These habits of mind are the marks of political and intellectual defeat. Unable to win arguments, the Left now traffics almost exclusively in slogans and stereotypes”<sup>556</sup>. His growing cultural conservatism, therefore, was in search, at least since the end of the seventies, and much more in the eighties, of finding places in which he could have dealt with his interests of research without following ideological stereotypes.

#### ***4.2 Christopher Lasch, Dale Vree and the “New Oxford Review”: A Radical, Anti-Capitalist and Conservative Perspective Against Progressivism.***

In the eighties Lasch was by then a famous scholar. The publication of *The Culture of Narcissism* gave him a fame for which he is still known. As we have already seen, the book let him win an important award, which however he refused. He was even interviewed by popular magazines like “Time”, “Newsweek” and “People”<sup>557</sup>. But he also attracted attention in the academic domain, as the several invitations to conferences and the invitation from the President Jimmy Carter well demonstrate as well<sup>558</sup>. In particular, it is important to mark for what we are talking about, that Lasch was becoming, at least since the book on the family, a scholar of a certain interest for cultural conservative magazines. Several reviews of

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<sup>556</sup> Ch. Lasch, *No Respect: A Reply to Michael Kazin and Barbara Ehrenreich*, “Tikkun”, 6, n. 5, 1991, pp. 42-44. I found the manuscript, from which I quote, in Lasch Papers, Box 30, Folder 30.

<sup>557</sup> See chap. 1.

<sup>558</sup> See chap. 2.

that cultural area dedicated to his books some attention, in particular “National Review”<sup>559</sup>, “Modern Age”<sup>560</sup>, “The Intercollegiate

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<sup>559</sup> The review was founded by William F. Buckley Jr. in 1955. Among the review just mentioned, it is however perhaps the one which dealt with Lasch more critically. Its obituary, nevertheless, argued that Lasch’s social and cultural critique would have been missing: Editors, *Christopher Lasch, R.I.P.: Historian, Author, Social Commentator*, “National Review”, 21 March 1994, pp. 20. For an introduction of the “National Review” see in particular R. Lora, *National Review*, R. Lora, W.H. Longton, *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1999, pp. 515-530; D. Kelly, *National Review*, B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp 601-604. For an extended discussion of it see J. Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind. National Review and Its Times*, ISI Books, Wilmington, 2005.

<sup>560</sup> It was founded in 1957 by one of the most important conservative thinkers of nineteenth-century, Russell Kirk. It was less critical of Lasch in comparison with the previous one. In particular, the reviewer of Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* wrote that, since the next book, Lasch’s apostasy of liberal culture would have been complete: G. McKenna, *A Reluctant Conservative*, “Modern Age”, 24, 1, Winter 1980, pp. 86-87. Actually, already the book on the family was praised by the review. Although he criticized Lasch’s “obsession” with Freud, he recommended the book for “its many solid virtues”, foremost its critique of “some enemies of civilized life in our time”: R.M. Crunden, *Enemies of Civilized Life*, “Modern Age”, 22, 3, Summer 1978, pp. 329-331. See also the positive remarks on Lasch’s *The Revolt of Elites: The Children of Faust*, “Modern Age”, 38, 3, Summer 1996, pp. 280-284. On that journal it also appeared one of the most positive assessments of Lasch’s thought from a conservative point of view: J. Beer, *On Christopher Lasch*, cit. For an introduction of “Modern Age” see G.A. Panichas, *Modern Age*, in R. Lora, W.H. Longton, *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America*, cit., pp. 531-545; J. Zmirak, *Modern Age*, B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp 578-580. See, moreover, G.A. Panichas (ed. by), *Modern Age: The First Twenty-Five Years. A Selection*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1988.



Review”<sup>561</sup>, “Chronicles”<sup>562</sup>, “First Things”<sup>563</sup>, “The New Criterion”<sup>564</sup>.

But the most interested review in, and sympathetic to his ideas was without any doubt the “New Oxford Review”<sup>565</sup>.

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<sup>561</sup> “The Intercollegiate Review” was founded in 1965 as the cultural journal of the “Intercollegiate Society of Individualists”, which was founded by Frank Chodorov in 1953. When Chodorov died, in 1966, the cultural institute changed name in “Intercollegiate Studies Institute”. The journal dedicated to Lasch just one review, and when Lasch was still just a radical, and precisely to Ch. Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, cit. Hence, the review was critical: E. Vivas, *Were They Radicals or Intellectuals?*, “The Intercollegiate Review”, January-February 1966, pp. 251-60. However, things changed over the years. Indeed, the institute launched in the end of twentieth-century a series of books devoted to “Modern Thinkers” and published by the publishing house of the institute, ISI Books. Some books were realized, for instance about M. Oakeshott, R. Nisbet, L. von Mises, W. Röpke, others not. It is the case of one dedicated to Lasch himself, and others classical conservative like R.M. Weaver. See L. Edwards, *Educating for Liberty. The First Half-Century of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute*, Regnery Publishing, Washington, 2003, p. 263. To be noted that Lasch used all the number of Spring 1986 of the journal, dedicated to the “state of conservatism”, for writing part of the introduction of *The True and Only Heaven*, cit. See Lasch Papers Box 26, Folder 33, in which that number, as underlined by Lasch, is conserved. For an introduction of the journal see J.H. Dorn, *Intercollegiate Review*, R. Lora, W.H. Longton, *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America*, cit., pp. 559-571.

<sup>562</sup> It was founded in 1977 as “Chronicles of Culture”, then it changed name, simply “Chronicles”, in 1986. It is the primary organ of the minoritarian group in American conservatism called “paleo-conservatism”, as opposed to the mainstream and majoritarian conservatism emerged during Reagan’s years, “neoconservatism”. The magazine dedicated much attention to Lasch, as for the several invitations to write in it demonstrate. I will speak of it in the next chapter. On the magazine see E.C. Kopff, *Chronicles*, B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 147-149. On the paleo-conservative movement see, for instance, J. Scotchie (ed.), *The Paleoconservatives*, cit.; G. Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 178-206; P. Gottfried, *Paleoconservatism*, B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 651-652.

<sup>563</sup> It was founded by Father Richard John Neuhaus in 1990 as cultural review of “The Institute on Religion and Public Life”, founded the previous year. Neuhaus was a friend of Lasch, as some correspondence demonstrates. Moreover, Lasch wrote an important article for the magazine, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit. Actually, the name Lasch gave to the article was *Notes on Cultural Conservatism, Proprietorship and the Radicalism of the Petty-Bourgeoisie*. Lasch’s article was a paper he presented in occasion of a conference that Neuhaus organized in 1989. See Lasch Papers, Box 28, Folder 23. On the journal see M. S. Muncy (ed.), *The End of Democracy? The Celebrated First Things Debate, with Arguments Pro and Con*, Spence Publishing Company, Dallas, 1997; D. Linker, *First Things*, B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 310-311.

<sup>564</sup> The magazine was founded in 1982 and later, by Roger Kimball’s direction, devoted much attention to Lasch’s thought. Kimball, however, preferred Nisbet to Lasch, as he stated in a partially critical article of Lasch: R. Kimball, *The Disaffected Populist*, cit., to which Lasch replied in *A Reply to Jeffrey Isaac*, cit., p. 99. However, Kimball estimated Lasch’s work, as also demonstrated by some letters in which he complimented with Lasch: Lasch Papers, Box 7b, Folder 20. On the journal see P. Notley, *New Criterion*, R. Lora, W.H. Longton, *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America*, cit., pp. 605-612; J. Derbyshire, *New Criterion*, B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., p. 617.

<sup>565</sup> The most important biographer of the conservative thinker Russell Kirk, Bradley Birzer, wrote that the “New Oxford Review” is one of the most important conservative

That monthly journal of religious, economic, cultural and social themes was founded in 1977 in Berkeley by the American Church Union, an organization of conservative Episcopalians based in California<sup>566</sup>. As the name suggests, the review wanted to revivify the spirit of the English Oxford Movement of early nineteenth-century. It wanted, thus, to seek a Catholic renewal within the Church of England and, at the same time, oppose the spirit of the time, expressed for instance by secularism and gnosticism<sup>567</sup>. Thanks to the influence of the nineteenth-century theologian John Henry Newman and of Pope Jean Paul II, the review, by means of its director Dale Vree, who became Catholic in 1983, approached at the beginnings of the eighties the Roman Catholic Church. Radical-conservative, in its deepest cultural commitments, it began since the beginnings to criticize vehemently capitalism as well, conceived as one of the evils of modernity. Its director, Dale Vree, quite as Lasch had a left-wing, socialist background. He took part to the revolts of the students of the sixties in Berkeley. However, he remained, as Lasch again, disappointed by liberationist drift of the movement. For this reason, he left his country in 1966 and flew in East Berlin, in order to find a haven from the hedonism of the West. However, he found the same

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contemporary magazines in the US: see B.J. Birzer, *Beyond Tenebrae. Christian Humanism in the Twilight of the West*, Angelico Press, New York, 2019, p. 26.

<sup>566</sup> For the basic information of the review see J.J. Thompson Jr, *New Oxford Review*, in R. Lora, W.H. Longton, *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America*, cit., pp. 209-215.

<sup>567</sup> D. Vree, *Why the New Oxford Review?*, "New Oxford Review", 44, February 1977. As Thompson Jr. explained, the magazine began with volume 44, instead of volume 1, because it viewed itself as a continuation of the magazine of the American Church Union, the "American Church News": J.J. Thompson Jr., *New Oxford Review*, cit., p. 214. The most part of the articles that I will quote are taken from the online version, due to the difficulty of finding them. Therefore, I will mention only the month and the year of publication of the articles.

western obsession for affluence and comfort, only tinged with Marxism. What he found, though, was a sect of devout Christian Protestants that tried to escape from all that. Therefore, he abandoned atheist radicalism and became a Christian<sup>568</sup>. His direct experience in the ranks of Marxist creed made him write a book in which he showed how Christianity lost its integrity while crossing Marxism, by becoming a sort of gnostic doctrine<sup>569</sup>. But to Vree faith could be well compatible with all political positions: “There is no political orthodoxy for Christians because there is no single political outlook that necessarily follows from the fundamentals of Christian faith. It is possible for a Christian – Vree continued – to be a conservative – or a liberal, a socialist, a reactionary, or even non-political – and still to be a faithful Christian”<sup>570</sup>. The object of Vree was not only to realize a cultural project which could be read by all Christians, and foremost Catholics, but also to mix cultural conservative elements, for instance the strenuous defence of the family, as the pivot of a well-ordered society based on cooperation and loyalty, sacrifice and love for the community of belonging, and radical ones, in particular the radical critique of capitalism, considered as a threatening system of the family itself<sup>571</sup>. In an article published in 1986, Vree could thus write as follows: “The NOR has never been a cheerleader for the Zeitgeist — whether the Zeitgeist (ever fickle, it seems) be Marxist liberationism, sexual

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<sup>568</sup> For more detailed information about Vree’s intellectual pilgrimage see for instance D. Vree, *From Berkeley to East Berlin and Back*, “New Oxford Review”, January-February 1983, D. Vree, *God’s Beloved East Germany*, “New Oxford Review”, March 1983.

<sup>569</sup> D. Vree, *On Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity*, John Wiley & Sons Inc., New York, 1977.

<sup>570</sup> D. Vree, *Traditionalists and Other Conservatives*, “New Oxford Review”, June 1977.

<sup>571</sup> See J.J. Thompson Jr, *New Oxford Review*, cit., pp. 212-213.

confusion, raw capitalism and the naked love of money, national idolatry, or some combination of the above. And so, in these (allegedly and inauthentically) conservative times, we have been insistent that the renewal of orthodoxy not represent a capitulation to the dominant ideological agenda of our times. The NOR's orthodoxy necessarily makes us simultaneously more conservative than 'conservatism' and more radical than 'radicalism'<sup>572</sup>.

Such a perspective, that we could call radical-conservative, was almost precisely the point of view that Lasch, at least since the end of the seventies, was maturing<sup>573</sup>. In a very similar manner, Lasch would have expressed in 1985 in an important conference, as for the cultural and political positions he adopted. By concluding his relation, *Modernism and Its Critics*, Lasch asserted as follows: "we have reached a point in our history where moral and political innovation – a new political discourse beyond left and right – depends not so much on the invention of anything self-consciously new or revolutionary as on the recovery of traditions long ignored and half forgotten. The real conservatives may turn out to be the radicals of the 21st century"<sup>574</sup>.

As such, it is not difficult to imagine why Greg Erlandson, the book review editor of the review, wrote to Lasch in 1984 by saying how the review had appreciated his works and by proposing thus to write a book review for it. Erlandson presented the review as follows, by emphasizing

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<sup>572</sup> D. Vree, *Not so Lonely Anymore*, New Oxford Review", November 1986. "NOR" is obviously the acronym of the review name.

<sup>573</sup> In addition to the same admission of Lasch, see R. Coles, *Remembering Christopher Lasch*, "New Oxford Review", September 1994.

<sup>574</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Modernism and Its Critics*, cit., p. 25.

moreover the peculiarity of the cultural line of the “New Oxford Review”, just as Lasch’s ideas: “Dear Dr. Lasch, As I’m a sure you know, the New Oxford Review is a monthly journal, ecumenical in tone, Christian in perspective. Beyond that, it is rather hard to classify, for its positions on economics, society and culture are not easily classified in the usual categories. But if it narrows things down a bit, we’d love to have you write for us! We’ve long admired you writing, and we think our readers too”<sup>575</sup>. Lasch did not answer to this first invitation to participate in the magazine. At least, in the archive there is no trace of that letter. However, after some time, the same director, Dale Vree, wrote to him, by praising again his work and conceiving as a source of inspiration for the cultural coordinates of the magazine: “Dear Prof. Lasch, several of us who labour for the New Oxford Review have long been fascinated by your perspective on American culture and politics – one which is respectful of the Judeo-Christian tradition and yet one which is not politically reactionary. Your position – which broadly-speaking is our position – is a lonely one, especially these days”<sup>576</sup>. Vree proposed Lasch to comment an opinion recently expressed at that time by Michael Harrington, who was also a friend of Lasch, about “the great problem of socialism” as a “lack of a sense of transcendence”. Vree did not ask Lasch to make a profession of faith in God. However, he wanted to know what

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<sup>575</sup> G. Erlandson to Dr. Lasch, 20 September 1984, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 11. The book that Erlandson proposed Lasch to review was R. Wightman Fox, T.J. Jackson Lears, *The Culture of Consumption. Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1983. To be noted that Lasch, precisely ten years later, will publish an article entitled in the same, exact way and by quoting that book in the bibliography: *The Culture of Consumption*, cit.

<sup>576</sup> D. Vree to Prof. Lasch, 27 January 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 57, Folder 9.

Lasch thought of that statement, in particular about the possibility “to transcend the apparent chasm between agnostic democratic socialists and religious conservatives”<sup>577</sup>. Lasch did not consider Harrington’s statement as the best point of departure for dealing with such a theme, and therefore he did not accept to write an opinion about it. But he was nevertheless pleased with Vree’s letter, by expressing “my gratitude for your interest in my work and my agreement with most of what appears in the New Oxford Review”<sup>578</sup>. Moreover, Lasch appreciated a lot the review to his book *The Minimal Self* that had appeared in the magazine<sup>579</sup>.

As both Erlandson and Vree explicitly stated, the “New Oxford Review” had been long admiring his works. Since Lasch’s book published in 1977, his influence on the review was growing deeply. *Haven in Heartless World*, Vree wrote in his review *A Socialist for Decency: Could It Be?*, “is an unambiguous defense of the family”. And it was even more surprising that such a defence, Vree continued, came from a “radical socialist”, as Vree called Lasch at that time<sup>580</sup>. However, Vree noted how Lasch in that book was starting to radiate a cultural conservative point of view, a perspective at the same time radical, for his critique of capitalism and modernity, and conservative, for his strenuous defence of some crucial elements of civilization itself, foremost the family. Indeed, as have already and in detail seen before<sup>581</sup>, the family is for Lasch the very element for a well-structured and ordered society. That

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<sup>577</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>578</sup> Ch. Lasch to Mr. Vree, 4 March 1986, Lasch Papers, Box 57, Folder 9.

<sup>579</sup> J.J. Thompson Jr., *Christopher Lasch: A Fellow Traveler with Christianity?*, “New Oxford Review”, January-February 1986.

<sup>580</sup> D. Vree, *A Socialist for Decency: Could It Be?*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>581</sup> See chap. 3.1.

institution is not only the main socializing agency, but rather it constitutes the very means by which cultural patterns are inherited and replied on the individual level: “It not only imparts ethical norms, providing the child with his first instruction in the prevailing social rules, it profoundly shapes his character, in ways of which he is not even aware. The family – Lasch continued in the very beginnings of his book – instills modes of thought and action that become habitual. Because of its enormous emotional influence, it colors all of a child’s subsequent experience”<sup>582</sup>. The family, therefore, is much more than a simple agency of formal instruction and discipline. Contrary to the school, the family teaches the child “to do what he has to do”<sup>583</sup>. In sum, the family provides the young with the basic structure of personality. Such a task, according to Lasch, could not have replaced by any other external and artificial agency. However, that was precisely what had happened with the expansion of helping professions and therapeutic culture throughout the last century.

That happened, in Lasch’s interpretation, with the birth and the development of the social science which, according to the objective and scientific knowledge, namely free of values, whose it was deemed the holder, could have been applied as an instrument for social control<sup>584</sup>. Once religion was considered the only legitimate authority, the primary source for social cohesion somehow also introjected by the belief in a life that would have continued beyond human world. By the affirmation of positivism and the development of scientific method, a new source of

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<sup>582</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>583</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>584</sup> See again chap. 3.1 for a more detailed explanation of the argument. See moreover directly Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., pp. 22-61.

authority, much more immediate and knowable, impersonal and value-free, replaced religion: it tried to give cohesion to human beings, by not advocating some mysterious and uncritical precepts, because they were based just on belief and faith, about a world beyond human knowledge, but rather by the promise of a growing knowledge about this world, the human world that could be discovered and even dominated by scientific procedures. Belief and faith were thus replaced by science, uncertainty, sense of limitedness and respect for nature by an unabated quest for certainty, hybris and power over nature. By the growing belief in the possibility of human beings in knowing their world and planning their development, some international organizations were created for replacing inherited and humble traditions and settled beliefs. A new more rational, efficient and progressive type of knowledge substituted what was deemed obsolete and backward-looking. A paradigmatic example was for Lasch the World Health Organization (WVO) which had the effect or, better, was the consequence of the development of an enlightened, therapeutic point of view. Such progressivism, according to Lasch, led directly to “the medicalization of society: the substitution of medical and psychiatric authority for the authority of parents, priests, and lawgivers, now condemned as representatives of discredited authoritarian modes of discipline”<sup>585</sup>. According to Lasch, democracy was the opposite of therapy. A mature citizenship could grow only if it can solve every day and directly its own problems<sup>586</sup>. For the new progressive conception,

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<sup>585</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 100.

<sup>586</sup> It is very interesting how Lasch considered one of the “guiding spirits” of the WVO, C.B. Chisholm: “A progressive in the tradition of John Dewey, Chisholm demanded that education, informed by psychiatric principles, become the highest social priority.



instead, society had to be straightened, because it was sick of prejudices, atavisms and backwardness: such an orthopaedic-pedagogic conceit wanted “to replace the old morality of ‘right and wrong’, ‘guilt and sin’, with the new morality of ‘human relations’”<sup>587</sup>. The family, therefore, was under siege. A therapeutic perspective was quite at odds with that institution. The family, in fact, helps to develop morality, which means the moral sense by which an individual can choose responsibly what to do and mature self-control and capacity of judgment, and to understand that human world is an imperfect mix of good and evil, and that evil cannot be expunge: otherwise, human world would be a celestial and angelic, not human, place. Besides, the family was crucial for another reason. It is the primary and deepest form of communitarian loyalty and therefore a strenuous source for fighting emerging and expanding artificial powers, like that of the Leviathan. At the end of *Haven*, Lasch, by taking into account the growing interdependence of capitalism and the therapeutic state, could thus write that “today the state controls not merely the individual’s body but as much of his spirit as it can pre-empt; not merely his outer but his inner life as well; not merely the public realm but the darkest corners of private life, formerly inaccessible to political domination. The citizen’s entire existence has now been subjected to

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‘To produce a generation of mature citizens is the biggest and most necessary job any country should undertake’”, *ibidem*, p. 99. According to such a therapeutic perspective local identities, cultures and traditions were to be replaced by rationalist blueprints elaborated from the top of society. That was due to the privileged and scientific point of view of the elites.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 02.

social direction, increasingly unmediated by the family or other institutions to which the work of socialization was once confined”<sup>588</sup>.

Lasch observed how since the nineteenth century had been diffusing a therapeutic ethic in the cultural system. On that point, Lasch was influenced by the American sociologist and cultural critic Philip Rieff, in particular his work originally published in 1968, *The Triumph of Therapeutic*<sup>589</sup>. Every society, Lasch noted, needs a symbolic centre. In early modern times, that was represented by religion and its concrete place, the church. Religion gave unity and coherence to society, by providing a communitarian sense of inhibition, control and loyalty as well: religion prescribed what was right and wrong, what could be done and what not. In the nineteenth century, however, it was replaced by the legislative halls and tribunals and then by the hospital. A therapeutic state substituted a liberal state and invaded and eroded the traditional role of the family, by replacing it with the helping professions. The continuing expansion of health, education and welfare agencies, thus, not only undermined the autonomy of the family and society from the tutelary power of paternal Leviathan, but eroded the very roots of democracy,

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<sup>588</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>589</sup> Ph. Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, cit. Lasch explicitly thanked the work of the sociologist in the acknowledgments of *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit. We have already reported Rieff’s books influence on Lasch. However, it must be also noted that Lasch, in a late article, which will be included in his book on the elites too, criticized his late works: see Ch. Lasch, *The Saving Remnant*, cit., then *Philip Rieff and the Religion of Culture*, in Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., pp. 213-229. The work Lasch criticized was Ph. Rieff, *The Feeling Intellect: Selected Writings*, ed. J. Imber, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990. In that work Rieff praised too much culture, almost like a religion. For Lasch “God (...) is the only appropriate object of unconditional reverence and wonder”: Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 228. One more thing. It must be noted that also Rieff, just as Lasch, attracted more attention of conservatives over the years. The new edition of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, cit., was published in 2006 by ISI books, and with the introduction of the daughter of Lasch himself, the historian Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn.

namely of self-government, and created the condition for its total dependence on the state, namely the therapy of it<sup>590</sup>: “the apparatus of mass tuition – the successor to the church in a secularized society – undermined the family’s capacity to provide for itself and thereby justified the continuing expansion of health, education, and welfare services”<sup>591</sup>. What Rieff called “psychological man”, what Lasch used to call “narcissist”, a very precarious individual devoid of any deep commitment because deprived of the inner-sources for facing the asperities of life, replaced the moral and religious man, who in the past could develop such an inner direction by means of inherited traditions as well. By means of science and progressive theories of education, a new milder and paternal system, without conflicts and struggles of class, could have been emerged: a new paternalism would have replaced a past burdened with conflicts and prejudices<sup>592</sup>. But the resulting figure, who would be emerged, would have been a de-humanised individual, for his incapacity of morality, namely his incapacity of taking decisions on the strength of his inner sources, of which he actually lacked. The therapeutic ethic, in sum, was for Lasch in antithesis with the very nature of human existence: “therapeutic morality encourages a permanent suspension of the moral sense”<sup>593</sup>.

The erosion of the family, to conclude, had had for Lasch disastrous effects on the very structure of society. By means of that, even a sense of rootedness, particularism, loyalty and radical dependence from others is

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<sup>590</sup> See in particular Ch. Lasch, *Democracy vs. Therapy*, cit.

<sup>591</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 18:

<sup>592</sup> See in particular, Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., pp. 218-236.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230.

matured. Moreover, family can be considered a very Christian institution, because it hinges on love and fraternity, but also because it helps to introject the idea that human life is made of an imperfect blend of delight and pain, joy and tragic sense. However, Vree in his review to *Haven* still conceived Lasch as a not religious and Christian man. But the director of the “New Oxford review” argued that “he says things that will cheer the heart of any believing Christian”<sup>594</sup>. It was the time in which Lasch was still influenced by Freud. And Vree continued by saying that “if he adheres to any ‘religion’, it would seem to be a kind of Freudianism”<sup>595</sup>. Freud’s influence on him will be strong until *The Minimal Self*. But it is crucial, to clarify it, how Lasch evaluated Freud’s insights.

Lasch’s interpretation of Freud, as elsewhere I have already remarked, was totally at odds with either those who considered him the theorist of liberationism, like Marcuse, or those who considered his theories something like a religion or science. As he clearly stated during some conferences that he held in 1981, at the “Freud Lectures”, Lasch interpreted Freud as a moralist and humanist who stressed human limitations. For this reason, he could not be interpreted as a lever through which trying to rebuild human society from its foundations<sup>596</sup>. In other words, according to Lasch Freud’s theory could have been regarded as part of the classical moral understanding of human beings as limited, imperfect and fragile creatures<sup>597</sup>: Lasch used Freud, in essence, as a tool

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<sup>594</sup> D. Vree, *A Socialist for Decency*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>596</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Freudian Left and the Theory of Cultural Revolution*, cit.

<sup>597</sup> See Ch. Lasch to Mr. Braffman, 10 December 1985, Lasch Papers, Box 26, Folder 19.

against human hybris, a means by which rediscovering moral realism<sup>598</sup>. Freudianism was not a substitute for religion, according to Lasch. Indeed, in 1979 he had already stated that “religion is the substitute for religion”<sup>599</sup>. The reviewer for the “New Oxford Review” of *The Minimal Self*, in fact, wondered if Lasch could be called Christian. The answer he gave was negative, but he wrote as follows: “A careful reading of *The Minimal Self* shows that Lasch admires much of the Judeo-Christian tradition; its loss of vigor, he suggests, accounts in part for the malaise that grips so many Americans. His view of man’s divided nature — ‘the painful awareness of the gulf between human aspirations and human limitations’ — cuts close to the Christian doctrine of original sin.”<sup>600</sup>. In the end, he considered him “a fellow traveller of Christianity”<sup>601</sup>. Psychoanalysis could help, in his words, “reviving a half-forgotten tradition of moral and public discourse in which the intellectual addressed his appeal to conscience, not to scientific reason, on the one hand, or to the romantic dream of liberation, on the other”<sup>602</sup>. And he continued as follows: “From this point of view, the value of psychoanalysis lies in its capacity to recapture some of the deepest insights of an earlier religious tradition”<sup>603</sup>. That statement well shows how Lasch was moving, and already from an earlier time, to some kind of religious belief. While he abandoned Freudian discourse, in the following years, he was by then

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<sup>598</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *The Moral Implications of Psychoanalysis*, cit.

<sup>599</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Me Decade*, cit.

<sup>600</sup> J.J. Thompson Jr., *Christopher Lasch: A Fellow Traveler with Christianity?*, cit.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>602</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Moral Implications of Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibidem*.

approaching some kind of religious sentiment against human hybris and desire of omnipotence.

That was precisely an interest of research about which Lasch wrote a series of article for the “New Oxford Review”, from 1986 to 1993<sup>604</sup>. In his interpretation, religion was the antithesis of the Enlightenment: the former was based on the recognition of human limits; the latter instead was hinged on the temptation of overcoming them. As he wrote in a note I found in Lasch Papers, a sort of table of contents for a study of liberalism he never wrote as a book, religion was the right reverse of Enlightenment<sup>605</sup>: the former tried to bind individuals in communities, by making them conscious of their dependence on others, due to their intrinsic limitations; the latter pursued the total liberation of the individual, according to Lasch, from larger contexts, by expanding everywhere freedom of choice and liberations from loyalties, long-term commitments, moral constraints. What Lasch started to call gnosticism was precisely the extension of the legacy of Enlightenment through science. To some extent, Lasch reversed the argument one of the most important scholars of gnosticism, Eric Voegelin, according to whom it was a religious heresy which manifested itself in contemporary totalitarian movements. For Lasch, gnostic impulse was even much rooted in the liberal mind of his time: liberalism, in his opinion, aimed at liberating human beings from their very human condition, by means of

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<sup>604</sup> In chronological order: *The Infantile Illusion of Omnipotence & the Modern Ideology of Science*, cit., October 1986; *Probing Gnosticism & Its Modern Derivatives*, cit., December 1990; *The Spirit of Modern Science*, cit., January-February 1991; *Anti-Modern Mysticism: E.M. Cioran & C.G. Jung*, cit., March 1991; *The New Age Movement: No Effort, No Truth, No Solutions*, cit., April 1991.

<sup>605</sup> Lasch Papers, Box 21, Folder 27.

science and in order to pursue an unlimited knowledge and, as a consequence of that, an unlimited power over nature.

By means of reason conceived as an absolute and infallible tool for understanding and re-order human world, as consequence of the project of Enlightenment in his opinion, human beings become equated to a “God-like status”, Lasch wrote in his first article about gnosticism: “The modern scientific project is not to reduce man to a machine but to elevate him — through his control of machines — to godlike status. It is in this sense that gnosticism, the most archaic and regressive of religions, turns out to be so modern: in its equation of salvation with knowledge (as opposed to contrition), its belief that knowledge will enable men to triumph over the material world and over their own physical limitations, and above all in its assumption that saving knowledge must remain esoteric, accessible only to a spiritual or intellectual elite”<sup>606</sup>. If Christianity, as Lasch argued in a following essay published in 1991, and also Judaism “set definite limits to man’s domination of nature, limits inherent in the belief that the natural world is a manifestation of God’s glory”, the spirit of modern science, however, had much more in common with gnosticism, which hinged on rebellion against human limitations: “Rebellion, not devotion, is the animating impulse of the scientific enterprise as it has come to be understood in the modern world — rebellion against limits on human power and freedom, against bodily frailty and finitude, against the human condition itself”<sup>607</sup>. Such a

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<sup>606</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Infantile Illusion of Omnipotence & the Modern Ideology of Science*, cit.

<sup>607</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Spirit of Modern Science*, cit.

rebellion against human limitations, to be honest, Lasch would have argued in *The True and Only Heaven*, but also in an article that was published in 1989 in the “New Oxford Review”, was shared by liberalism and socialism as well: both were idolaters of progress<sup>608</sup>. In a letter addressed to Dale Vree, Lasch criticized what socialism was become, or perhaps was always been, namely “so terribly progressive”: “It assumes both the inevitability and desirability of the large-scale organization of industry, ignoring its devastating effect on craftsmanship (...); and it holds furthermore that the uprooting of the working class from its dull pre-capitalist communal life will lead to a more aggressive defense of its collective interests and thus contribute to the march of democracy”<sup>609</sup>. An anti-industrialist, and in part agrarian, decentralist and localist, rooted in tradition and communitarian vision was pervaded Lasch<sup>610</sup>.

That position, which Lasch defended as neither left- nor right-wing, was explicated in other articles as well. He wrote, in fact, the opening article for a review, “Tikkun”, in 1986. A review that Vree himself, due to the complementary perspective to the “New Oxford Review’s” warmly greeted<sup>611</sup>. *What’s Wrong with the Right*<sup>612</sup>, the first Laschian article for “Tikkun”, was followed then by another article written by him for the

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<sup>608</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Obsolescence of Left and Right: On the Exhaustion of the Idea of Progress*, cit.

<sup>609</sup> Ch. Lasch to Dale (Vree), 27 January 1987, Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 19.

<sup>610</sup> We have already noted that point in chap. 2 when we spoke of Lasch’s contribution to “democracy”. Lasch was influenced by Lewis Mumford and Wendell Berry, and also by the agrarian critique of progress and modernity. We will speak of it in the last chapter. However, it must be noted that Thompson Jr, one of the most careful contributors of the review of Lasch’s works was an agrarian. That aspect well explains his attention towards Lasch.

<sup>611</sup> D. Vree, *Not so Lonely Anymore*, cit.

<sup>612</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What’s Wrong with the Right*, cit.



second number of the review, *Why the Left Has No Future*<sup>613</sup>. Lasch demonstrated, if it was still necessary, how he was critical both of his contemporary right and his contemporary left: he was a maverick. However, he seemed to be even much critical of the left and in particular of liberalism. Indeed, Lasch considered Reagan a false conservative. He wanted to safeguard, at least at talking, the “ordinary people”, traditional values, the family, which all were traditional point of reference for a conservative – or at least for a true conservative, as he thought of himself. At the same time, though, he was on the big business side, and he praised deregulation and free market. All that was antithetical, he thought, to real conservatism which is radically based on continuity, stability, rootedness: the exact reverse of what idolizes change, namely the market and capitalism. However, Lasch noted how Reagan had been “a political genius” because he occupied a political space, that of the so called “Middle America”, that the left, espousing an elitist and therapeutic perspective, had long abandoned<sup>614</sup>. But for Lasch, what Reagan argued about the defence of the family, the communitarian life, the safeguard of traditional values, was not still enough because the market, at least the large-scale market was one of the enemies of the true conservatism as Lasch meant it: “There is a fundamental contradiction between Reagan’s rhetorical defence of ‘family’ and ‘neighbourhood’ and his championship

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<sup>613</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Why the Left Has No Future*, cit.

<sup>614</sup> B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit. See also Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., pp. 38-39, 515-516. Elsewhere, about the conservative turn in the eighties, he wrote as follows: “I think the ‘backlash’ has to be attributed not to their adherence the *status quo* but rather to the failure of the left to address Middle America with anything but contempt. The left values change, ‘innovation’, and the exploration of self, which it confuses with personal liberation. Middle Americans value continuity, stability and personal responsibility”, Ch. Lasch, *The Conservative ‘Backlash’ and the Cultural Civil War*, cit., p. 9.

of the unregulated business enterprise that replaced neighbourhood with shopping malls and superhighways. A society dominated by the free market, – Lasch continued his last article published in 1988 in the “New York Review of Books” – in which the ‘American dream’ means making a bundle, has small place for ‘family values’”<sup>615</sup>. For that reason, Reagan was for Lasch a liberal, rather than a conservative. But he recognised that not all was to reject: “The new politics we need (...) will owe more to the populist tradition than to either liberalism or conservatism. It will combine an attack on wealth and privilege with a defense of ‘traditional values’ far more thoroughgoing and consistent than Reagan’s. Reaganism is just the beginning”<sup>616</sup>.

In *What’s Wrong with the Right* he argued as follows: “The left, which until recently has regarded itself as the voice of the ‘forgotten man’, has lost the common touch. Failing to create a popular consensus in favor of its policies, the left has relied on the courts, the federal bureaucracy, and the media to achieve its goals of racial integration, affirmative action, and economic equality. Ever since War World II, it has used essentially undemocratic means to achieve democratic ends, and it has paid the price for this evasive strategy in the loss of public confidence and support”<sup>617</sup>. According to Lasch, the left, instead of defending those crucial intermediate and natural institutions, such as the family, from the invasion of the market and tutelary agencies of the therapeutic state, had promoted the “rightism” for all. The family – that

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<sup>615</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Reagan’s Victims*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>617</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What’s Wrong with the Right*, cit., p. 3.

Lasch in *Haven* had defined as among the institutions “the most resistant to change”<sup>618</sup> – was no longer seen as a key element of stability and permanence, but rather as a mere cumbersome legacy of the past. The culture of consumption, a culture shared by all political spectrum, that was so threatening for the cohesion and the unity of the family “undermines the values of loyalty and permanence”<sup>619</sup>. The same very idea of progress, so warmly welcomed still by contemporary conservatives such as Reagan, was at odds with the family itself and the sense of continuity that underlines it. While defending propriety, a crucial element of a good society for Lasch as well, contemporary conservatism did not consider the difference between a material and a non-material conception of it: the first is for Lasch essential, in the Jeffersonian tradition, because it helps to cultivate self-control and discipline, responsibility and a sense of rooted freedom, and it is based on a work ethic; the second, instead, made of stocks and bonds, destroys such a responsibility, erodes the connection between human beings, his work and reality, and it hinges on a consumption ethic<sup>620</sup>. Conservative ideology, in sum, at least in its contemporary manifestation, is deeply anti-traditional. It pursued the values “of the man on the make, in flight from his own past, from his ancestors, from the family claim, from

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<sup>618</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>619</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What's Wrong with the Right*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16. In an article he quoted very favourably the conception of propriety of Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver, who shared his ideas about it. See Ch. Lasch, *Beyond Left and Right*, “Dissent”, Fall 1991, p. 588. Weaver’s ideas, in particular, are very much similar to Lasch’s. This is perhaps well explained by the fact that Weaver was an epigone of the Southern agrarians, whose vision was close to Lasch’s one. See R.M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1984, chap. 7. Weaver called propriety “the last metaphysical right” also due to its crucial role of check to Leviathan power. For an analysis of the similarities between the thinkers above-mentioned, see chap. 5 and chap. 6.

everything that ties him down and limits his freedom of movement. What is traditional about the rejection of tradition, continuity, and rootedness? A conservatism that sides with the forces of restless mobility is a false conservatism”<sup>621</sup>. Similarly, Vree could write that “both the Right, with its pursuit of reckless economic innovation and nuclear brinksmanship, and the Left, with its pursuit of destructive personal experimentation, constitute forces of moral disintegration”<sup>622</sup>. If Lasch had criticized his contemporary right in the first article published in “Tikkun”, in the second article he deplored the left ideology of the “nonbinding commitments”, as he called it in *Haven*<sup>623</sup>. The left deemed every constraint and obligation as an authoritarian imposition. Due to the fact that it espoused a radical contractual view of association, because of its absolutistic interpretation of it, it cannot accept anything but freely chosen. However, Lasch remembered, freedom cannot be broken away from every constraint: that would be the condition of a more than human creature. Furthermore, obligations constitute a “test for character” as well: they help to develop self-control and discipline, sense of honour and loyalty, sense of limits and consciousness of the very condition of human dependence<sup>624</sup>. For this reason, the rejection of the left of binding commitments well explained, for Lasch, its incompatibility with the very idea of the family: “The modern conception gives little support to the binding promises that under-lie the family, especially when we add to the ideology of individual rights the widely accepted belief in the universal

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<sup>621</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What's Wrong with the Right*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>622</sup> D. Vree, *Not so Lonely Anymore*, cit.

<sup>623</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 134.

<sup>624</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Why the Left Has No Future*, cit.

obligation to be happy. Liberal ideology not only gives little support to the family, it cannot even make sense of the family, an institution that appears irrational in the sense that its members ideally do not think of their own interests and of the rights designed to protect them, and in the further sense that they promise to sustain each other through a lifetime. What folly!”<sup>625</sup>.

In 1987 then Vree organized an important conference concerning the possibility of a meeting between “humane socialism and traditional conservatism”. As Vree admitted to a letter addressed to Lasch, the articles that the historian wrote for “Tikkun” had been the true sources of inspiration for the symposium<sup>626</sup>. After receiving his writing, Vree wrote to Lasch for saying that his was the best of the fifteen he received<sup>627</sup>. The symposium took place in September 1987, and the contributions were already published in the review number of October<sup>628</sup>. In brief, Vree had asked to the participants to comment what James J. Thompson Jr. wrote in the pages of the review about the idea of the sociologist Peter Berger according to whom capitalism is absolutely not conservative, but rather progressive, due to its attitude to change every material, social, political, and cultural facet of the societies it touches. Thompson, who was an

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<sup>625</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>626</sup> D. Vree to Kit (Christopher Lasch), Lasch Papers, 12 June 1987, Box 27, Folder 12.

<sup>627</sup> D. Vree to Kit, 28 July 1987, Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 12.

<sup>628</sup> ‘*Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism*’, “New Oxford Review”, October 1987. In addition to Lasch the participants were the following (in order of publication: Lasch’s contribution, which was considered by Vree the linchpin of the conference, was the last): Thomas Molnar, John B. Judis, John Lukacs, James G. Hanink, Sheldon Vanauken, Michael Lerner, Christopher Derrick, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Samuel Hux, Russell Kirk, John C. Cort, Juli Loesch, L. Brent Bozell, Robert Coles. As I have read in a document found in Lasch Papers, Box 27, Folder 12, the following intellectual personalities were invited but did not participate: Daniel Bell, Robert N. Bellah, James Buchanan, George G. Higgins, Joe Holland, Francis X. Meier, Murray N. Rothbard, George F. Will.

agrarian and traditionalist, answered as follows in his review: “How can the traditionalist defend tradition while ignoring one of its prime destroyers? Industrial capitalism simply cannot be squared with the values he cherishes”<sup>629</sup>. Deeply imbued with agrarian traditionalism – he defined *I’ll Take My Stand* “the most compelling defense of traditional society enunciated in 20th-century America”<sup>630</sup> – Thompson estimated “repugnant”, from a conservative point of view at least, Berger’s eulogy of capitalism, the most powerful, disruptive and disintegrating force ever existed. According to Thompson, by echoing explicitly Robert Nisbet’s ideas, the real enemy of a traditionalist vision properly understood was the utilitarian, economistic and Darwinian mind of the free-marketers: “For free-marketeers, the ultimate evil is socialism; the traditionalist knows better. His 19th-century forebears directed their most heated ire not at socialism, but at utilitarianism, Manchester liberalism, social Darwinism, and assorted other apologies for the new economic order. Certainly, they despised Marxism, but they discerned in some types of socialism an ethos not unlike their own”<sup>631</sup>. Nisbet had noted, in fact, that a certain type of socialism, the guild socialism and the French and

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<sup>629</sup> J.J. Thompson Jr., *American Conservatism’s Lost Soul*, cit. The books he reviewed were: P.L. Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions About Prosperity, Equality and Liberty*, Basic Books, New York, 1986; P. Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the Postwar American Right*, Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, 1986; R. Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986; M. Hereth, *Alexis De Tocqueville: Threats to Freedom in Democracy*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1985; G. Panichas, C. Ryn, *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1986.

<sup>630</sup> *Ibidem*. As I have already written, *I’ll Take My Stand* was the southern agrarian manifesto published in 1930. To be noted, furthermore, that Thompson contributed to edit a collection of southern essays of one of the major epigones of the agrarians, Richard Weaver: G.M. Curtis III, J.J. Thompson J. (eds.), *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1987. He was, moreover, an editor of “Chronicles” as well.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibidem*. Thompson was furious with Reaganomics, as also Gottfried, a paleo-conservative was.

German Catholic socialism as well, could be allies of conservatives, due to their hostility both of capitalist and collective monism. Thus, Thompson concluded as follows: “Might the traditionalist consider joining forces with the heirs to such forms of socialism? How this could be accomplished I cannot say, for the obstacles are legion. But before dismissing the suggestion as sheer lunacy, he might ask himself a simple question. Who best approximates the traditionalist vision: Dorothy Day or the president of General Motors? Christopher Lasch or Milton Friedman? Robert Coles or Irving Kristol?”<sup>632</sup>.

In his contribution to the symposium Lasch expressed a very similar point of view: “That cultural conservatives should oppose capitalism almost goes without saying. The free market is the great destroyer of tradition. It fosters a rootless, restless mode of life. It promotes change for the sake of change. Its ideal embodiment and symbol is the bulldozer, by means of which the real estate interests plough under the past and put it up for sale”<sup>633</sup>. In his perspective, there could be space for a fruitful meeting between a certain conservatism, not his contemporary conservatism or neoconservatism, and a certain socialism, not the welfare state or simply statist socialism of his time. Some key points for that conversation could have been: a sense of respect, even though not uncritical and dogmatic, for the past; the defence of the

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<sup>632</sup> *Ibidem*. That was also Lasch’s growing opinion. See in particular Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit.

<sup>633</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to ‘Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism’*, cit. In different letters Lasch manifested his appreciation for what Thompson wrote, not only about the consideration towards Lasch’s work, but for the very vision he embodied: Ch. Lasch to Richard (Neuhaus), 15 August 1988, Lasch Papers, Box 28, Folder 23; Ch. Lasch to Dale (Vree), 29 October 1988, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 5.

habits and places of the heart and traditions; a sense of limits hinged on a religious vision; a perspective of the good life not merely based on the hedonistic and economic aspect; defence of material property as lever for the cultivation of responsibility, virtue, and intergenerational continuity, and no less important as bulwark against the Leviathan; radical democracy conceived as decentralised and localist self-government. Unfortunately, as he noted, contemporary conservatism and socialism had other priorities: the former was actually liberal, by defending uncritically free market and capitalism; the latter advocated a cultural radicalism, by rejecting restraints and obligations, and tended to idolize centralistic state rather than to ask for radical self-government of common and ordinary people, and was deeply progressive: “How socialism came to be identified with progress and the cult of technology is another mystery. Socialism ought to mean a respect for limits, a sense of place, a recognition of mutual dependence, a rejection of material abundance as the only requirement of a good life. It implies fraternity, not an abstract conception of equality. But the socialist ideal as we know it today offers little in the way of an alternative to capitalism. It is the product of 19th-century optimism and of an outdated Darwinian theory of social evolution. ‘Dialectical materialism’ conceives of socialism as capitalism without the capitalist. It welcomes the giant corporation, the division of labor that reduces the worker to an automaton, the multiplication of needs and wants, and the insatiable appetite for change as the foundations of a new order”<sup>634</sup>. And he concluded his intervention

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<sup>634</sup> *Ibidem*. For him socialism was close to cultural conservatism: “If socialism means the common ownership of land, a labour-intensive economy, the restoration of



as follows: “Conservatives face a doubly daunting task: to take cultural conservatism back from the capitalists and socialism from the socialists. Not work for the faint-hearted!”<sup>635</sup>.

What Lasch identified with conservatism was not an ideology or a dogmatic set of nostalgic belief. It was, as he stated in an intervention in another symposium organized by the “New Oxford Review”, “the product of experience, not of inherited dogma or nostalgia for “the 50s”<sup>636</sup>. Lasch’s perspective, in sum, was quite at odds with his contemporary conservatives and, at the same, with the radical or liberal mainstream perspective. The “New Oxford Review”, however, demonstrated to be a fellow traveller with Lasch on the basis of a cultural conservative sensibility, which, nonetheless, was radically democratic –

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craftsmanship, the conservation of scarce resources, and a more modest standard of living, the alliance of cultural conservatism and socialism ought to be irresistible. But socialism means none of those things today”.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibidem*. What Lasch called socialism was in sum something like rooted conservatism, small-scale production, defence of traditions: a type of socialism perhaps that could be feasible only in Lasch’s perspective. It was, actually, a sort of “distributism”, a perspective Lasch had been starting to study since just a few years. A very similar opinion, even if not using the term socialism, was expressed by the conservative Russell Kirk, who, like Lasch, hated concentrations of power and economism, namely a social vision based only in utilitarian, progressive and enlightened terms. See R. Kirk, *Contribution to ‘Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism’*, cit: “The ‘capitalist’ ideologues who proclaim that the Holy Market is the be-all and end-all are working their own destruction. As truly private property gives way to colossal mergers and combinations, the prediction of Marx is increasingly fulfilled: monopolies and oligopolies find few defenders in rough times, and are converted readily into agencies of the state. As the liberals’ moral nihilism dissolves the inner order and the outer, truly things fall apart. For the sake of the permanent things, we ought to transcend mere faction and unite to redeem the time”. But also the vision expressed by the historian John Lukacs was similar: “The great task before traditionalist conservatives is the defense of Christian and Western civilization through a rejection of an — increasingly abstract — materialism, but also through a — long overdue — rethinking of the very meaning of ‘progress’”, in *ibidem*. Actually, Lasch and Lukacs, both historians, had agreed in another occasion about the importance of history as the embodiment of the past and the continuity among generations: see Ch. Lasch, *Response: History in America, ‘Salmagundi’*, n. 50-51, Fall 1980-Winter 1981, pp. 181-92 (panel with Henry Pachter, Robert Orrill, John Lukacs, Dwight Macdonald, Gerald Graff).

<sup>636</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to ‘Symposium on Transcending Ideological Conformity: Beyond ‘Political Correctness’*, *Left or Right*, “New Oxford Review”, October, 1991.

as Lasch would have told populist<sup>637</sup>: “the essence of cultural conservatism is a certain respect for limits. The central conservative insight is that human freedom is constrained by the natural conditions of human life, by the weight of history, by the fallibility of human judgment, and by the perversity of the human will. Conservatives are often accused of an exaggerated esteem for the past, but it is not the moral superiority of the past so much as its inescapability that impresses them. What we are is largely inherited, in the form of gender, genetic endowment, institutions, predispositions—including the universal predisposition to resent these constraints on our freedom and to dream of abolishing them. What was called original sin, in a bygone age, referred to the most troubling aspect of our natural inheritance—our natural incapacity for graceful submission to our subordinate position in the larger scheme of things”<sup>638</sup>.

### ***4.3 Towards a Conservative Vision Well Understood?***

As Lasch wrote “The search for definitions is never a very fruitful procedure to begin with, not at least in the social sciences, where everything depends on the historical context in which actions and ideas unfold and where superficial resemblances, accordingly, may conceal crucial differences of nuance and tone”<sup>639</sup>. In this sense, he did not like describe himself with a superficial, journalistic political label. What

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<sup>637</sup> See Ch. Lasch, *Communitarianism or Populism? The Ethic of Compassion and the Ethic of Respect*, cit.

<sup>638</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit.

<sup>639</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Probing Gnosticism & Its Modern Derivatives*, cit.

mattered for him, hence, were ideas. Ideas, he thought, do not follow fixed and set paths, because there is no philosophy of history, and ideas and the human beings that spread them are free to choose and to develop a unique and peculiar road of thought. But Lasch was unmistakably at odds with liberalism and the left. His contemporary representatives of such a cultural tradition had espoused an elitist and therapeutic point of view, whereas Lasch sided with common sense and moral realism<sup>640</sup>. What one of his friends wrote explains very well, or at least in part, Lasch's cultural choice facing the world he lived in: "in a society dedicated to economic development and 'personal growth' at the expense of all larger loyalties, conservative values are too important to be left to pseudoconservative apologists for capitalism. In our time, the most profound radicalism is often the most profound conservatism."<sup>641</sup>. What is sure is that Lasch did not, could not, share his own path with many fellows<sup>642</sup>. His perspective collided with liberals, radicals and (neo)conservatives as well. It is not a case if a particular strand of conservatism, heir of the Old Right and the southern agrarians, very much at odds with neoconservatism and Reagan, namely paleo-conservatism,

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<sup>640</sup> See in particular P.A Lawler, *Moral Realism versus Therapeutic Elitism*, cit.

<sup>641</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *Preface* (1980) in, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. XXVIII. Jackson Lears was a friend of Lasch and explicitly mentioned him as a source of influence. To be noted that in the archive, Lasch Papers, Box 6, Folder 17, I found a Lears' book review that he addressed to Lasch and in which he expressed favour with the radical-conservative critique of progress of the southern agrarians as expressed in a book in which contemporary southerners remembered and thanked their predecessors in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of *I'll Take My Stand*, cit., namely W.C. Havard, W. Sullivan (eds), *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*, Louisiana University Press, Baton Rouge, 1982. The book review is T.J. Jackson Lears, *Still Taking Their Stand*, "The Nation", July 1982, pp. 52-54.

<sup>642</sup> A.O. Lian, *Christopher Lasch: A Loon on the Street Corner?*, "New Oxford review", December 1991.

manifested its growing deep interest in Lasch's work. We will speak of it in the next chapter, but for now it is sufficient to say that the magazine which was the point of reference of the movement, "Chronicles", tried several times to let Lasch write for it: in 1990, in the end, he published in the magazine an essay<sup>643</sup>. In particular, in 1986 the magazine, by means of its director Thomas Fleming, wrote to Lasch for sharing with him its appreciation for his article *What's Wrong with the Right*. In the letter, Fleming argued how Lasch had given voice to some ideas that the magazine and paleo-conservatives radically shared: critique of progress and capitalism and of what mainstream conservatism had become<sup>644</sup>. But in particular a member of the group, if it is possible to consider as a definite group, became infatuated, so to speak, of Lasch's works. That was historian Paul Gottfried. In his autobiography, Gottfried remembered how had admired Lasch's works on the therapeutic state<sup>645</sup>. As a matter of fact, in his history of the conservative movement, a sort of counter-history of it in comparison to other more positive works in their judgment of conservatism considered, even if in its internal differences, as a whole<sup>646</sup>, he gave space to what he called "the unravelling of the conservative movement": neoconservatism, similarly to Lasch's point of view, was for Gottfried anything but a sort of liberalism<sup>647</sup>. *The True and*

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<sup>643</sup> I am referring to Ch. Lasch, *The New Class Controversy*, cit.

<sup>644</sup> Th. Fleming to Prof. Lasch, 17 September 1986, cit. Remember that one of the contributors of the "New Oxford Review", James Thompson, who, as we have seen, appreciated a lot Lasch's ideas, was ascribable to paleo-conservatism.

<sup>645</sup> P. Gottfried, *Encounters*, cit.

<sup>646</sup> See in particular G.H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, cit.

<sup>647</sup> P. Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, cit.

*Only Heaven*, furthermore, was seen as a crucial source of inspiration<sup>648</sup>. In an interview he gave to a young scholar, Gottfried explicitly stated that the conservative vision he had was “much closer to Christopher Lasch than any other modern conservative”<sup>649</sup>. Still, Gottfried noted that Lasch, if he was not prematurely dead, could have become even more conservative than the paleo-conservative candidate for American presidency in the primary election of the conservatives in 1992 and 1996, Patrick Buchanan<sup>650</sup>. Actually, Gottfried also called Lasch religiously based communitarian and socialist<sup>651</sup>. However, in my interpretation Lasch was not, no longer at least, socialist since the end of the seventies. Even if Lasch admired some form of nonmainstream socialism, as he explicitly argued for instance in *Conservatism Against Itself*, his populist sensibility was much closer to a form of conservatism: a cultural, anti-capitalist conservatism. Indeed, as also Gottfried noted, Lasch was moving to some form of religion for counteracting the growing secularism of his time: religion served, in Lasch’s opinion, for letting human beings remember their humble and precarious condition, in opposition to modern, progressive and gnostic liberalism. Religion, Lasch thought, was not only a haven in a heartless world, as the title of

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<sup>648</sup> Gottfried included Lasch’s book in the bibliographic essay, in the works that affected American conservatism since 1945, together with books written, just to mention a few, by Hayek, Weaver, Kirk, Nisbet, Voegelin, Lukacs and so on. It has to be noted that both Gottfried and Lasch were in the orbit of “Telos”, a review that reunited several different sensibilities, from libertarians to conservatives and some types of socialists too. In the archive of Rochester, I found some correspondence of the two, but I will deal with it in the next chapter: Lasch Papers, Box 7a, Folder 21.

<sup>649</sup> S. Barteo, *Imagination Movers*, cit., p. 26. Gottfried’s book *After Liberalism*, cit., as we have already remembered, was written also under the influence of Lasch’s thought.

<sup>650</sup> P. Gottfried, *Encounters*, cit., p. 181. In the archive, I also found an article of Buchanan in which he criticized the (neo)conservative idea of democracy exportation: Lasch Papers, Box 30, Folder 22.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibidem*.

perhaps his most significant work: it is “a challenge to self-pity and despair (...). Submission to God makes people less submissive in everyday life. It makes them less fearful but also less bitter and resentful, less inclined to make excuses for themselves”<sup>652</sup>. It constitutes a precious instrument for facing reality and develop a responsible sense of limits. In an era of pride and illusion in human beings’ capacity of dominating nature and their own condition, the belief and faith in a transcendent order could replace human hybris of creating the paradise on earth. That radical and conservative critique of human hybris that Lasch was maturing in his final years of life well explain also his interest for a thinker, Orestes Brownson, that Lasch not by chance defined “one of my favourites”<sup>653</sup>, of whom he even wrote an article for the “New Oxford Review”<sup>654</sup>. In a similar manner to Lasch, Brownson started as a socialist but over the years he became a cultural conservative, never abandoning radicalism and his deep commitment to democracy as self-government and proprietorship, and he even converted to Catholicism<sup>655</sup>.

Dale Vree himself wrote in his eulogy how Lasch was so shy in speaking of his religiousness. But he reported that one of his friends told

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<sup>652</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Misreading the Facts About Families*, “Commonweal”, 22 February 1991, p. 138. Elsewhere, Lasch wrote in positive terms about the Christian existentialism of Pascal and Kierkegaard, about whom, it should be noted and we have already remarked in chap. 1, Lasch was interested since he was young. Contrary to gnosticism as faith of the faithless, that is to say belief in science as a pseudo-religion, and to a religion whose God is indifferent to human lives and is inaccessible, Pascal’s and Kierkegaard’s God “is remote but by no means hidden or inaccessible and who see grace and faith – ideas that play no part in gnostic theology – as the bridge between heaven and earth”, Ch. Lasch, *Gnosticism, Ancient and Modern*, cit., pp. 33-34.

<sup>653</sup> Ch. Lasch to Dale Vree, 14 November 1988, cit.

<sup>654</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Orestes Brownson’s Christian Radicalism*, cit. Note that he wrote also a voice on Brownson for an American encyclopedia: Ch. Lasch, *Orestes Brownson*, in R. Wightman Fox, J.T. Kloppenberg (eds.), *A Companion to American Thought*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>655</sup> See also R. Kirk, Introduction to O. Brownson, *Selected Political Essays*, ed. by R. Kirk, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1990.

him that Lasch once was present at a conference of evangelicals. Assumed the he was an agnostic, a participant asked him if he was a believer. But if Lasch answered “not really”, his wife intervened and said that her husband was a believer actually<sup>656</sup>. True or not, Vree ended his memoir by arguing that “he admitted to me that Calvinism was his theological inspiration, but he also insisted he was not a Calvinist. Anyhow, he told me bluntly, ‘Calvinism is dead’. He spoke to me favourably of Jansenism, and in the final analysis it seemed to me that he died a Jansenist. If so, he was an honest Jansenist. He knew enough Catholic theology, and he respected the Church enough, to understand that to be a Jansenist one must stand outside the Church. But he seemed to keep looking in wistfully. Had he lived another decade, who knows if he would have ironed out his difficulties and entered? Only God knows. What I do know is that some of the best friends of the Church are those who, for a variety of reasons, have basically stood outside — e.g., Simone Weil, Henri Bergson, Henry Adams, C.S. Lewis, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Robert Coles. And Christopher Lasch”<sup>657</sup>. But Lasch was very much interested in religious and, broadly speaking, Christian themes.

In a letter of 1988 addressed to Vree, he asked him pieces of advice for starting to study Catholic social thought and natural law tradition<sup>658</sup>. In the answer, Vree recommended him some crucial works, such as the encyclical of Pope Jean Paul II *Laborem Exercens* (1981) and *Sollicitudo*

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<sup>656</sup> D. Vree, *A Memoir*, cit.

<sup>657</sup> *Ibidem*. It is difficult to argue, however, that Lasch was a Jansenist. If Lasch’s vision was pessimist, and not optimist, he was also hopeful in grace. Moreover, he believed that human beings could act for the good, because of their capacity of freely choosing

<sup>658</sup> Ch. Lasch to Dale (Vree), 29 October 1988, cit.

*Rei Socialis* (1987) and Pope Leo XIII *Rerum Novarum* (1891)<sup>659</sup>. As for the former, Lasch explicitly argued in a late interview that the Pope “has some of the best insights into social questions”<sup>660</sup>. As for the latter, he was perhaps crucial in Lasch’s reflection about subsidiarity, even if he never used the term, by preferring localism or decentralism: but his thought about rooted moral realism in ordinary people in opposition to therapeutic elitist statism went precisely in that direction. In addition to that, moreover, Lasch’s interest in distributism, namely in Belloc and Chesterton’s perspective on social themes, was referable to Vree’s and his review’s influence<sup>661</sup>. Vree, furthermore, was probably crucial in influencing Lasch’s reflection of one of his dearest concepts, “hope”, in the sense that around it a vision could be imagined: a vision based on sense of limits and respect for the natural order of things, as representation of grace and divine will, in opposition to human hybris and gnosticism, namely idolatry of progress and science. Lasch wrote about the consequences of progress in human spirit as follows: “Disillusioned but undaunted: Such is the self-image of modernity, so proud of its intellectual emancipation that it makes no effort to conceal the spiritual price that has to be paid”<sup>662</sup>. In a letter to Lasch, Vree wrote, by referring to the fact that a not named person associated Lasch to Popes Leo XIII

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<sup>659</sup> Dale Vree to Kit (Christopher Lasch), Lasch Papers, 11 November 1988, Box 7d, Folder 5. He also recommended the following books for the study of natural law tradition: P.E. Sigmund, *Natural Law in Political Thought*, Cambridge, Winthrop Publishers, 1971; A. Passerin D’Entreves, *The Natural Law* (1951), Routledge, London, 1994.

<sup>660</sup> B. Murchland, *On the Moral Vision of Democracy*, cit.

<sup>661</sup> Belloc and Chesterton were explicit points of reference of Vree and the New Oxford Review.

<sup>662</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Soul of Man Under Secularism*, cit., p. 30, then in Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 240.



and Pio XI, “not bad company to be in – but they are part of a living, on-going tradition, which is a tradition not only embracing Original Sin, but also (and, ultimately, more importantly) to hope – an otherworldly hope, of course, but also a certain temporal hope”<sup>663</sup>. Later, in another letter, Vree wrote to Lasch that “you must do a book on religious themes”<sup>664</sup>.

In any case, Lasch’s interest for faith may not have been just academic. Furthermore, he radically believed that some form of religious sentiment was the very crucial instrument for the rediscovery of human limitations and acceptance of it. Already in 1985 Lasch argued in a conference that among the three correctives he found to the illusions of liberalism as gnosticism, Christianity was the right one. It teaches human limitations and moral realism, because human world does not end with human existence and living creatures in it<sup>665</sup>. As he expressed in an article for the “New Oxford Review,” Christian vision, according to Lasch, led to a “joyful affirmation of the fitness of things; in other words, to the faith that an imperfect order of being, considered from a merely human point of view, has its own order and beauty at a higher and deeper level. Human happiness, from this point of view, depends on a grateful (rather than a grudging) acknowledgment of the principle that man was made for higher ends than happiness”<sup>666</sup>. For Lasch, Christianity taught

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<sup>663</sup> Dale Vree to Kit (Ch. Lasch), 10 December 1988, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 5.

<sup>664</sup> D. Vree to Kit (Ch. Lasch), 24 September 1991, Lasch Papers, Box 7b, Folder 13.

<sup>665</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Modernism and Its Critics*, cit. The other two were for Lasch Marxism and Romanticism: the former, however, was too much connected to Enlightenment and a progressive, anti-traditional vision of history; the latter, instead, opposed too harshly reason and nature, by totally rejecting reason and overestimating nature.

<sup>666</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The New Age Movement*, cit. Elsewhere, and in a review article to *The True and Only Heaven*, an observer described Lasch’s intellectual and faithful journey as follows: Lasch “rejected vigorously Marxism. Has gratefully embraced Judeo-Christian (read ‘Calvinist’) wisdom about human nature and destiny, and is

moral realism and a crucial sense of finitude and limitedness to human beings, precisely what liberalism, in his opinion, was radically antithetical to<sup>667</sup>. And in Lasch's perspective such a moral realism was more noticeable in the common people and ordinary citizens rather than in liberal elites, who not by chance despised his vision<sup>668</sup>. They appreciated those "homespun values", as he called them, that only rooted and humble common people could echo<sup>669</sup>. The ordinary people, that the left had forgotten because they considered themselves the noblest heir of Enlightenment, were the very stewards of what for Lasch had to be conserved: the very idea of person with its natural attachment to traditions, places of the heart, particularism and the family. As Edmund Burke would have call all that, "the unbought grace of life" itself<sup>670</sup>.

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enthusiastically devoted to the democratic 'populist' tradition in American thought and life", R. Wightman Fox, *Lasching Liberalism*, "Christian Century", 11 March 1992.

<sup>667</sup> On that, see also the review to Lasch's book on progress published in the "New Oxford Review": E.R.F. Sheehan, *Shocks of Recognition*, "New Oxford Review", May 1991, pp. 27-30, Lasch Papers, Box 35, Folder 9. The reviewer wrote that "the liberals' belief in the perfectibility of society reposed on the false optimism of social engineering and has resulted in a culture that has lost its moral moorings. The conservatism of the Reaganites was not authentic conservatism at all but a vulgar consecration of greed that made unlimited growth of business and consumption the goal of human culture", *ibidem*, p. 27. Although Sheehan recognized that not all in Lasch's argument was shareable, his classical and theological conception of man are, indeed. "Is there another social critic abroad today whose mind is so well-nourished, whose sight extends quite so far?", he asked. And he concluded as follows: "As we examine what our society is and what it might become, we will need voices such as Lasch's more than ever", *ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>668</sup> Perhaps the harshest critique Lasch ever received was S. Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993. But Lasch did not have a great opinion of such a scholar. In a letter in which he replied to the question for providing an opinion about some candidates for a vacancy in political theory at the University of Yale, he simply defined him a "hatchet-man" of liberalism: Ch. Lasch to Mr. Russett 14 February 1992, Lasch Papers, Box 7d, Folder 2.

<sup>669</sup> Ch. Lasch to David Cole, 22 March 1992, Lasch Papers, Box 7c, Folder 1.

<sup>670</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, cit., p. 170.

## Chapter 5 - American Conservatism or Conservatism? A Very Short Introduction.

In the intellectual context we inhabit late in the twentieth century (...) merely to conserve is sometimes to perpetuate what is outrageous.

M.E. Bradford<sup>671</sup>

In this chapter I will deal more directly with American conservatism. As every intellectual phenomenon, however, and in particular in conservatism's case, for the very idea of it is opposed to conformism and standardization, it is quite complicated to gather together thinkers and ideas that, even if they could have some similarities, they still maintain crucial differences. As such, in the first part I will consider, very briefly, some differences about the conservative movement, namely between traditionalism and libertarianism, by mentioning some of the most important thinkers among them.

In the second part, in particular, I will consider Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk as the most prominent traditionalist conservatives emerged in the late Forties and at the beginnings of the Fifties. I will focus on their critiques of the ideology of progress and liberalism, by emphasizing, furthermore, their idea of conservatism. The reason for that choice is quite simple: Lasch share many aspects of their thought.

In the last part, then, I will consider the similarities between Christopher Lasch and the Kentuckian agrarian thinker, Wendell Berry

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<sup>671</sup> M.E. Bradford, *The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political*, Sherwood Sjudgen, Peru, 1990, p. II.

(1934-), that Lasch had been considering a lot since his contribution to the journal “democracy”. Berry, soi-disant a “conservationist and agrarian”<sup>672</sup>, was very much close to Lasch’s radicalism and cultural conservatism. Like him, in fact, Lasch emphasized the importance of independent people, supported by property ownership, religious sentiment and rootedness in places and traditions, in order to build, according to a bottom-up process, a good and well-ordered society.

This very idea of a bottom-up order, made of independent individuals, even if kept together by a strong communal bond, and a small-scale economy by them sustained, against big capitalist concentrations of wealth, is indeed a central point for collecting all them in an intellectual group of anti-capitalist conservative thinkers. If they still have some differences, they maintain, however, a crucial decentralist vision also due to the fact that they all were either epigones of the Southern Agrarians (Weaver and Berry) or fascinated by their anti-modern, radical-conservative point of view (Kirk and Lasch). Moreover, as we will see in the sixth and last chapter, this leads directly to consider, as the considerable linking points among them, the decentrist vision of Wilhelm Röpke: although he was not American, and therefore he did not know, at least it seems, the Southern Agrarians, he nevertheless developed a radical critique of power concentration and hoped for a

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<sup>672</sup> W. Berry, *Conservationist and Agrarian* (2002), in *Citizens Papers*, Shoemaker & Hoard, Washington, 2003, pp. 165-174. In a more explicit manner, he defined himself as follows: “I am a conservationist and a farmer, a wilderness advocate and an agrarian”, *ibidem*, p. 165.

systematic decentralization, taking into account as a model Switzerland, a country in which he lived for a long time<sup>673</sup>.

### ***5.1 The Conservative Renaissance in the Fifties and Beyond: Conservatism Between Traditionalism and Libertarianism, Neoconservatism and Paleoconservatism.***

As it should be well known, the term conservatism had never been so much popular in the United States: a country that was born by means of a process of independence from another one, that is to say England, could not conserve anything, except for some cultural sources and inheritances, for creating a new one. In this sense, the ideology of progress, and liberalism as well, was meant to be the cultural horizon of the whole society. Therefore, among others scholars, Lionel Trilling could argue that liberalism was the only living intellectual tradition in the US<sup>674</sup>. Some years later and in a similar way, Louis Hartz argued that the United States did not know any conservative tradition<sup>675</sup>. Then, another important work, about which we have already spoken, *The Authoritarian Personality*, aimed to discredit the typical anti-liberal, and rather

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<sup>673</sup> Indeed, Röpke valued highly the English Distributists, which were very close to the decentralist ideas of the Southern Agrarians. In *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, he wrote about Switzerland as follows: “It therefore seems advisable to us to recommend not only, as is frequently done today, the political but also the economic and social institution of Switzerland as a model for the rehabilitation of world after this war. Switzerland, in any case, refutes by its mere existence every cynical doubt regarding the possibility of realizing our program”, p. 179.

<sup>674</sup> L. Trilling, *Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, Viking Press, New York, 1950.

<sup>675</sup> L. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1955.

conservative, institution, namely the family, arguing that it was the incubator of an authoritarian personality<sup>676</sup>.

Nevertheless, between the end of the forties and during the fifties a strong conservative intellectual reaction emerged. Actually, as the most important historian of the conservative movement argued, conservatism was more a movement of plural ideas than a monolithic group of thinkers<sup>677</sup>. Indeed, it could be divided at least in three distinctive groups: the libertarians or classical liberals, the traditionalists and the anti-communists<sup>678</sup>. Among the first intellectual group, thinkers such as Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek can be mentioned. They were convinced, in essence, even though with some differences, in some cases even remarkable<sup>679</sup>, that there was only an alternative to socialism and contemporary liberalism, which was almost another name for it, namely a classical liberal perspective hinged on market. Between the

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<sup>676</sup> Th. Adorno et al, *The Authoritarian Personality*, cit. Lasch considered that work suffering from a perilous bias: it contributed to diffuse the idea, among liberal elites, that the family was authoritarian and was to be replaced by some form of enlightened authority. The result, however, was for Lasch ruinous: “the reestablishment of political despotism in a form based not on the family but on its dissolution. Instead of liberating the individual from external coercion, the decay of family life subjects him to new forms of domination, while at the same time weakening his ability to resist them”, Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 91. Still, this study, by considering the family as the enemy of democracy and liberation of the individual from its own heavy burdens, provided a strong cultural incentive for enlightened elites to rid of the family, the most important and strenuous check to the growing power of Leviathan, and to launch “the golden age of ‘social relations – the science of social hygiene’”, *ibidem*, p. 95. Thanks to it, in sum, society, suffering from traditionalism and backwardness, could be “scientifically” considered as a sick patient to be straightened and therapeutically supervised.

<sup>677</sup> G.H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, cit. For other sources about conservatism in the US see for instance M. Rothbard, *The Betrayal of the American Right*, ed. and with an introduction of Th. E. Woods Jr., Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn, 2007; P. Allitt, *The Conservatives*, cit.; P. Kolozi, *Conservatism Against Capitalism. From the Industrial Revolution to Globalization*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. XX-XXI. Things are much complicated than that, in particular as for considering interchangeable libertarianism and classical liberalism. However, I simply follow the distinction operated by Nash.

<sup>679</sup> Just to mention a crucial difference between them, whereas Mises had a very positive opinion about reason, Hayek, instead, was much more critical of it.

forties and the fifties, they published several books. We can just mention, as for Mises, *Omnipotent Government* (1944)<sup>680</sup>, *Bureaucracy* (1944)<sup>681</sup> and *Human Action* (1949)<sup>682</sup>; as for Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944)<sup>683</sup>, *Individualism and Economic Order* (1948)<sup>684</sup>, *The Counter-Revolution of Science. Studies in the Abuse of Reason* (1952)<sup>685</sup>, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960)<sup>686</sup>. Traditionalists, instead, were much more worried about the cultural troubles of their time<sup>687</sup>. That meant, for example, rootedness of mass society, loss of true communities, erosion of Christian-Judaic tradition. Among them, we can mention Richard Weaver, and his *Ideas Have Consequences* (1944)<sup>688</sup>, Russell Kirk and his *The Conservative Mind* (1953)<sup>689</sup>. The book written by Weaver was considered, in the words of Frank Meyer, “the *fons et origo* of the contemporary American conservative movement”<sup>690</sup>, whereas the book written by Kirk was considered, and is still probably considered the most

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<sup>680</sup> L. von Mises, *Omnipotent Government: The Rise of the Total State and Total War*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1944.

<sup>681</sup> L. von Mises, *Bureaucracy* (1944), Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962.

<sup>682</sup> L. von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (1949), Henry Regnery, Chicago, 1966.

<sup>683</sup> F.A. von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), Routledge, London and New York, 2006.

<sup>684</sup> F.A. von Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (1948), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966.

<sup>685</sup> F.A. von Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science. Studies in the Abuse of Reason*, The Free Press, Glencoe, 1952.

<sup>686</sup> F.A. von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978.

<sup>687</sup> As this is not the place to deal in detail with the different spirits of conservatism, I will not consider the anti-communists, namely, for instance, Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham, Frank Meyer.

<sup>688</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, cit.

<sup>689</sup> R. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind. From Burke to Eliot* (1953), Regnery, Chicago, 2021. There are many other important books and authors among the traditionalists, but this is not the place to deal with it, since it just a very brief introduction to the following parts of the chapter. Among other traditionalists, we can just quote Robert Nisbet, Eric Voegelin, John Hallowell and Peter Viereck.

<sup>690</sup> F. Meyer, *Richard M. Weaver: An Appreciation*, “Modern Age”, XIV, Summer-Autumn 1970, p. 243.

important book of American conservatives: in the words of Nash “*The Conservative Mind* had decisively catalyzed a self-conscious, unabashedly conservative movement”<sup>691</sup>. It is however difficult to state that conservatism was a movement. Indeed, whereas it was composed by thinkers who were convinced that communism was the enemy during the Cold War, they differed, however, in their perspectives, sometimes even radically. As a matter of fact, in particular Mises, but also Hayek criticized conservative negative attitude towards change. It is famous, for instance, Hayek’s postscript to *The Constitution of Liberty*, paradigmatically entitled *Why I Am not a Conservative*<sup>692</sup>, in which, although he did not quote him, criticized Kirk and his idea of conservatism, by concluding as follows: “Conservatism may often be a useful practical maxim, but it does not give us any guiding principles which can influence long-range developments”<sup>693</sup>. Kirk, nevertheless, did not spare critics, even harsh, to libertarians. In a late book, for example, he argued that, on the one hand, conservatives believe that “there exists an enduring moral order” and that customs, habits and traditions must be defended because without them there could not exist any true freedom; on the other hand, he argued that “what doctrinaire libertarians offer us is an ideology of universal selfishness”<sup>694</sup>. Weaver, perhaps, was less

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<sup>691</sup> G.H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, cit., p. 113.

<sup>692</sup> F.A. von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, cit., pp. 396-411.

<sup>693</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 411. Things, however, happen to be more complicated again. In fact, even the most important biographer of Kirk, Bradley Birzer, argues that, actually, Hayek’s and Kirk’s individualisms are much closer than they admitted: B.J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk. American Conservative*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2015, note n. 128, p. 462. However, alas, this is not the place in which I can consider these themes.

<sup>694</sup> R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (1993), ISI Books, Wilmington, 2004, pp. 170-171. Again, also in this case things are more complicated. In an essay, for example, Kirk argued how he did not disagree with all what libertarians sustained. But he could not



critical about libertarians. He wrote, for instance, that existed a “common ground” between them, even if with some crucial differences<sup>695</sup>.

Another critical point in the conservative movement of ideas came to manifest itself towards the seventies and the eighties, when the so-called neoconservatives, a group of previous Trotskyists and liberals intellectually guided by Irving Kristol<sup>696</sup>, tended to occupy conservatism, and the cultural influence on Reagan, by causing, furthermore, a fracture inside the same movement. Due to the capillary influence of neoconservatism on the conservative movement, the so-called paleoconservatives, heirs of the Old Right and the Southern Agrarians, formed as a distinctive group<sup>697</sup>. As one of them thought, the historian Paul Gottfried, by sharing Lasch’s position on the theme, neoconservatism was not at all conservative: rather, it was another name for liberalism with a particular emphasis on what Oakeshott used to call “rationalism in

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accept the idea that the market is a self-sustaining institution as well as just economy matters. In order of his preference, he put on the lowest level Mises, then Hayek and his most favourite thinker, in this respect, because, like him, he did not conceive the market an all-embracing institution, was Wilhelm Röpke: see R. Kirk, *The New Humanism of Political Economy*, “The South Atlantic Quarterly”, 52, 2, 1953, pp. 180-196; R. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1954, pp. 143-150.

<sup>695</sup> See especially R.M. Weaver, *Conservatism and Libertarianism: The Common Ground* (1960), T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition. Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 2000, pp. 476-482.

<sup>696</sup> The bibliography about neoconservatism is definitely true. For a direct introduction into it, see for instance the books of the “grandfather” of the movement, Irving Kristol: Id, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, Basic Books, New York, 1978; Id, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, Basic Books, New York, 1983; Id, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Free Press, New York, 1995; Id, *The Neoconservative Persuasion. Selected Essays 1942-2009*, ed. by G. Himmelfarb, Basic Books, New York, 2011. For other readings of other neoconservatives, see especially: D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, New York, 1976; M. Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982. For a general introduction see for example, F. Felice, *Prospettiva “neocon”. Capitalismo, democrazia, valori nel mondo unipolare*, Rubbettino, 2005; J. Ehrman, *Neoconservatism*, in B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 610-614; J. Vaisse, *Neoconservatism. The Biography of a Movement*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, 2011; P. Kolozi, *Conservatism Against Capitalism*, cit., chap. 5, *The Neoconservative Critiques of and Reconciliation with Capitalism*.

<sup>697</sup> See for instance J. Scotchie (ed.), *The Paleoconservatives*, cit.

politics”, that is to say top-down-managed solutions, and passion for power<sup>698</sup>. Weaver could not see the development of neoconservatism, for he died in 1963, but Kirk did and was very much at odds with them. In an essay, in fact, he wrote that they were seekers after power, ideologists of capitalism and cultural as well economic imperialists, for they wanted to create a world of standardization and Americanization, in the name of the exportation of democracy, capitalism and industrialization<sup>699</sup>.

It is not difficult to understand, thus, how Lasch in an essay argued in favour of Weaver and Kirk, by stating that traditionalists had almost nothing in common with libertarians, and neoconservatives as well<sup>700</sup>.

## ***5.2 Richard Malcolm Weaver, Russell Kirk and the “God Terms” of Our Time: Liberalism and Progress.***

“Is life worth living?”, the conservative philosopher and historian of ideas Russel Kirk (1918-1994) asked himself in the last chapter of his

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<sup>698</sup> See P. Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, cit., pp. 83-92.

<sup>699</sup> R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., pp. 172-190. Kirk’s position is perhaps an over-simplification, and a provocative one. Indeed, Irving Kristol himself does not fit the description, since neoconservatism was anything but a monolithic movement. As a scholar noted, “The neoconservative had two parts. The first offered by Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell and centered on how capitalism undermined the ‘bourgeois virtues’ of the hard work, thrift, and delayed gratification associated with Protestant ethic. (...). As originally articulated by Bell and Kristol, capitalism needed to recover the lost values that once made it morally defensible and culturally legitimate. Their critique of contemporary capitalism centered on its amorality and how it contributed to a cultural nihilism perilous to the American economic and political system. They called for a cultural renaissance that repudiated the emphasis on self-absorbed consumerism and immediate gratification of contemporary capitalism (...). The second, more persistent (...emerged after) the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (and) resulted in (the support for) a unipolar world in which the United States was the only superpower. The neoconservatives viewed this international landscape as an opportunity for the nation to fashion a new world order founded on democratic capitalism”: P. Kolozsi, *Conservatism Against Capitalism*, cit., pp. 141-142. As it is clear, Kirk, and Lasch together with him, opposed the second perspective and, to some extent, are close however to the first one.

<sup>700</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Beyond Left and Right*, cit.

autobiography<sup>701</sup>. The answer he gave was an unambiguous yes. However, he stated, life must be lived by following strenuous principles and permanent things that let it worth of living. Therefore, he thought, modern concepts such as progress, utility, efficiency and wealth are just of secondary importance. Moreover, before using them, it would have been necessary reflect on them and reach an agreement on their effective and deep meaning. He argued, for instance, that “true progress improvement, is unthinkable without tradition (...) because progress rests upon addition, not subtraction. Change without reference to tradition – he continued – runs the risk of aimless alteration for alteration’s sake, terminating in anarchy or nihilism”<sup>702</sup>. The principle of utility, then, was very much opposed by Kirk, in the sense that it could be considered only a point of reference for some, determinate and limited economic affairs. But beyond that, its role was ended: it could have not become a universal principle by which re-building the world rationalistically and efficiently. Its main advocate, Jeremy Bentham, was described by Kirk as follows: “Totally deficient in the higher imagination, unable to grasp the nature of either love or hate, Bentham ignored spiritual aspiration in man; and, as if to balance the scale, he never spoke of sin. National character, the immense variety of human motives, the power of passion in human affairs-these he omitted from his system; he radiated an absolute confidence in Rationality. Taking his own personality for the incarnation of humanity, he presumed that men have only to be shown how to solve

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<sup>701</sup> R. Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination. Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 1995, pp. 471-476.

<sup>702</sup> R. Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (1956), Imaginative Conservative Books, New York, 2013, p. 217.

pleasure-and-pain equations, and they will be good; their interests will lead them to cooperation and diligence and peace. He was the narrowest of moralists; and he was the most complacent of political theorists. Politics, like human nature, had no mysteries for him”<sup>703</sup>. For Kirk, Bentham and his several epigons, such as Karl Marx or John Dewey, demonstrated to be deeply arid from a moral point of view and blind in their conception of human beings: happiness cannot be measured by means of simple equations or in economic terms. Person possessed for Kirk a moral dignity which lay beyond purely economic terms.

Nevertheless, Kirk was conscious of the importance of economy. As a matter of fact, he wrote a book on economics too<sup>704</sup>. However, he considered it as based on moral assumptions and reservations. For him, economy was just a discipline hierarchically subjected to moral philosophy because it had to serve human beings as a means and not, on the contrary, becoming an end itself. In this respect, Kirk was very much close to the social and political thought of the German economist and sociologist Wilhelm Röpke<sup>705</sup>. Just as Röpke did, also Kirk criticized vehemently utilitarianism, rationalism and an economics derived and

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<sup>703</sup> R. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, cit., pp. 115-116.

<sup>704</sup> R. Kirk, *Economics: Work and Prosperity*, Pensacola Christian College, Pensacola, 1989.

<sup>705</sup> The last paragraph of the last chapter of his book on economics, in its title, *The Moral Foundations of Economics*, in R. Kirk, *Economics*, cit., pp. 365-369 reminds precisely the contents of the most famous book, namely the spiritual testament of Röpke: *A Humane Economy. The Social Framework of the Free Market* (1958), Regnery, Chicago, 1960 that Kirk himself let it translate in English. Röpke over the years matured a more conservative *coté*: in his writings, moreover, he demonstrated to know a few conservative American thinker, quoting not only Kirk, but also Eric Voegelin and Robert Nisbet. On the relationship between him and American conservatism, see T. Petersen, *Wilhelm Röpke and American Conservatism*, in P. Commun, S. Kolev (eds. by), *Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966) A Liberal Political Economist and Conservative Social Philosopher*, Springer, Berlin, 2017, pp. 175-86;

based only on those assumptions<sup>706</sup>. Kirk believed that a humane-scale order needed a humane economy. And that was in antithesis with the modernity he saw around him. What he observed was that Christianity, which constituted a basis element of the West and of civilization, was in crisis. According to him, from Christianity directly derives the right conception of human being: a humble, limited and precarious creature who, however, is also made strong by faith and hope in a transcendent order. As a consequence of that, he thought, human beings cannot idolize false and worldly things, but they cannot tyrannize nature as well as use science as a pseudo-religion: as Pope Jean Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1981), human beings have just to respond to “their vocation as responsible builders of earthly society”<sup>707</sup>. Therefore, they cannot pursue the idea of creating the heaven on the earth and idolize the ideology of progress: they have just to reconsider the teachings of tradition and religion in order to pursue a humble, but human research of happiness.

Richard Weaver (1910-1963), if possible, was even much harsher towards modernity and progressive contemporary times. He was a Southern conservative, heir of those intellectuals, mostly men of letters, who wrote in 1930 the manifesto of a radical-conservative critique towards progress and industrialism, namely *I'll Take My Stand*<sup>708</sup>.

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<sup>706</sup> It is not a case then if Kirk criticized also what he called “Manchesterian liberalism”, a version of liberalism that he found in his times in particular in the works of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek. About that see in particular R. Kirk, *The New Humanism of Political Economy*, cit.; R. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1954, pp. 143-150.

<sup>707</sup> Pope J. Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, *Introduction*, 1: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html).

<sup>708</sup> The Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, cit.

According to Weaver, the modern project of liberalism consisting in liberating individuals from natural bonds and obligations was the betrayal of the very idea of “person”. True individualism, for him, presupposed some crucial characteristics: rootedness and sense of history, independence and sense of limits, self-control and humbleness towards the inscrutable mystery of things, an order of which human beings are necessarily part. Modern world, by idolizing progress, science and technology tried to reject that, as it was possible to go beyond the same condition of imperfect creatures.

However, as Kirk thought as well, Weaver believed that hope persisted: for this very reason, human beings could choose what to do, which road to take. In this sense, free will remained a crucial element of human world, even though uniformizing and homogenizing tendencies of contemporary political discourse worsened the moral awakening of people. As Weaver showed in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953), in the absence of a strenuous and rooted religious sentiment some terms develop a capacity of deep attraction which becomes a true pseudo-religion, a secular religion. The term “progress”, Weaver wrote, is probably the most important among them: “progress is the coordinator of all socially respectable effort”<sup>709</sup>. This “god term”, as Weaver called it, became a real worldly idol, and with it other followed: science, modernity, knowledge, efficiency and so forth. In opposition to them some terms, instead, transmitted, according to the cultural mainstream élites, negative contents that were to be ostracized: prejudice, Tory,

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<sup>709</sup> R.M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, cit., p. 214.

tradition were called by Weaver “devil terms”, because they are the terms of repulsion<sup>710</sup>. The “god terms”, on the contrary, are the point of reference of a progressive and enlightened social vision. They evoke the idea that the future horizon will be better than the past, that change and progress constitute the ultimate principles of social organization. But for Weaver, “change in itself cannot be a meaningful principle of ordering. And there are very grave liabilities in the idea of an endless or infinite change”<sup>711</sup>.

The very problem of modernity, according to Weaver, consisted in the fact there is no longer a shared image and conception of what a human being truly is: nowadays the individual is simply conceived as an abstract and self-interested monad. But for Weaver, and for Kirk too, the definition of man was much more complex and burdened with higher moral contents. In absence of such a strong and rooted commitments and social bonds, order is even unconceivable: “Basically our modern confusions and animosities derive from the fact that in the last century we have lost our consensus, our agreement, about the definition of man, about this creature who lives in every one of us and who in his aggregations raises our political problems”<sup>712</sup>. According to Kirk, then, life without some superordinate principles, which cannot be progress, change, change or similar ideals, “soon becomes insufferably boring; also it cannot long endure”<sup>713</sup>.

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<sup>710</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 222-224-

<sup>711</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Reflections of Modernity* (1961), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 109.

<sup>712</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 107.

<sup>713</sup> R. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things. Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* (1969), Cluny, Providence, 2016, p. 329.

Both Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk took part, and a very active part from an intellectual point of view, as we have already seen it, in the conservative renaissance in the fifties. Weaver, however, died prematurely for a heart attack in 1963<sup>714</sup>. Therefore, he could not write as many books as Kirk did. Kirk, instead, was a very prolific author<sup>715</sup>. Two

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<sup>714</sup> In chronological order: R.M Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, cit.; *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, cit; *Composition: A Course in Writing and Rhetoric*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1957; *Visions of Order. The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (1964), ISI Books, Wilmington, 1995; *Life Without Prejudice and Other Essays*, ed. by H. Plotnick, Regnery, Chicago 1965; *The Southern Tradition at Bay. A History of Postbellum Thought* (1968), ed. by G. Core and M.E. Bradford, Regnery Gateway, Washington, 2021 (paperback ed.) which his doctoral thesis, even though revisited, discussed in 1943 at the Louisiana State University with the title *The Confederate South, 1865-1910: A Study in the Survival of a Mind and a Culture; Language Is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric*, eds. by R. L. Johannesen, R. Strickland and R.T. Eubanks, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 1970; *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, eds. by G.M. Curtis III, J.J. Thompson Jr, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1987. Moreover, it must be quoted the volume which includes almost all the essays that Weaver published over his life: T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit. There exist then just two Weaver's biographies: di Weaver: F.D. Young, *Richard M. Weaver 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind*, University of Missouri Press, 1995; J. Scotchie, *Barbarians in the Saddle*, Transaction (1997), Routledge, New York and London 2020. Moreover, another book on his thought exists, but specifically on his contribution in rhetoric B.K. Duffy, M. Jacobi, *The Politics of Rhetoric. Richard M. Weaver and the Conservative Tradition*, Greenwood Press, Westport-London 1993. See moreover, the collection of essays written on him: J. Scotchie (ed.), *The Vision of Richard Weaver* (1995), Routledge, London and New York 2018 and the collection of essays published after the conference held after fifty years since the publication of his book published in 1948: T. Smith III (ed.), *Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver's Ideas*, ISI Books, Wilmington 1998.

<sup>715</sup> Kirk's bibliography is almost unlimited. Therefore, I can just mention some of his works in chronological order: *Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in Conservative Thought*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1951; *The Conservative Mind*, cit.; *A Program for Conservatives*, cit.; *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1955; *Prospects for Conservatives*, cit.; *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: Essays of a Social Critic*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1956; *The American Cause* (1957), ISI Books, Wilmington, 2002; *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory: Episodes and Reflections of a Vagrant Career*, Fleet Press, 1963; *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics*, Louisiana State University Press, 1965; *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, Arlington House, 1967; *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, cit.; *Eliot and His Age. T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (1971), ISI Books, Wilmington, 2008; R. Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (1974), ISI Books, Wilmington, 2020; *Decadence and Renewal in the High Learning*, Regnery, Chicago, 1978; *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written in the Sky*, Regnery, Chicago, 1987; *Economics: Work and Prosperity*, cit.; *The Politics of Prudence*, cit.; *The Sword of Imagination*, cit.; *Redeeming the Time* (1996), ISI Books, Wilmington 1998. Monographies concerning Kirk's thought are the following ones: J.E. Person Jr., *Russell Kirk. A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind*, Madison Books, Lanham-New York-Oxford 1999; W.W. McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2004; G.J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, University Press of Missouri, Columbia 2007; J.M. Pafford, *Russell Kirk*, Continuum Books, New York-



of their books, namely *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) and *The Conservative Mind* (1953) were crucial works for the conservative renaissance in the US. Weaver and Kirk were not just fellow traveller, from an intellectual point of view, but rather friends and they quoted each other in their works. But Weaver, as we have seen, died early and therefore he could not read all the Kirkian intellectual production. However, by reviewing Kirk's *A Program for Conservatives* (1954), he praised his intellectual struggle against "the two modern forces of materialism and political abstractionism"<sup>716</sup>. Moreover, he considered crucial conservative wisdom about the idea of man conceived as an imperfect and precarious creature. Conservatism, as he and Kirk meant, was radically opposed to contemporary liberalism, from an anthropological point of view, because the image of man it espoused did not allow for an engineering, rationalistic and standardized plan from top-down: society, in its plurality and multifariousness, is irreducible to abstract schemes of radical re-building. "Civilization shows itself in variety and complexity and individual attachment; and standardization is the death alike of vitality and interest", Weaver wrote<sup>717</sup>.

Human beings, Weaver thought, must recognize what their human condition is made of: they must recognize what he called "*pietas*", the

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London, 2010; B.J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, cit. See also the following volume which includes some articles written in his honour: J.E. Person Jr. (ed. by), *The Unbought Grace of Life. Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk*, Sherwood Sudgen & Company, Peru, 1999 and the volume which included much of his correspondence: J.E. Person Jr. (ed.), *Imaginative Conservatism. The Letters of Russell Kirk*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2018.

<sup>716</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Review* (1954) to R. Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives*, cit., in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 518. See also R.M. Weaver, *Battle for the Mind* (1955) e *Which Ancestors?* (1956), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., pp. 516-517 e 522-523.

<sup>717</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Battle for the Mind*, cit., p. 516.

idea, derived from religion, that human world cannot be fully discovered and completely understood, because human condition is essentially tragic. Piety, Weaver thought, reminds human beings how imperfect they are and remain, no matter how scientific discovery and knowledge seem to proceed: “it signifies an attitude toward things which are immeasurably larger and greater than oneself without which man is an insufferably brash, conceited, and frivolous animal (...). The realization that piety is a proper and constructive attitude toward certain things helped me to develop what Russell Kirk calls ‘affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life’”<sup>718</sup>. Such an attitude, Weaver thought, “has always been in my nature, but that it had been repressed by dogmatic, utilitarian, essentially contumacious doctrines of liberalism and scientism”<sup>719</sup>. Kirk, on the other hand, quoted several times Weaver by even writing the introduction to one of Weaver’s books<sup>720</sup>. Besides, in *The Politics of Prudence* (1993), Kirk included the southern thinker in a

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<sup>718</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Up From Liberalism* (1958), in T. Smith III, *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 42. It must be noted that the theme of piety derived directly from the influence of the southern agrarians on Weaver. It can be already traced in his doctoral dissertation and, in addition to that, it will be central in the ninth chapter of his *Ideas Have Consequences*, cit., pp. 153-168, entitled *Piety and Justice*. Moreover, piety permeate also the last section of Weaver’s southern essays collection, *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, cit.: *The South and the Revolution of Nihilism* (1944), pp. 183-188; *Aspects of the Southern Philosophy* (1952), pp. 189-208; *The Southern Tradition* (1964), pp. 208-229; *The South and the American Union* (1957), pp. 230-256.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>720</sup> R. Kirk, *Introduction to R.M. Weaver, Visions of Order*, cit. pp. VII-IX. In such an introduction, Kirk described Weaver as “a champion of little community, rural life, and immemorial ways” and correctly wrote that order, “the inner order of the soul, the outer of society”, because there cannot be the former without the latter and vice versa, was the passion of Weaver: *Ibidem*, p. VIII. However, Ted Smith III argued that Kirk provided a somewhat inaccurate description of the thinker as solitary, never travelling and not participating in religious life: according to him, on the contrary, he had a wide circle of friends, was “an avid and frequent traveller” and occasionally Episcopal services in Chicago, T. Smith III, *Introduction to T. Smith III, In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. XV-XVI.

list of the ten thinkers that he deemed as “exemplary conservatives”<sup>721</sup> and defined *Ideas Have Consequences* as “the first gun fired by American conservatives in their intellectual rebellion against the ritualistic liberalism that had prevailed since 1933”<sup>722</sup>.

It is impossible here to outline a precise biographical account of the two authors. However, it is important to insist on the southern origins of Weaver. Although he taught from 1944 until his death at the University of Chicago, Weaver remained for all his life very much attached to southern sensibility: he was an “agrarian in exile”<sup>723</sup>. His political thought was imbued the ideas of the already mentioned “twelve southerners”. From them he took his view of rooted and radical decentralist point of view of society, the critique of industrialism, progress and modernity. In particular, he was a student of one of the twelve, John Crowe Ransom, whose *God Without Thunder* (1930)<sup>724</sup>, Weaver remembered in an important autobiographical article, “took possession of me”<sup>725</sup>. The twelve agrarians who wrote *I’ll Take My Stand*, even though in their differences<sup>726</sup>, were steady in opposing two different types of civilization and mentality: on the one hand, there was for them an industrial ideal,

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<sup>721</sup> R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., chap. V, pp. 62-78. The others were, in the order followed by Kirk: Marcus Tullius Cicero, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Samuel Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, John Randolph of Roanoke, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Theodor Roosevelt, Joseph Conrad, Freya Stark (Weaver was the ninth).

<sup>722</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>723</sup> P.V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History*, cit., chap. six, pp. 151-178.

<sup>724</sup> J.C. Ransom, *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*, Harcourt Brace and Co, New York, 1930.

<sup>725</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Up From Liberalism*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>726</sup> See P.V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History*, cit. For some interesting retrospective analyses of the thought of those thinkers, see *Fifteen Southerners, Why the South Will Survive*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1981; W.C. Havard, W. Sullivan (eds.), *A Band of Prophets*, cit. About Southern conservatism see also E.D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition. The Achievements and Limitations of an American Conservatism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1996 (paperback ed.).

which was also the contemporary American ideal as a consequence of the victory of the Northern states in the Civil War (1865), and an agrarian ideal, typical instead of the Southern states<sup>727</sup>. The struggle was not just between two visions which could be traced in the Northern and Southern part of the US. Rather, it had to be seen as a metaphor of a universal condition between two antithetical mentalities, one based on progress and change, the other on tradition and rootedness. As Weaver himself put it, the Northern progressive view was typical of the “Faustian man” who “is essentially a restless striver, a yearner after the infinite, a hater of stasis, a man who is unhappy unless he feels that he is making the world over”<sup>728</sup>: that was the mentality of the human being that, ensnared by rationalism, hybris and scientism, aims to dominate nature by unlimited power. The Southern perspective, on the other hand, conscious of the tragedy of human condition and of the limits of human power over nature, “knew nothing of infinite progressions but rather loved fixed limits in all things; it rejected the idea of ceaseless (...). It saw little point in restless striving, but desired a permanent settlement, a coming to terms with nature, a recognition of what is in its self-sustaining form”<sup>729</sup>.

Russell Kirk, then, did not come from the South of the US, but he considered himself deeply sympathetic with the traditional and anti-progressive vision of the southerners. Moreover, even though he was born in Michigan and lived for almost all his life there, he obtained his

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<sup>727</sup> See *The Twelve Southerners, Introduction: A Statement of Principles*, in *I'll Take My Stand*, cit., pp. XLI-LII.

<sup>728</sup> R.M. Weaver, *The South and the American Union*, cit., p. 235. See also R.M. Weaver, *Aspects of the Southern Philosophy*, cit.; R.M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition*, cit.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibidem*.

master in North Carolina, where Weaver was born, at the Duke University. He sincerely appreciated the southern respect for traditions and rootedness, for rural life and the suspicion of progress and industrialism as ends in themselves. In a late letter, and precisely addressed to one of the epigons, even if critical, of the “Twelve Southerners”, Wendell Berry, he wrote that he considered himself a “Northern agrarian”<sup>730</sup>. Moreover, he already focused on the Southern political thought in his *The Conservative Mind*, where devoted an entire chapter to two fundamental Southern thinkers, John Randolph of Roanoke and John C. Calhoun<sup>731</sup>. In *The Politics of Prudence*, then, Kirk argued that when he was twenty years old, in 1938, he discovered in the library of the University of Michigan, during his bachelor’s program, another agrarian author, Donald Davidson, whose *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (1938)<sup>732</sup>. And the agrarian manifesto was described by Kirk not as an ideology or rationalistic plan to be imposed on society: that was, as he thought, the typical liberal way of proceeding. Rather, it was a defence of the “permanent things”, not a rationalistic based on an engineering scheme but a vision rooted in tradition<sup>733</sup>: “The authors of *I’ll Take My Stand* did

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<sup>730</sup> R. Kirk to W. Berry, 18 October 1990, in J.E. Person Jr. (ed.), *Imaginative Conservatism*, cit., p. 325.

<sup>731</sup> R. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, cit., chap. V, pp. 150-184. Remember, besides, that his first book was precisely and fully dedicated to John Randolph.

<sup>732</sup> D. Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1938. The volume is now published by Routledge, but with inverse order of title and subtitle. See R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., chap. VII, pp. 98-113.

<sup>733</sup> See for instance R. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, cit., chap. 1, pp. 1-29

not propound a rigorous ideology or display a model of Utopia: their principal purpose it was to open eyes to the illusions of Modernism”<sup>734</sup>.

Therefore, if Weaver’s anti-progressive vision is heir of his personal biography, Kirk’s vision is different, for what concerns his personal biography, but it is equally rooted in an anti-progressive political thought<sup>735</sup>. Both of them, in fact, struggled against a progressive, liberal perspective, hinged on idolizing science and economy, the powers of Leviathan and centralization of government. Both of them abhorred the Whig theory of history, namely the idea of a linear, unlimited and endless progress. According to Weaver, tradition could be defended in two ways. The first conception of it resulted, even if in different terms, ended in a mere idolatry, quite similarly to the liberal idolatry of progress and change: that meant an obtuse reaction. “But the other attitude – the second conception of tradition – is reverential and creative at the same time; it worships the spirit rather than the graven image; and it allows man to contribute his mite toward helping Providence”<sup>736</sup>. Tradition, just as change, runs the risk to become the absolute protagonist without considering, as a matter of fact, person as an active actor and a moral, free agent. Thus “Some things we have to change – Weaver continued – but we must avoid changing out of *hybris* and senseless presumption. And always we have to keep in mind what man is supposed to be”<sup>737</sup>.

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<sup>734</sup> R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., p. 112.

<sup>735</sup> Murphy argued, actually, that both of them shared much of the typical “deep-rooted midwestern, small-town Right” vision, made of anti-centralization and hostility towards federal government and bureaucracy, rejection of progress and materialism as an end in itself: P.V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History*, cit., p. 161.

<sup>736</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Up From Liberalism*, cit., p. 43.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibidem*.

Kirk shared Weaver's idea about the relationships between progress, or change, and tradition. As his main source of influence argued, Edmund Burke, "a spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors"<sup>738</sup>. At the same time, thought, Burke argued as a society "without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation"<sup>739</sup>. Tradition, in Kirk's perspective, was a guide to the permanent things, even if an imperfect one, as all human things are, "throughout the process of inevitable change": "the essence of tradition – he believed – is the preservation of continuity in the midst of change"<sup>740</sup>.

The problem of liberalism and progress, according to Weaver and Kirk, was mainly anthropological and cultural. What is person? That is the crucial question, according to them, about which there is no longer a fundamental agreement. In an essay in which Kirk was particularly critical of liberalism as a misguided and misleading doctrine. By positively considering Orestes Brownson's insights about liberalism, and socialism as well<sup>741</sup>, Kirk deemed liberalism as founded on «myth distorted: the myth of individual free will, but a free will stripped of divine guidance and grace: the myth of popular sovereignty, but a myth deprived of the saving phrase 'under God': the myth of natural rights, but

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<sup>738</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, cit., p. 121.

<sup>739</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 108.

<sup>740</sup> R. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, cit., p. 217.

<sup>741</sup> Remember that Kirk also edited a collection of Brownson's essays O. Brownson, *Selected Political Essays*, cit. In the introduction, he wrote that one of the articles included, *Liberalism and Progress* (1864), was "perhaps the best expression, in a few thousand words, of the American conservative stand": *ibidem*, p. 9. In that essay, Brownson considered that the "liberalistic tendencies, if unchecked, could lead only to anarchy", *ibidem*, p. 179.

a myth shorn of the Providential order which gives such rights their sanction<sup>742</sup>. According to Kirk, instead, the right image of man, “the truly human man”, is “temperate because he has a disciplined mind. He is prudent because he knows the greatness and the weakness of human nature”<sup>743</sup>. Under the influence of a religious sentiment, therefore, “he is saved from intellectual *hybris* because he knows both the powers and the limits of private human rationality”<sup>744</sup>. For these very reasons, a real human being understands that he finds himself in a necessary relationship with many generations; he is free in the sense that he understands that, considering his limited nature, cannot do whatever he wants, but he obeys norms that govern human nature and human behaviour: “he knows that there is a law for man, and law for thing”<sup>745</sup>. Contemporary, liberal *hybris*, on the contrary, betrays all that. In a certain sense, he argued in another important article published in 1957, liberalism is quite similar to communism and all the gnostic contemporary impulses, as Lasch would have recognized too: “We suffer from the same disease as do the Communists, though in a milder form. Whenever we go about looking for a solution to some great social problem, we rarely recur to the first principle of human nature and society. Instead, we turn back to Benthamite dogmas. ‘Efficiency’, ‘progress’ and ‘economic secularity’ are our god-terms, as they are those of Soviets”<sup>746</sup>. Without some

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<sup>742</sup> R. Kirk, *The Dissolution of Liberalism* (1955), “Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture”, 22, 4, Fall 2019, p. 147.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 170.

<sup>744</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>745</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>746</sup> R. Kirk, *Ideology and Political Economy*, “America”, 96, 14, January 5, 1957, p. 390.



reference to a transcendent order that can check human appetites, for Kirk person's worldly passions are inclined, as one of his main points of reference, Edmund Burke, would have said, to "forge their fetters"<sup>747</sup>.

In an autobiographical essay, Weaver directly spoke of his personal experience as a liberal until the Thirties. He wrote how the university he entered, the University of Kentucky, was full of liberal and progressive professors, who "reflected their position in their teaching very largely". By their propaganda, Weaver had been "persuades entirely that the future was with science, liberalism, and equalitarianism, and that all opposed to these trends were people of ignorance or malevolence"<sup>748</sup>. They basically rejected people in their particularity and natural imperfection for building, from a top-down perspective, a better community. They were just, Weaver wrote, "novelty-seekers, victims of restlessness"<sup>749</sup>: all that was linked with tradition and past was considered an error to overcome. For Weaver, however, tradition and rootedness are part of a human being: they are the basis material upon which everyone builds his own life, and teach him imperfectability. Redemptive rationalism, on the contrary, full of scientism and anti-religious sentiment, let liberals think that on the earth it is not only desirable but even possible to create a heaven made of progress and unlimited wealth.

Kirk succinctly resumed these radical tendencies by listing the intellectual influences behind: the French *philosophes*' rationalism, the

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<sup>747</sup> E. Burke, *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), in E. Burke, *Storia e tradizione. Due lettere e un discorso*, a cura di G.M. Arrigo, Mimesis, Milano-Udine, 2022, p. 128.

<sup>748</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Up From Liberalism*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>749</sup> *Ibidem*.

romantic and voluntaristic emancipation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, the positivism of Auguste Comte and the collectivistic materialism of Karl Marx<sup>750</sup>. By means of these intellectual sources of influence, an ideology of perfectibility, radical optimism and secular religion of progress is created. But both for Kirk and Weaver that ideology is radically anti-human and perilous: for Kirk, “ideology, in short, is a political formula that promises mankind an earthly paradise; but in cruel fact what ideology has created is a series of terrestrial hells”<sup>751</sup>. Ideology, in essence, aims at substituting Christian religion with a secular doctrine of salvation<sup>752</sup>. Conservatism, on the contrary, hinges on the consciousness of the radical imperfection of a tragic human condition. It is, more humbly, a realist ethos, sensibility or mentality, according to Kirk, which considers impossible to reduce human world to some abstract scheme or engineering plan: it conceives human order from a bottom-up rather than top-down perspective<sup>753</sup>. In an article published in 1960, Weaver wrote about conservatism and conservative sensibility as follows: “It is my contention that a conservative is a realist, who believes that there is a structure of reality independent of his own will and desire. He believes that there is a creation which was before him, which exists now not by just his sufferance, and

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<sup>750</sup> R. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>751</sup> R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., p. 5

<sup>752</sup> See R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., chap 1, *The Errors of Ideology*, pp. 1-14.

<sup>753</sup> On the definition of conservatism Kirk was very vague. But it is quite simple to explain. In fact, as it is the negation of ideology, conservatism cannot be reduced to any catch-all and universal formula. This idea is demonstrated by the fact that Kirk changed many times how he defined it. See for example R. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, cit., pp. 3-11; *Prospects for Conservatives*, cit., pp. 17-36; *The Portable Conservative Reader*, Penguin Books, New York, 1982; *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., chap. 2, pp. 15-29.

which will be here after he's gone. This structure consists not merely of the great physical world but also of many laws, principles, and regulations which control human behaviour. Though this reality is independent of the individual, it is not hostile to him. It is in fact amenable by him in many ways, but it cannot be changed radically and arbitrarily. This is the cardinal point. The conservative – Weaver concluded – holds that man in this world cannot make his will his law without any regard to limits and to the fixed nature of things”<sup>754</sup>. Conservatism, in other words, means to conserve human being as he is: an imperfect creature, but full of dignity. Liberalism, on the contrary, “places man at the centre of things – indeed not only at the centre, but in potentially unlimited control”<sup>755</sup>. Liberals tend, by doing so, to divinize man, to let him be the “Chief Engineer of the Universe”<sup>756</sup>. His will, therefore, does not know any limit or check: but that is the betrayal, Weaver thought, of the very condition of being human.

According to him, there were two distinct visions about the idea of men. The “scientific” one, which is the liberal one, denies that exists such a thing called human nature. Based on a Darwinian or evolutionistic point of view, it considers nature as something fluid, in perennial motion and therefore, something that can be changed or even manipulated in the name of progress<sup>757</sup>. The “traditional” perspective, instead, consider

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<sup>754</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Conservatism and Libertarianism*, cit., in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 477.

<sup>755</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Conservatism and Liberalism* (1960), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 487.

<sup>756</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>757</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Reflections of Modernity*, cit., p. 107. On that point, both Weaver and Kirk were deep critical of John Dewey and his epigons. Kirk, for instance, wrote as follows: “Now I am very much afraid that the aristocracy, or rather the oligarchy, which is being trained by our Deweyites is a collection of individuals without veneration,

human beings as part of an order that existed before him and that is part of him, by means of traditions, inherited customs and wisdom. For this very reason, “there is a nature of man which can be known and which in its better part ought to be conserved”<sup>758</sup>. Therefore, individual cannot be reduced to a mechanical wheel of an impersonal machinery. Rather, he is a spiritual creature who has a telos that cannot be imposed by a paternal and therapeutic power: “Individualism in the true sense is a matter of mind and spirit; it means the development of the person, not the well-adjusted automation. What the progressivists really desire to produce is the ‘smooth’ individual adapted to some favourite scheme of collectivized living, not the person of strong convictions, of refined sensibility, and of deep personal feeling of direction in life”<sup>759</sup>.

Similarly, Kirk took as polemical pivot the American sociologist David Riesman<sup>760</sup>. According to Riesman, the inner-directed man, by introjecting when he was young the basic teachings, is capable of a fully rationality: freedom, in other words, is a matter of reason. Kirk was very much doubtful about such a point of view: can reason be conceived as a guide in itself? Are there any other possible guides? According to him, human being, as a creature equipped with free will, can and has to choose and acting as a moral agent. However, reason is not sufficient in itself. Indeed, tradition constitutes the very fundamental structure upon which

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without any apprehension of the unbought grace of life, without anything but scorn for the idea of a gentleman, without any objects but personal ambition, social efficiency, power over man and nature, and – at best – an abstract appetite for ‘social reform’, by which they mean constant tinkering with traditional society”, R. Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>758</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Reflections of Modernity*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>759</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Education and the Individual* (1959), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 192

<sup>760</sup> His reference was to D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, cit.

reason becomes not only a useful, but a necessary means for a free moral agent. Without tradition, human beings run the risk of becoming other-directed, by adopting Riesman's terminology, or "proletarianized"<sup>761</sup>. Traditional support is therefore crucial for true self-government and inner-direction against nihilism and external occupation of artificial forces such as despotism.

The total rationalizing of human existence, hence, by its idolatry of science, to the detriment of religion, the centralizing forces of power, to the detriment of self-government rooted in local communities and pre-political institutions, the ideology of progress, to the detriment of the rediscovery of the past and traditions, tends to create intellectual apathy, moral weakness, intellectual conformism. Uprooting individuals, instead of really liberating them, could lead to new collectivism and paternalisms, they thought. Instead of contemporary liberalism, however, Kirk recognized how a different liberalism, rooted in a classical and Christian understanding, and based on the liberation of individuals "from things here and now"<sup>762</sup>, had existed<sup>763</sup>. If things are in this way, Kirk argued, "true conservatism and true liberalism, both of which owe so much to Burke, may join once more and agree upon a social principle that regards man as a spiritual being, not simply as a functioning machine"<sup>764</sup>. That was the object of conservatism, namely the conservation of man as

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<sup>761</sup> Kirk's point of reference on that was W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time* (1942), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1950.

<sup>762</sup> B.J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk. American Conservative*, cit., p. 150.

<sup>763</sup> On the point it is crucial an article by Röpke, which was derived from a speech he gave in Florence, Italy, in 1947: W. Röpke, *Crisi e rinnovamento del liberalismo* (1947), in *La crisi del collettivismo*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1951, pp. 79-107.

<sup>764</sup> R. Kirk, *The New Humanism of Political Economy*, cit. p 196.

a historical and rooted creature, Weaver believed: conservatism wants to conserve reality in its radical variety and multifariousness, “and this is a different thing from introducing some abstract design of society and imposing that by a national fiat”<sup>765</sup>.

### ***5.3 Wendell Berry, Christopher Lasch and Ordinary People Conservatism.***

“The attempt to remodel society according to abstract principles of justice, to uproot established ways of life, overthrow ancient beliefs, and ‘free ourselves of illusions’ leads more easily to a reign of terror than to a reign of universal love and brotherhood”, Lasch argued in a late article, by echoing Edmund Burke<sup>766</sup>. According to him, a true conservatism, one that was not fully colluded with the acritical defence of capitalism and progress, began at home, by safeguarding the natural elements of individual’s everyday own life: the antithesis of a system which promised to liberate individuals from their own chains. In this sense, he thought that the original “American dream”<sup>767</sup> had been betrayed by liberal elites who exchanged decentralization and localism with centralism, self-governed and republican democracy with managed and technocratic democracy, small-scale, producerist market with industrial, consumerist

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<sup>765</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Who Are Today’s Conservatives?* (1955), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 464.

<sup>766</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Response to Fischer*, cit., p. 1.

<sup>767</sup> On that point see Ch. Lasch, *Education and the American Dream*, cit.; *What Was the American Dream?*, cit. See also Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., chap 3, *Opportunity in the Promise Land: Social Mobility or the Democratization of Competence*, pp. 50-79, which is actually a revised version of the manuscript abovementioned, *What Was the American Dream?*, cit.

corporate capitalism. In a few words, rather than advocating for a defence of a society capable of self-government and independence, the Hamiltonian type of social, political and economic system developed in the opposite way: a rationalistic, centralized, and experts-dependent structure of power.

Such a theme, as we have already seen, was at the centre of Lasch's reflection at least since the end of the Seventies. In particular, he started to articulate, even if it was already present in his thought before<sup>768</sup>, his Jeffersonian position while contributing with a journal, "democracy", which tried to revive a radical and, at the same time, cultural conservative option against mainstream conservatism and liberalism<sup>769</sup>. In those years, Lasch started to be very much interested in the works of a Southern, Kentuckian, farmer, essayist and poet, Wendell Berry, who shared many of his worries about modern times<sup>770</sup>. In particular, he addressed a letter to Sheldon Wolin, the director of "democracy", in which he argued that Berry's book *The Unsettling of America* (1977)<sup>771</sup> was a really important one to reflect about for a journal, like "democracy", devoted to localism, defence of traditions and Jeffersonian democracy<sup>772</sup>. Therefore, Lasch proposed to Wolin to publish a book review, written by a scholar that

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<sup>768</sup> See for example Ch. Lasch, *The Agony of American Left*, chap. 1, *The Decline of Populism*, cit.; *The Jeffersonian Legacy*, cit.

<sup>769</sup> See chap. 2.

<sup>770</sup> For an introduction to Berry's biography and social thought see: J. Goodrich, *The Unforeseen Self in the Works of Wendell Berry*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2001; K.K. Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2003; J. Peters (ed.), *Wendell Berry. Life and Work*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2007; J.R. Backer, J. Bilbro, *Wendell Berry and Higher Education. Cultivating Virtues of Place*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2017; J. Bilbro, *Virtues of Renewal. Wendell Berry's Sustainable Forms*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2019.

<sup>771</sup> W. Berry, *The Unsettling of America. Culture and Agriculture* (1977), Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2015.

<sup>772</sup> Ch. Lasch to Sheldon (Wolin), 6 April 1980, cit.

Lasch on purpose contacted. The review, thus, was published the year later and emphasized in particular Berry's human-scale order perspective: "Berry argues that a vital democracy hinges on an independent citizenry whose integrity and common bonds grow out of wide ownership and careful use of the land"<sup>773</sup>. According to Berry, a "Jeffersonian and Democratic"<sup>774</sup>, there existed two crucial alternatives in the individual attitudes of American history. On the one hand, a tendency he used to call "to stay"; on the other hand, a tendency he used to call "to displace"<sup>775</sup>. The first tendency is typical, in Berry's view, of those who find themselves at home in the places of the heart and on the land they were born and grew up. As a farmer himself, Berry considered exactly the figure of the farmer the embodiment of such an ideal. The farmer, according to him, is a "nurturer"<sup>776</sup>, a person who prefers to stay rather than to restlessly move and who wants to take care of his land and his property rather than to accumulate without cease new ones. On the contrary, those who find at home everywhere and nowhere, the "exploiters"<sup>777</sup>, are not interested in taking care of their homes and roots: they are progressives and uprooted people. As Lasch would have said it, "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

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<sup>773</sup> S. Hahn, *Agriculture and Political Culture*, cit., p. 103.

<sup>774</sup> See J. Peters, *Introduction* to J. Peters (ed.), *Wendell Berry*, cit., pp. 7-9.

<sup>775</sup> W. Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, cit., pp. 5-6. For an interpretation of such a view see especially P.J. Deneen, *Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought*, in J. Peters (ed.), *Wendell Berry*, cit., pp. 300-315.

<sup>776</sup> W. Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>777</sup> *Ibidem*.



film festival, or to an undiscovered resort. Theirs – Lasch concluded – is essentially a tourist’s view of the world”<sup>778</sup>.

According to Berry, a thinker that Lasch constantly, at least since the period of activity of “democracy”, reflected about<sup>779</sup>, “exploitation” and “nurture” referred to radical and irreconcilable social, political and economic vision; the first based on efficiency, profit, and progress, whereas the latter is based on love and work, family loyalty and traditions<sup>780</sup>: “The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, ‘hard facts’; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind”<sup>781</sup>.

On the one hand, in sum, there is an idea of order which is, actually, an organization managed and directed from above, according to a top-

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<sup>778</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>779</sup> In particular, in the archive of Rochester there are some worksheets and noted about him: Lasch Papers, Box 37, Folder 14; Box 53, Folder 8. Consider, as a matter of fact, that Lasch made explicit references to Berry in Ch. Lasch, *What Was the American Dream?*, cit.; *Social Mobility*, in R. Wightman Fox, J.T. Kloppenberg (eds.), *A Companion to American Thought*, cit., pp. 632-634; *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., pp. 71-72, 77, 78. However, Berry’s influence on Lasch is much more present in his intellectual development than he admitted. For example, it results quite curious that Lasch never mentioned Berry in his *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., whereas his reflections on “limits and hope”, even not only referable to Berry, are for sure part of his influence on Lasch: see W. Berry, *A Continuous Harmony. Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (1970), Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2012, in particular *Discipline and Hope*, pp. 71-133.

<sup>780</sup> W. Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>781</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

down, or centralized, perspective of politics, economics, and culture. On the other hand, instead, society is conceived as a human-scale order, which tends to emerge from bottom-up, as a humble and also precarious building that common people, in their everyday life, try to create on the basis of local cultures and traditions, and not by following some kind of rationalistic plan or enlightened, therapeutic culture. At this point, it is crucial to underline the Southern Agrarians' influence on Berry. Indeed, Berry had been considered one of the most important epigons of the authors of *I'll Take My Stand* (1930)<sup>782</sup>. Berry himself recognized how that agrarian manifesto and in particular its introduction, *A Statement of Principles*<sup>783</sup>, was crucial for his intellectual development: "We are being saved from work, then, for what? The answer can only be that we are being saved from work that is meaningful and ennobling and comely in order to be put to work that is unmeaning and degrading and ugly. In 1930, the Twelve Southerners of *I'll Take My Stand* issued as an introduction to their book 'A Statement of Principles', in which they declared for the agrarian way of life as opposed to the industrial. The book, I believe, was never popular. At the time, and during the three decades that followed, it might have been almost routinely dismissed by the dominant cultural factions as an act of sentimental allegiance to a lost cause. But now it has begun to be possible to say that the cause for which the Twelve Southerners spoke in their introduction was not a lost but a

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<sup>782</sup> See A. Carlson, *The New Agrarian Mind. The Movement Towards Decentralist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017, chap. 8, 177-201; P.V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History*, cit., pp. 264-275; A. Carlson, *Wendell Berry and the Twentieth-Century Agrarian "Series"*, in J. Peters (ed.), *Wendell Berry*, cit., pp., 96-111.

<sup>783</sup> The Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, cit., pp. XLI-LII.

threatened cause: the cause of human culture”<sup>784</sup>. The agrarians, in fact, had developed a powerful critique towards the uprooting tendencies of their time, made of political and economic centralization, abstract universalism and scientism. According to Berry, whose main influences were agrarianism, of course, but also democratic as well as Christian tradition<sup>785</sup>, the most important task for human beings consisted in defending their own home. This meant, in essence, to cultivate a sense of stewardship towards the place they inhabit and which forge them; to cultivate the sense of faith towards a mysterious order of things which is bigger and more complex than human mind can understand; to cultivate a sense of gratitude towards a life that is given to them to take care of<sup>786</sup>. Precisely on these points, Berry was then opposed to some modern tendencies that he deemed perilous for a human-scale order. First of all, he advocated for a radical decentralization of powers. As a Jeffersonian, he could not accept political and economic centralization. Therefore, he considered at the same time enemies of the common, plain people, those who used to call the “nurturers”, let us say, as we previously reported his

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<sup>784</sup> W. Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, cit., p. 96. See also *ibidem*, pp. 54-58, and note 2, p. 56. In particular, Berry rejected the agrarian tendency to hypostatize and mythicize, just as the ideologists of progress and science do, fundamental concepts for the southerners such as place, religion, history, responsibility: “Thus generalized, regional pieties blind a man to his whereabouts and his condition. Like the abstractions of Economics and Heaven and Progress, they come between him and his place and cause him to be, not its steward and preserver, but its destroyer”, *A Continuous Harmony*, cit., p. 55. In a late book, Berry stated that the introduction of the agrarian manifesto “is still the best summary of agrarian principles versus the principles of industrialism”, W. Berry, *Imagination in Place*, Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2010, p. 7. Elsewhere, Berry, if on the one side criticized some conservative excess in the agrarian manifesto, he nevertheless deemed their critique of progress and industrialism crucial for highlighting the very problems of modernity: W. Berry, *Still Standing* (1999), in *Citizens Papers*, cit., pp. 153-163;

<sup>785</sup> W. Berry, *Is Life a Miracle?* (2002), in *Citizens Papers*, cit., p. 181.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 182-184. On that point see especially K.K. Smith, *Wendell Berry's Political Vision*, J. Peters (ed.), *Wendell Berry*, cit., pp. 49-59.

dichotomy, the “exploiters” such as political bureaucrats, who tend to think in abstract, rationalistic and therapeutic way in order to uproot people from their own traditions and cultures on the basis a presumed superior enlightened ethic, managers of “Big Business”, who tend to destroy small-scale production economies, and in general all the elites who tend possess the conceit of know better than common people what is best for everyone. In his view, by following the dichotomy of “nurturer-exploiter”, another dichotomy can be derived, one that presupposes, again, a radical different perspective on human life and human order: a “think big” therapeutic perspective as opposed to a “think little” common-people ethos<sup>787</sup>. The former is the typical attitude of the politicians, but also intellectuals, that presume to radically change human order as it was an organization, namely an artificial machine: in this perspective, the inhabitants of such an organization are just dependent upon power and are to be managed by top-down elites. The latter, instead, is the typical humble attitude of those who understand that individuals are subjects with their own stories, inhabiting specific places, possessing peculiar traditions. In this sense, society is conceived as a bottom-up, ordinary creation, made of independent subjects, which cannot be reduced to any simplistic, managerial plan. As Berry argued, “Thinking Big has led us to the two biggest and cheapest political dodges of our time: plan-making and law-making. The lotus-eaters of this era are in Washington, D.C., Thinking Big. Somebody perceives a problem, and somebody in the government comes up with a plan or a law. The result,

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<sup>787</sup> W. Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, cit., p. 66.

mostly, has been the persistence of the problem, and the enlargement and enrichment of the government. But the discipline of thought is not generalization; it is detail, and it is personal behaviour. While the government is “studying” and funding and organizing its Big Thought, nothing is being done”<sup>788</sup>. “Think Little” ethos, on the contrary, presupposes the typical Jeffersonian democracy, namely the attitude of self-government: “But the citizen who is willing to Think Little, and, accepting the discipline of that, to go ahead on his own, is already solving the problem. A man who is trying to live as a neighbour to his neighbours will have a lively and practical understanding of the work of peace and brotherhood, and let there be no mistake about it—he is doing that work. A couple who makes a good marriage, and raise healthy, morally competent children, are serving the world’s future more directly and surely than any political leader, though they never utter a public word. A good farmer who is dealing with the problem of soil erosion on an acre of ground has a sounder grasp of that problem and cares more about it and is probably doing more to solve it than any bureaucrat who is talking about it in general. A man who is willing to undertake the discipline and the difficulty of mending his own ways – Berry concluded – is worth more to the conservation movement than a hundred who are insisting merely that the government and the industries mend their ways”<sup>789</sup>.

Indeed, according to the Kentuckian thinker, the real hope for a true self-governed society did not consist in artificially creating a better

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<sup>788</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>789</sup> *Ibidem.*

condition: human life and human order cannot be engineered<sup>790</sup>. On the contrary, it must be rediscovered the idea of humbleness towards the human condition, which is limited, and it could not be otherwise<sup>791</sup>. However, by means of this awareness, Berry thought that human beings could effectively take back their capacity of make things better, not in a progressive sense, but rather in a more human sense, namely cooperating spontaneously and in a decentralized manner, rather than enforcedly and in a centralized way, in order to safeguard their home from which the very human life starts. Berry argued, and Lasch with him, how Jefferson advocated for a democracy which is very much at odds with the contemporary one. Democratic self-government, in other words, could not be replaced by some managed technocracy directed by unknown elites: rather, democracy meant every day, decentralized self-government of ordinary citizens, by means of taking care of land ownership and the connected responsibilities. Indeed, as the southern thinker remarked, to be free does neither consist in an ideal and abstract word nor in a condition that someone could definitely reach, either by means a government's law or by a principle stated by a universalistic, rationalistic declaration. Rather, "Free men are not set free by their government; they have set their government free of themselves; they have made it

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<sup>790</sup> On this point see also Ch. Lasch, *Engineering the Good Life: The Search for Perfection*, "This World", n. 26, Summer 1989, pp. 9-17.

<sup>791</sup> See what Berry thought of science, a human, anti-hybris instrument: "Science is not superior to its subjects, nor is it inherently superior to the other disciplines. It becomes markedly inferior when it becomes grandiose in its own estimate of itself. In my opinion, science falsifies itself by seeing itself either as a system for the production of marketable ideas or as a romantic quest for some definitive "truth of the universe." It would do far better to understand itself as a part of a highly diverse effort of human thought, never to be completed, that might actually have the power to make us kinder to one another and to our world", W. Berry, *Is Life a Miracle*, cit., p. 189.

unnecessary. Freedom is not accomplished by a declaration. A declaration of freedom is either a futile and empty gesture, or it is the statement of a finished fact. Freedom is a personal matter – Berry concluded; though we may be enslaved as a group, we can be free only as persons. We can set each other free only as persons. It is a matter of discipline”<sup>792</sup>. A discipline that could be nurtured only day after day, by an aristocratic education that teaches to develop an independent attitude of mind and character as well to develop a restraining attitude towards his own appetites and desires. This was precisely what education, Lasch thought, and Berry too, failed to do.

In fact, Berry argued that education was replaced by a different type of discipline, a technical one, that he called “training”. If the latter, Berry wrote, “is a process of conditioning, an orderly and highly efficient procedure by which a man learns a prescribed pattern of facts and functions”<sup>793</sup>, something that pull human beings close to machines, due to its impersonal and repetitive activity, education, on the contrary, is a much longer “process by which a person’s experience is brought into contact with his place and his history. A college can train a person in four years; it can barely begin his education in that time. A person’s education begins before his birth in the making of the disciplines, traditions, and attitudes of mind that he will inherit, and it continues until his death under the slow, expensive, uneasy tutelage of his experience”<sup>794</sup>. Education, rather than training, teaches, in brief, to be human, namely to be

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<sup>792</sup> W. Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, cit., p. 103.

<sup>793</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>794</sup> *Ibidem*.

independent, responsible, rooted, historical creatures, conscious of their very nature of limited entities<sup>795</sup>. According to Lasch, contemporary society, instead, chose to pursue a different way for letting their young grow. A road that exchanged democracy, conceived as decentralised self-government, with the centralistic “reign of specialized expertise”<sup>796</sup>. The problem, for Lasch, was that a real republican democracy cannot be based on experts that take decisions for the rest of the people: that would mean, instead, an elitist, technocratic form of oligarchy. On the contrary, democracy presupposed small-scale politics and economics: “democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbours, instead of depending on the state”<sup>797</sup>.

Lasch, unlike Berry, was not a direct agrarian<sup>798</sup>. However, even if his quotations of the Southern Agrarians were rare, he quoted, and quite favourably, the agrarian manifesto, due to its powerful critique of progress and centralization, already in *The New Radicalism in America*

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<sup>795</sup> According to Lasch liberal education originally should have served as tool for developing independent, responsible and self-governed individuals. Indeed, by teaching a common language by means of history, classics, literature, foreign languages and so forth, it should have taught to develop a free mind, capable of making choices, by knowing good and evil, right and wrong. However, the narrow specialization that had developed since the end of nineteenth century, eroded such common languages, by creating, on the contrary “various technical jargons intelligible only to specialists”, Ch. Lasch, *The Disappearance of the General Reader*, cit., p. 4. That process not only eroded democracy, by giving more power to the elites. Rather, it eroded the very humanist basis of everyone so that, Lasch argued at the end of the lecture he gave at Rochester in 1984, anyone is now understandable by no one: “As modern society approaches universal literacy, it faces the prospect of universal illiteracy”, *ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>796</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What Was the American Dream?*, cit., p. 30. On a few similarities on this point between Lasch and Berry see especially J. Beer, *Wendell Berry and the Traditionalist Critique of Meritocracy*, in J. Peters (ed.), *Wendell Berry*, cit., pp. 212-229.

<sup>797</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>798</sup> Even if he was not an agrarian, Lasch had the idea that a human order needed a “healthy balance” between town and country in order to create a good society: Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 9. Moreover, as a matter fact, Lasch always preferred not to live in big towns, but rather in small ones, in which a more natural and simple life could be lived.



(1965)<sup>799</sup> and then in *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977)<sup>800</sup>. Nevertheless, he did not consider it a primary source, at least explicitly, of his political thought<sup>801</sup>. Even if he appreciated a lot its critique of progress and its advocate for some kind of decentralized human order, he recognized that the conservatism it echoed was too much nostalgic and to some extent sectarian, like Berry argued as well<sup>802</sup>. In this sense, he preferred the agrarianism of Berry, who mixed radicalism and cultural conservatism as well in un-nostalgic way. By the way, as it results from the archival research, Lasch was interested in agrarian thinkers. In fact, there are some folders in Rochester that contain notes on many articles of the agrarians, such as Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom<sup>803</sup>. Indeed, as some has already noted the point, there exist many similarities between Lasch and the “Twelve Southerners”<sup>804</sup>, at least in their basic understanding of human life and order: both they and Lasch

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<sup>799</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, cit., p. 297.

<sup>800</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>801</sup> A more thorough treatment of the agrarians would have been probably by Lasch made if only he had discovered that *I'll Take My Stand* had some kind of a sequel in which the agrarians met with, and this is not a chance, the English distributists, in particular Belloc: see H. Agar, A. Tate (eds.), *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, University Press of America, Washington, 1936. In that collected book, the essayist found a shared vision in an idea of society as built from bottom-up, characterised by economic and political radical decentralization, distribution of property, local cultures and traditions. The enemy was the growing corporate capitalism, made of massification and uprootedness and dependence upon centralized powers.

<sup>802</sup> That was probably due to the influence on Lasch by a book, W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, cit., in which the author praised the agrarian critique of progress and industrialism, while recognizing its authors' excess of conservatism. Nevertheless, Lasch included the agrarian manifesto in a plurality of his courses' syllabus, from the Sixties until the Nineties: see Lasch Papers, Box 44, Folder 6; Box 56, Folder 6.

<sup>803</sup> Lasch Papers, Box 37, Folder 16; Box 37, Folder 17. In particular, Lasch emphasized an article of Tate, *A Traditionalist Looks at Liberalism*, “Southern Review”, 1, 1935-36, 731-744, Lasch Papers, Box 37, Folder 16, in which Tate gave a moral meaning of private property, a typical agrarian conception of it, that we have seen already in Weaver as well, not by chance an epigone of the agrarians, according to which by means of it an individual matures responsibility and self-government. And, no less important, it constitutes a means through which traditions are perpetuated and inherited.

<sup>804</sup> It is Paul Murphy who argued that Lasch, for certain aspects, reminds the critique contained in *I'll Take My Stand*: P.V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History*, cit., p. 274.

argued for a human-scale order based on traditions, local cultures and radical decentralization as opposed to elitist, centralized and rationalistic plans. Of course, there are also differences, for Lasch, as we have already stated, was much less nostalgic than them. But what is important here to emphasize is their common vision about a human social order. Indeed, quite as Lasch, the Southern Agrarians did not mean to produce intellectually a whole plan by which creating or, rather, restoring, an idyllic society. As it has been noted, *I'll Take My Stand*, rather being considered a political program, in which case it would be very scarce, it should be deemed a poetic or ethical work: "it is an imaginative work on culture and society"<sup>805</sup>. As such, it just emphasized the basic structures which were deemed crucial for a human-scale order: small-scale economy, political decentralization, awareness of human finitude and its tragic nature, centrality of the family and spontaneous associations, among others. In just one word, we could say, stewardship of the very meaning of life itself. These elements, as it was in part already clear in *A Statement of Principles*, the introduction of *I'll Take My Stand*, could not be referred just to southern agrarians, strictly speaking. In fact, as it can be read in the introduction, the Southerners were critically dealing with the American way of life and praising for southern agrarianism, of course, but, as they stated, "proper living is a matter of the intelligence and the will, does not depend on the local climate of geography, and is capable

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<sup>805</sup> L.D. Rubin Jr, *I'll Take My Stand: The Literary Tradition*, in W.C. Havard, W. Sullivan (eds), *A Band of Prophets*, cit., p. 141. A review of the book was sent by Lasch and is conserved in archive: Lasch Papers, Box 6, Folder 17. It was written by his friend Jackson Lears: *Still Taking Their Stand*, cit.

of a definition which is general and not Southern at all. Southerners (...) must seek alliances with sympathetic communities everywhere”<sup>806</sup>.

It is not a case, thus, if a Southerner, Cleanth Brooks, quoted Lasch’s insights included in *The Culture of Narcissism*<sup>807</sup>. Indeed, if we consider the dichotomy of the agrarians a metaphor between two different, antithetical social visions, Lasch could very well be considered part of the tradition that deemed crucial the stewardship of home and of a human-scale order which begins in the family. As Andrew Lytle argued during the discussion with Brooks, “the whole family as a unit of society has been damaged almost unto death. That is a grave situation. The alternative is the servile state or the police state, which we are fast moving to”<sup>808</sup>. Stewardship meant to Lasch, and to Berry as well, to preserve and safeguard those natural structures that make human life worth living for,

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<sup>806</sup> The Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand*, cit., p. XLIII. For this reason, for instance, an epigone of them considered Alexander Solzhenitsyn a Southerner: M. Montgomery, *Solzhenitsyn as Southerner*, in Fifteen Southerners, *Why the South Still Survive*, cit., pp. 171-199.

<sup>807</sup> C. Brooks, *The Enduring Faith*, in Fifteen Southerners, *Why the South Still Survive*, cit., pp. 205-206; C. Brooks, *The Agrarian-Industrial Metaphor: Culture, Economics, and Society in a Technological Age*, discussion with Lyle Lanier, Andrew Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, in W.C. Havard, W. Sullivan (eds), *A Band of Prophets*, cit., pp. 188-189. As for the former, however, Brooks argued that Lasch did not consider gnosticism as an evil that manifested in contemporary times. Moreover, he let Lasch say that religion is an illusion. Both the statements are not entirely correct. In fact, Brooks words dated back to 1981 when Lasch, effectively, did not speak yet about gnosticism and was not still convinced that religion could be a precious element for a good society. For the first theme, see especially the already mentioned Laschian contributions to the “New Oxford Review”: *The Infantile Illusion of Omnipotence & the Modern Ideology of Science*, cit.; *Probing Gnosticism & Its Modern Derivatives*, cit.; *The Spirit of Modern Science*, cit.; *Anti-Modern Mysticism: E.M. Cioran & C.G. Jung*, cit.; *The New Age Movement: No Effort, No Truth, No Solutions*, cit. See also Ch. Lasch, *Gnosticism, Ancient and Modern*, cit. As for Lasch’s consideration of religion, there are plenty of examples by which it appears clear, at least from the Eighties, that he took it very seriously, as tool by which everyone could accept his own limited condition, and not as an illusion. See for example what follows: “For those who take religion seriously, belief is a burden, not a self-righteous claim to some privileged moral status. Self-righteousness, indeed, may be more prevalent among skeptics than among believers. The spiritual discipline against self-righteousness is the very essence of religion”, Ch. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, cit., p. 16. In the second essay, Brooks considered Lasch a possible ally.

<sup>808</sup> A. Lytle, *The Agrarian-Industrial Metaphor*, cit., p. 189.

such as the family, and the spiritual and ethical force that is derived from them: “The only things worth living for are love and work – Lasch clearly and powerfully declared in an interview after the publication of his most famous book. I have a family I like to live with and work I enjoy. Every day I make compromises, but I don’t know how else to live. Maybe I have a stable life and family because we live here in the provinces. Or maybe I just got lucky”<sup>809</sup>.

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<sup>809</sup> B. Rowes, *Gratification Now Is the Slogan of the '70s, Laments a Historian*, cit.

## Chapter 6 - Christopher Lasch and Conservatism Well Understood

The real conservatives may turn out to be the radicals of the twenty-first century.

Christopher Lasch<sup>810</sup>

In this last chapter, I will firstly speak of two types of visions of order. As I have already argued in the previous chapter, Lasch together with Weaver, Kirk and Berry as well can be considered as decentralist. According to them, an order, which means not only a political order, but more generally a cultural and social one, is a spontaneous and bottom-up creation that nurtures a community. For them, all somehow influenced by an agrarian idea of society, only in small-scale communities it is possible to live properly as persons. As such, a decentrist vision, to use the words of Wilhelm Röpke, is apter to human beings. That means, first of all, that economics is not everything. Indeed, before economics there are some qualities that need to be cultivated so that a free economy does not become crony capitalism or utilitarian materialism invades every aspect of human life. In this respect, it is crucial what Röpke wrote<sup>811</sup>.

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<sup>810</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Modernism and Its Critics*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>811</sup> About that, Röpke used to speak of “economism”: “We mean the incorrigible mania of making the means the end, of thinking only of bread and never of those other things of which the Gospel speaks. It is economism to succumb to those aberrations of social rationalism of which we have spoken and to all the implied distortions of perspective. It is economism to dismiss, as Schumpeter does, the problem of giant industrial concerns and monopoly with the highly questionable argument that mass production, the promotion of research, and the investment of monopoly profits raise the supply of goods, and to neglect to include in the calculation of these potential gains in the supply of material goods the possible losses of a non-material kind, in the form of impairment of the higher purposes of life and society. It is economism to allow material gain to obscure the danger that we may forfeit liberty, variety, and justice and that the concentration of power may grow, and it is also economism to forget that people do not live by cheaper vacuum cleaners alone but by other and higher things which may wither in the shadow of giant industries and monopolies”, W. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, cit., p. 107.

A brief comparison between Lasch and Röpke is then the core of the second part of this chapter. Both of them, in fact, were radically decentralist and hoped for a human-scale order that brought back in the minds and in the heart of the individuals those crucial characteristics of a healthy, well-structured society. Both of them, besides, were critics of capitalism and liberalism: however, whereas Lasch's analysis demonstrates some historical fallacies, Röpke, also due the fact that he was an economist, provides a deeper critique. Both of them thought that rationalism led liberalism and capitalism to degenerate: but Lasch is often vague in discussing the topic and he seems often not to discern, respectively, capitalism from free market, and different types of liberalism; Röpke, instead, provides a critical and historical account of liberalism and capitalism, by explaining how liberalism during nineteenth century became a kind of "economic technique", and capitalism a distorted type of free economy hinged on utilitarianism, materialism and the "cult of the colossal" that dried up the very moral reservations that nurtures a true free economy. Nevertheless, they both consider a small-scale market and decentralized society as the remedies for a good society of independent, self-limited and responsible individuals. In the end, if they both highly valued independence – a crucial element of the classical thought – Röpke mixed both elements of liberalism and (anti-modern) conservatism<sup>812</sup>, so that a scholar rightly

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Economism, in other words, is another way to describe the degeneration of free economy in the ideology of utilitarian and rationalistic materialism that Lasch opposed too.

<sup>812</sup> Someone, actually, considered him just a conservative: on that see for example J. Solchany, *Wilhelm Röpke: Why He Was a Conservative*, in P. Commun, S. Kolev (eds. by), *Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966) A Liberal Political Economist and Conservative*

argued that his liberalism could be defined as follows: “His liberalism is a bridled horse galloping to Utopia along a path full of pitfalls”<sup>813</sup>.

In the end, I will consider the elements Lasch considered crucial for a human-scale order. I will use, in particular, Lasch’s essay *Conservatism Against Itself* (1990)<sup>814</sup>. However, it must be noted that Lasch did not mean to elaborate a definite scheme of order, for in his perspective a human order can be built only by a bottom-up process: otherwise, it would be an organization planned by some kind of enlightened elites, and that would be very much at odds with what Lasch had been fighting against, from an intellectual point of view, for all his life. Besides, Lasch had been discovering, during his last years, some themes and authors, as we have already previously spoken of<sup>815</sup>, and therefore his intellectual journey was still in motion, when he unfortunately died. As such, his ideas still remain incomplete and undefined, at least in his discussion about conservatism. Nevertheless, some crucial elements, as we have emphasized for all this study, such as anti-capitalism, critiques of big concentrations of power and consumerism, preference for small-communities and radical critique of globalization, as well the emphasis upon traditions and rootedness make him a conservative.

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*Social Philosopher*, pp. 165-173; others, instead, emphasized his “ordoliberalism” which considers “economic freedom, societal order, and cultural embeddedness (...) interdependent”, N. Goldschmidt, J. Dörr, *Wilhelm Röpke on Liberalism, Culture, and Economic Development*, in P. Commun, S. Kolev (eds. by), *Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966) A Liberal Political Economist and Conservative Social Philosopher*, cit., p. 216.

<sup>813</sup> A. Kahan, *From Basel to Brooklyn: Liberal Cultural Pessimism in Burckhardt, Röpke, and the American Neoconservatives*, in P. Commun, S. Kolev (eds. by), *Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966) A Liberal Political Economist and Conservative Social Philosopher*, cit., pp. 162.

<sup>814</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit.

<sup>815</sup> I am referring in particular to the influence Lasch received from Dale Vree and the “New Oxford Review”. See chap. 4.

## 6.1 *Centrism vs Decentrism: Two Visions of Order.*

In a significant memory of a relative of him, Uncle Doug, Weaver spoke of what meant to him to be a good citizen. As a Southerner, Weaver suggested that Uncle Doug had followed the example of Thomas Jefferson. He embodied the ideal of the inhabitant of a real republic because he was an independent mind and spirit living on his own work and cultivating everyday self-government: “He was an agrarian, living on the soil; a primary producer creating things, not trafficking in the things that other men made. He did not believe in being beholden. In that spirit of independence which we associate with the builders of this country, he believed that the individual should support the state and not the state the individual. Again, like a good Jeffersonian, he viewed politics with the watchful eye of the self-sustaining citizen”<sup>816</sup>. He epitomized what Weaver, as a Southerner, used to call the tragic sense of human life. Indeed, the Southerners, by experiencing directly the tragedy of the defeat in the Civil War could not embrace the “hysterical optimism”<sup>817</sup> typical of the American way of life made of progress, apology of science and capitalism: “But perhaps most important of all is the Southerner’s discipline in tragedy. Belief in tragedy is essentially un-American”<sup>818</sup>. Southern’s view of life, in fact, opposed tragic awareness of life to optimism, hope and piety to progressivism, religion to science: “Southern piety is basically an acceptance of the inscrutability of nature. Under its

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<sup>816</sup> R.M. Weaver, *The Pattern of a Life* (1954), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>817</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>818</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Aspects of the Southern Philosophy*, cit., p. 208.



impulse the individual Southerner feels that nature is not something which he is to make over or change; it is rather something for him to come to terms with (...). Essentially the Northerner – Weaver argued – is a child of the Enlightenment”<sup>819</sup>. Whereas “the Southern world-outlook”, Weaver wrote elsewhere, “knew nothing of infinite progressions but rather loved fixed limits in all things: it rejected the idea of ceaseless (...) it saw little point in restless striving, but desired a permanent settlement, a coming to terms with nature, a recognition of what is in its self-sustaining form”<sup>820</sup>, the Northern mind, on the contrary, “more clearly embraced the Faustian concept than in the idea of progress. There is the constant outreaching, the denial of limits, the willingness to dissolve all into endless instrumental activity”<sup>821</sup>. According to Weaver, in sum, “life is not simply a linear progression, but a drama, with rise and fall”<sup>822</sup>. By living on his own skin the tragedy of human condition and experiencing the difficulties of everyday life, the man pictured by Weaver, which was the true image of what meant to be a human being, rejected the superficial, optimistic, aimless and hysterical contemporary society and, instead, “he kept a grasp upon those values which are neither old-fashioned nor new-fashioned, but are central, permanent, and certain in their reward”<sup>823</sup>: in one word, because it implies sense of limits and deep awareness of his own precarious condition, we could say rootedness.

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<sup>819</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>820</sup> R.M. Weaver, *The South and the American Union*, cit., p. 235

<sup>821</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

<sup>822</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 240.

<sup>823</sup> R.M. Weaver, *The Pattern of a Life*, cit., p. 15.

In another very much Southern essay, Weaver made a comparison between the typical Southern community and the idea of community lived in Chicago, where, as we have already seen, had lived by teaching for many years. According to Weaver, community cannot be simply conceived as people existing together in a geographical area. Chicago, in this sense, was a political definite area but lacked what “make true community, namely association on some non-material level and common attachment to some non-material ends”<sup>824</sup>. In Chicago he could understand as follows: “One encounters the curious fact that the more closely people are crowded together, the less they know about one another, and the less they care about one another”<sup>825</sup>. Chicago, in his opinion, embodied the characteristics of great cities, in which individuals lost their own personalities and peculiarities just for becoming anonymous “people without faces”: “they come to be like mass-produced parts, polished, machined, and what is worst of all to say – interchangeable”<sup>826</sup>. In short, what great cities, such as Chicago, lacked was the very prerequisite of community: rootedness, sense of place, warm relationships, local traditions. According to Weaver, only in small communities, namely by radical decentralization, it could have been possible, precisely as it happened in the South, to “battle against the dehumanization of life”<sup>827</sup>. “What the big city fails to see, or wilfully ignores”, Weaver argued, “is that provincialism is one of the chief

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<sup>824</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Address of Dr. Richard M. Weaver* (1962), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>825</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>826</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>827</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

supports of character. To be of a place, to reflect it in your speech and action and general bearing, to offer it as a kind of warranty that you will remain true to yourself – this is what it means to have character and personality. And without these things there is no individuality”<sup>828</sup>. Contemporary liberals, on the contrary, believed in radical centralization, by replacing natural communities with state intervention and, by doing so, eroding the moral order, which begins at home, in the family, which is a prerequisite of true, natural communities and responsible, self-governed individuals.

According to Kirk, there were come specific “permanent things”<sup>829</sup> to conserve, without which the very meaning of human condition tended to faint: first of all, the tragic sense of life of human condition, that is to say the very precarious and fragile material of which human creatures are made; secondly, the sense of the past and the memory of the wisdom of ancestors incorporated in tradition and Christian and Judaic culture; thirdly, an idea of human order based on justice and freedom, which could be anything but imperfect, as imperfect is the human world itself<sup>830</sup>. “We cling to the permanent things, the norms of our being”, Kirk argued, “because all other grounds are quicksand”<sup>831</sup>. Furthermore, Kirk emphasized how human being could be conserved just in rooted and

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<sup>828</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>829</sup> Kirk’s reference is mainly to T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture. The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York and London, 1976, p. 176: “Conservatism is too often conservation of the wrong things: liberalism a relaxation of discipline; revolution a denial of the permanent things”.

<sup>830</sup> R. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, cit., pp. 47-50.

<sup>831</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53.

decentralized communities, under the influence in particular of Orestes Brownson<sup>832</sup> and Wilhelm Röpke<sup>833</sup>.

Brownson, Kirk noted, spoke of “territorial democracy” in order to describe a form of localist republic, as it was the American federalist order. This meant, Kirk continued, a radical decentralized order built in everyday life, in townships, counties and even in the first cell of a human order, the family: such was a bottom-up human-scale order. This type of republican democracy was opposed to the Jacobin democracy based on an abstract and collectivistic conception of people directed by a centralistic, capillary government. A genuine, federal human order, Kirk continued, “is the protector both of private rights and of local interests and powers of free decisions”<sup>834</sup> because it is rooted in history and place, localistic and decentralized. A human order, therefore, presupposes a “decentrist” vision, rather a “centrist” one. Röpke, in fact, spoke of these two radical antithetical social vision in his masterpiece, *A Humane Economy* (1958)<sup>835</sup>. According to the German economist and sociologist, there could be two manners by which looking at human order: one that considers society from the top downwards, the second from the bottom upwards. The first, Röpke continued, “seek security, happiness, and fulfilment in the subordination of the individual and the small group to a deliberately and strictly organized community, which, from this point of

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<sup>832</sup> See in particular R. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, cit., pp. 255-275; R. Kirk, *Introduction to O. Brownson, Selected Political Essays*, cit., pp. 1-10.

<sup>833</sup> See in particular R. Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives*, cit., pp. 106-123; *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., pp. 114-124

<sup>834</sup> R. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, cit., p. 160.

<sup>835</sup> W. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, cit., chap. V, *Centrism and Decentrism*, pp. 222-261.

view, is all the more attractive the larger it is; the others seek these benefits in the independence and autonomy of the individual and the small group”<sup>836</sup>. The centrist vision, in other words, “has a strange predilection for everything contrived, man-made, manufactured, organized, and intricately constructed, for the drawing board, blueprint, and ruler”<sup>837</sup>: that is the product of the Enlightened, rationalistic, and modern liberal mentality. Whereas the decentrist perspective “prefers what is natural, organic, time-tested, spontaneous, and self-regulating, and which endures through long eras”<sup>838</sup>: that is the idea of the conservation of a human-scale order. The concrete political realization of the centrist vision is the concentration of powers in a centre; the decentrist vision, on the contrary, manifests itself in genuine federalism and local government, starting from the very individual self-government, according to a subsidiary vision. The centrist, Röpke argued, is nothing but the “social rationalist” which wants to organize human life according to a rationalistic, therapeutic and all-embracing plan from top-down; the decentrist, instead, is conscious of the radical imperfection of human beings and therefore he does not idolize human reason, for without history, customs and traditions reason becomes tyrannic and despotic: “We know with what optimism our social rationalist views the success of his constructions and refashioning. By contrast, the decentrist, who thinks in terms of human beings and also knows and respects history, is skeptical or pessimistic and in any case bases, his arguments realistically and

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<sup>836</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 227.

<sup>837</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>838</sup> *Ibidem*.

unsentimentally upon human nature. The centrist is doctrinaire, the decentrist undoctinaire and unideological. The latter prefers to hold on to established principles; he is swayed more by a hierarchy of norms and values, by reason and sober reflection, than by passions and feelings”<sup>839</sup>. “The temptation of centrism (...) is the temptation of mechanical perfection and of uniformity at the expense of freedom”<sup>840</sup>, whereas the humbleness of decentrism, “the deeper – we might say here the conservative – meaning of decentrism is that it behoves us to bethink ourselves of the indispensable conditions for a sound and happy society. These are a certain stratification of society, respect for natural developments, a modicum of variety and of horizontal and vertical social articulation, family traditions, personal inclinations”<sup>841</sup>.

Röpke dichotomy is really effective, since it reminds what conservatives, cultural conservatives thought, as a matter of fact, such as Weaver and Kirk, that what to be primarily conserved: human being with its dignity and as part of a human, rooted, decentralized order without which human personality cannot fully flourish. As Weaver argued, in opposition to the liberals, the Röpkean centrists, who put a Faustian human being “not only at the centre, but in potentially unlimited control”<sup>842</sup> of his world, conservatives, the Röpkean decentrists, believe in the existence of something more than the amorph and uprooted individual, a creation which is “older than himself, greater than himself” and which puts him, as a consequence of that, in a radically modest position in this world: the

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<sup>839</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 229.

<sup>840</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>841</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 232. On all that see also W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit.

<sup>842</sup> R.M. Weaver, *Conservatism and Liberalism*, cit., p. 487.

conservative “believes in the uniqueness of man, but he does not translate this uniqueness as supremacy or omnipotence. He sees rather that this unique creation is limited and is subject to restraints”<sup>843</sup>. From his perspective, then, Kirk argued that what to conserve was precisely the very structure of human order: “first of all, he [the conservative] wants to keep humanity human”, hinged on imperfection but also love, moral imagination and love, that is to say not to reduce human beings to a mere rational calculators, efficient agents and uniformed social atoms; secondly “the conservative means protect that heritage of civilization which the painful labour of numberless generations of men has bequeathed to us, and which now is menaced by fanaticism and the craze for novelty”, that is to say traditions which make human beings who they are; thirdly, “the conservative seeks to protect the elaborate civil social edifice which, under Providence, has developed in America – our government of laws and not of men, our economy characterized by volition rather than compulsion, our institutions calculated to make a man his own master, our political system which prefers variety to centralized uniformity”<sup>844</sup>. In sum, what both Weaver and Kirk argued was to preserve the very human home.

Lasch, as it is clear, was neither a Southerner, like Weaver, and therefore he did not have his typical attachment to Southern culture, nor he was a time-rooted conservative, as Kirk was. Rather, he became, after historical developments, that is to say after the Sixties, as we have already said, a

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<sup>843</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 486-487.

<sup>844</sup> R. Kirk, *Why I Am a Conservative* (1963), in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, cit., p. 44. On this point see also R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., pp. 191-205.

cultural conservative, but without losing his deep radical perspective over the enlightened, modern project of individual liberation. Indeed, precisely because his conservatism was much more experience-rooted than Weaver's, who in any case died before the revolts of the Sixties, and Kirk's, he could keep a more critical eye towards contemporary conservatism as well<sup>845</sup>. In fact, the problem of contemporary conservatism was that, as he repeatedly argued, it was not conservative at all<sup>846</sup>. It was a sort of liberalism, but under the conservative label. Moreover, as the liberationist movement had so much influenced the whole society, as its cultural influence took deep roots in human behaviour and preferences, it was hard for Lasch to find something to conserve: the crucial element of a stable, structured and conservative society, that is to say the family, had been invaded and therefore its very task of preserving and cultivating human personality had been eroded. Hence, Lasch struggled for an alliance of radicals and cultural conservatives: "we have reached a point in our history – Lasch argued – where moral and political innovation – a new political discourse beyond left and right – depends not so much on the invention of anything self-consciously new or revolutionary as on the recovery of traditions long ignored and half forgotten"<sup>847</sup>. That was meant trace a common path towards the restoration of a rooted life, of a decentralized political system and a small-scale market. Once, Lasch thought, that would have meant,

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<sup>845</sup> Actually, as we have already argued, Kirk was deeply critical towards neoconservatism too. See especially R. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, cit., pp. 172-190.

<sup>846</sup> See for instance Ch. Lasch, *What's Wrong with the Right*, cit.

<sup>847</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Modernism and Its Critics*, cit., p. 25.



at least in his interpretation, a not well specified form of socialism. But, as it appeared to share the same propensity for concentration, the “centrist” tendency about which Röpke had spoken, Lasch was starting to look elsewhere: a vision hinged on a “respect for limits, a sense of place, a recognition of mutual dependence, a rejection of material abundance as the only requirement of a good life. It implies fraternity, not an abstract conception of equality”<sup>848</sup>. Instead of the total rationalizing of human everyday life<sup>849</sup>, Lasch struggled for the very roots of a human-scale order. He was aware, as he powerfully wrote in an essay published in “democracy”, that without any roots, without natural and spontaneous bonds and long-term commitments human life was not capable of standing<sup>850</sup>. As Brownson argued, “The nature of man is to live by means of an uninterrupted communion, with other men and with nature, under the three precise and definite forms of family, country and property. His destiny, that is, the design of his Creator in his constitution, is not, then, to place himself physically, sentimentally, and intellectually in communion with all men, and with all the beings of the universe. This were to annihilate him by the vast solitude of Sahara”<sup>851</sup>. As Lasch put it, “man grasps the universal only through the particular”<sup>852</sup>. His radical-conservatism vision was deeply at odds with his contemporary tendency to see progress and change as the bulwarks of a good life: rather,

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<sup>848</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to ‘Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism’*, cit. According to him, socialism was at his time just another “product of 19th-century optimism and of an outdated Darwinian theory of social evolution”, *ibidem*.

<sup>849</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Mismeasure of Man*, cit.

<sup>850</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Mass Culture Reconsidered*, cit.

<sup>851</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Orestes Brownson’s Christian Radicalism*, cit., then also in Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 193.

<sup>852</sup> *Ibidem*.

conservatism had the radical task to struggle against it. As he stated in a conference in 1983, “our culture sets such a high value on adaptability, and the prevailing sense of crisis has given so much additional support to the idea of willingness to adapt to changing technologies and changing values and new forms of danger is the supreme virtue, that is difficult to remind ourselves – and important to remind ourselves for that very reason – that a more important and essential virtue in some situations, is the courage not to change”<sup>853</sup>. Or, in other situations, which could be the reverse of the previous ones, a tougher, not progressive but rather conservative, radicalism, as Mel Bradford argued, could be necessary, for “merely to conserve is sometimes to perpetuate what is outrageous”<sup>854</sup>.

## ***6.2 Christopher Lasch and Anti-Capitalist Conservatism as Stewardship.***

Capitalism, in Lasch’s point of view, was pure evil. This point, after reading the previous chapters, should be clear. And however, Lasch was never plain and limpid in explaining what effectively was to him capitalism. In this sense, he manifested the typical intellectual bias towards economics and money motive<sup>855</sup>: Lasch thought that capitalism intrinsically, quite as a necessary process, leads to the commercialization of all human life<sup>856</sup>. As he wrote in an essay, “mass markets do not easily

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<sup>853</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Self Under Siege*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>854</sup> M.E. Bradford, *The Reactionary Imperative*, cit., p. II.

<sup>855</sup> On that see especially A. Kahan, *La guerra degli intellettuali al capitalismo*, cit.

<sup>856</sup> This is quite a contradictory thesis, since he seems to imagine individuals not as acting and reacting entities, but rather as impersonal manikins at the mercy of obscure forces. But Lasch considered individuals responsible actors as well.

coexist with institutions that operate according to principles antithetical to the market (...). Sooner or later, it tends to absorb them all. It puts an almost irresistible pressure on every activity to justify itself in the only terms recognized by the market – to become a business proposition, to pay its own way”<sup>857</sup>. If, however, we consider capitalism, generally speaking, as a system of production based on private property, the leading role of the middle class and a moral culture that nurtures it<sup>858</sup>, Lasch appears not to criticize it: the problem is that capitalism can be interpreted in different ways. But he did not accept that market could expand its *raison d’être* beyond its strict space of action. In other words, he considers contemporary capitalism as a system, not only economic, but, more than that and foremost cultural, that fosters a consumerist perspective and corrodes the bourgeois culture that once sustained markets. Besides, this globalized and universalist system is typically uprooted and detached from local communities, so that, Lasch wrote,

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<sup>857</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Consumption*, cit., p. 1387.

<sup>858</sup> Things are much more complicated than that, it is obvious. A crucial role for capitalism, or “innovism”, if we adopt the proposal of Deirdre McCloskey and Alberto Mingardi, is played by technology. But technological advancements are caused by the above-mentioned elements. In other words, without a certain type of culture, a certain type of human being and the defence of private property there cannot exist innovation. Someone could argue that also an entrepreneurial (anti-liberal) state could be the director of progress: but it can be objected that if a state drives progress, there is no space for the unexpected and unintentional (a bottom-up process) which is, maybe, the core of the progress. On that see especially D. McCloskey, A. Mingardi, *The Myth of the Entrepreneurial State*, AIER, Barrington, 2020. On the topic of the unintentional as the driving force of progress, see for instance the following thought of Friedrich von Hayek: “What individualism teaches us is that society is greater than the individual only in so far as it is free. In so far as it is controlled or directed, it is limited to the powers of the individual minds which control or direct it. If the presumption of the modern mind, which will not respect anything that is not consciously controlled by individual reason, does not learn in time where to stop, we may, as Edmund Burke warned us, ‘be well assured that everything about us will dwindle by degrees, until at length our concerns are shrunk to the dimensions of our minds’”, Id, *Individualism: True and False* (1945), in Id, *Individualism and Economic Order*, cit., p. 32.

tends to erode the loyalties and traditions that are pre-economical<sup>859</sup>. But there exist other points in Lasch's discourse against capitalism. Better said, against the capitalism of the twentieth century.

The most important point is that capitalism is become, over the last century, namely since the second part of nineteenth century, another thing in comparison with its previous version. In Lasch's opinion, there were once better conditions for a *good* and human capitalism. First of all, there existed religious and virtuous restraints for purely economic appetites; secondly, markets were for the most part rooted and small-scale ones; thirdly, the ties between property and control over it is simply vanishing, since the ever-increasing scale of corporations, and that leads to a relief of the responsibilities of its use. These three points constitute, for Lasch, a cultural issue. According to him, indeed, (small-scale) market economy presupposes a certain type of culture, a bourgeois culture: contemporary capitalism simply murdered it<sup>860</sup>. What now is called capitalism is another name for big concentrations of power in the hands of a few people. Rather, Lasch wrote that in the past there were no such situations: families possessed and produced in small-scale markets<sup>861</sup>. For this very fact, their use of property helped them to develop the crucial

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<sup>859</sup> On the critique of globalization, Lasch is close to some arguments that we are hearing in the last years. It is not a case that, for example, the former political advisor of Donald Trump, Steve Bannon, read and appreciated Lasch. Nevertheless, I think there are also differences between them. But there is no room for the topic here for at least two reasons: first of all, this is not a work on *politique politicienne*; secondly, this is a work of history of political thought and Bannon and Trump are too much close to these days.

<sup>860</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Capitalism Itself Corrupts*, cit., p. 543.

<sup>861</sup> As for in other cases, Lasch's way of dealing with history of political and economic thought is highly debatable. For instance, he wrote that in the time of Adam Smith property was "widely distributed": Ch. Lasch, *What's Wrong with the Right*, cit., p. 16; Id, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 519. Facts, however, seems to demonstrate that inequalities are ever-diminishing due to global markets over the centuries.

responsibility that needs liberty. Moreover, some pre-liberal, or pre-Enlightened, and religious culture (Protestant and Calvinist, foremost) was fundamental in order to well orientate and guide the person: it is a lever for self-discipline and self-control<sup>862</sup>. What Lasch noted, in other words, is that capitalism consumed the very culture it had to sustain it appropriately<sup>863</sup>. In *The True and Only Heaven*, by criticizing the contemporary champion of free enterprise, he wrote as follows: “The right's notion of free enterprise takes no account of the forces that have transformed capitalism from within: the rise of the corporation, the bureaucratization of business, the increasing insignificance of private property, and the shift from a work ethic to a consumption ethic”<sup>864</sup>. Capitalism changed because the culture that fostered is dead. But it is true the reverse as well: the bourgeois culture which fostered capitalism changed due to capitalism itself, according to Lasch. Still, the problem remains: how to amend an economic system which lost its cultural basis? How to make the issue of independence and ownership central again in a world of large concentrations and impersonal management, of massified and standardised individuals? The remedy, to Lasch, lay in the decentralization and in the (re)creation of small-scale markets, as well as in the renewal of a sense of human limits. Which is, to some extent, also

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<sup>862</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., pp. 53-55; Id, *Capitalism Itself Corrupts*, cit., p. 543.

<sup>863</sup> As two scholars noted by commenting Lasch on the topic, however, it cannot be argued that necessarily capitalism leads to consumerism: otherwise, individual responsible liberty would not exist: G.R. Beabout, E.J. Echevarria, *The Culture of Consumerism*, cit., pp. 373-374.

<sup>864</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., p. 519.

the critique, and the normative proposal argued by Wilhelm Röpke (1899-1966).

The German “humanist” economist and sociologist is here crucial, for, somehow, he plays the role of a bridge between a conservative, and even anti-modern social perspective (very similar to the Laschian one), but also a liberal point of view, in the economic domain<sup>865</sup>. In the preface of one of his most important volumes, which is also the second of his trilogy, *Civitas Humana* (1944)<sup>866</sup>, he stated that the best label, even though it was not fully satisfying, he could be described with is “liberal-conservative”<sup>867</sup>, which is another way to say that without some pre- or anti-liberal, namely conservative prerequisites and reservations, liberalism cannot survive. If we read, in fact, the first book of the trilogy, *The Social Crisis of Our Time* (1942), Röpke manifested a sombre streak when observing the world around him: the Second World War was in the course and hope was, that the German never abandoned, was a rare commodity. The “sickness of our civilization”<sup>868</sup>, as he opened the Swiss preface, was under his eyes: he was in search for a remedy, for a cure.

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<sup>865</sup> The bibliography on Röpke is clearly huge, particularly in German. For an introduction of his thought see at least J. Zmirak, *Wilhelm Röpke. Swiss Localist, Global Economist*, ISI Books, Wilmington, 2001; H.J. Hennecke, *Wilhelm Röpke. Ein Leben in der Brandung*, Schäffer-Poeschel Verlag, Stuttgart, 2005; W. Campbell, *Wilhelm Röpke*, in B. Frohnen, J. Beer, J.O. Nelson (eds.), *American Conservatism*, cit., pp. 747-749; S. Gregg, *Wilhelm Röpke’s Political Economy*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2010; J. Solchany, *Wilhelm Röpke, l’autre Hayek. Aux origines du neoliberalisme*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 2015; G. Franco, *Economia senza etica? Il contributo di Wilhelm Röpke all’etica dell’economia e al pensiero sociale cristiano*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2016; P. Commun, S. Kolev, *Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966) A Liberal Political Economist and Conservative Social Philosopher*, cit.

<sup>866</sup> W. Röpke, *Civitas Humana. A Humane Order of Society* (1944), William Hodge and Company, London-Edinburgh-Glasgow, 1948.

<sup>867</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XVII.

<sup>868</sup> W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., p. III. Indeed, in the pages of his books you can find plenty of medical expressions for explaining the describing the sickness of the world.

And the remedy, quite similar to Lasch, lay in the radical decentralization of societies as well as in the renewal of the true culture that could nurture a free economy and a human society.

In 1931 he asked himself, but also those who would listen to them: “Who can really be at ease in the presence of the growing concentration in economic life, which goes hand in hand with the increasing dependence of the masses? Who can fail to see that our civilization is being destroyed by the progressive commercialization of things that are beyond economics, by the obsessive business spirit that confuses ends and means and forgets that man does not live in order to work, but works in order to live, and thus perverts all human values, by the empty bustle and sterile excitement of our time? Who, indeed, does not feel that all this is destructive of civilization, does not want to fight against it all?”<sup>869</sup>. In this question, there are all the elements that Röpke harshly criticized in his trilogy, and his spiritual testament, *A Humane Economy* (1958): gigantism, concentrations in the economic life to the detriment of a sane, humane, small-scale and decentralist economy, the spreading of the dependent mass at the expense of independent and responsible individuals, the commercialization of things that are beyond economics because human beings lost their cultural orientation and therefore their intrinsic restraints<sup>870</sup>.

“Vermassung”, collectivization, social decomposition are all manifestations of the same phenomenon: a humane and sane society lost

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<sup>869</sup> W. Röpke, *The Intellectuals and 'Capitalism'* (1931), in Id, *Against the Tide*, Henry Regnery, Chicago, 1969, p. 27.

<sup>870</sup> This argument is classically dealt by José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, cit., which was an important cultural source for Röpke.

its own, right way. “A healthy society, firmly resting on its own foundation, possesses a genuine ‘structure’ with many intermediate stages; it exhibits a necessarily ‘hierarchical’ composition (...). Whereas such a society is based on the grouping functions of genuine communities filled with the spirit of human fellowship (such as the neighbourhood, the family, the parish, the Church, the occupation), society has during the last hundred years moved further and further away from such an ideal and has disintegrated into a mass of abstract individuals who are solitary and isolated as human beings, but packed tightly like termites in their role of social functionaries”, Röpke wrote<sup>871</sup>. The process of collectivization led human beings to a condition of “proletarianization”, which means, to the German thinker, the antithesis of the independent, spiritually aristocratic person of a free society<sup>872</sup>: it is a sociological and anthropological situation “characterized by economic and social dependence, a rootless, tenemented life, where men are strangers to nature and overwhelmed by

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<sup>871</sup> W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., p. 10. Röpke thought that a “nobilitas naturalis” naturally exists and not everyone can become part of it. In sum, as he wrote, “We need a natural nobility whose authority is, fortunately, readily accepted by all men, an elite deriving its title solely from supreme performance and peerless moral example and invested with the moral dignity of such a life. Only a few from every stratum of society can ascend into this thin layer of natural nobility. The way to it is an exemplary and slowly maturing life of dedicated endeavor on behalf of all, unimpeachable integrity, constant restraint of our common greed, proved soundness of judgment, a spotless private life, indomitable courage in standing up for truth and law, and generally the highest example. This is how the few, carried upward by the trust of the people, gradually attain to a position above the classes, interests, passions, wickedness, and foolishness of men and finally become the nation's conscience. To belong to this group of moral aristocrats should be the highest and most desirable aim, next to which all the other triumphs of life are pale and insipid.”, W. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, cit., pp. 130-131. Whereas Lasch thought that, despite the natural and ineradicable differences, human beings could try to find in themselves the levers for becoming moral aristocrats. The German was, in sum, an elitist, whereas Lasch was much more a democrat in this sense. To be noted, however, that Röpke makes explicit reference to Thomas Jefferson in this respect: an author, as it now clear, Lasch had in great consideration.

<sup>872</sup> On “aristocratic liberalism” see A. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis De Tocqueville* (1992), Routledge, London, 2017.



dreariness of work. This anti-modern, rural and agrarian perspective is clearly influenced by the fact that he lived from 1937 until his death, fleeing Hitlerian national-socialism, in Switzerland: there he found a place in which he could live in a small-scale republic and that became, not by accident, the benchmark for his idea of a good, humane, well-structured society.

A certain capitalism and a certain liberalism contributed to bring confusions and disorientation. Röpke referred to a specific period, the nineteenth century, in which something went wrong. Over that century, rationalism and liberalism experienced a sort of idolatry. But the sense of limits was, for the German philosopher, crucial in order not to let degenerate them. Reason was infected by what he used to call “eternal saint-simonism”, the hybris of human intellect<sup>873</sup>: “abuse of the intellect in the negative sense of rationalism is only possible if the intellect is taxed beyond its capacity, if its nature, its limits and premises are ignored. (...). It is true – Röpke stated – that in the sphere of pure logic and mathematics reason is free and independent, following its own laws, but the error occurs precisely when this *a priori* method of thinking is applied to the realities of society (...). In the fields which concern us here, reason simply is not autonomous and unfettered, it does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it entitled to spread its wings, but is obliged to recognize the barriers and conditions set by the circumstances of our existence (...). As soon as reason frees itself from these limits and peremptorily announces its independence, trouble ensues: such is the case of the ethical sophist

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<sup>873</sup> On that see specifically W. Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, cit., pp. 43-63.

who, proud of having used his reason to unmask justice as pure ‘ideology’, arrogantly ignores the most certain thing in the world, man’s moral compass, in brief, his conscience; such again is the case of the libertarian fanatic who, postulating absolute freedom, forgets that freedom without constraint will end in the worst kind of bondage”<sup>874</sup>. And here we come to the topic of liberty and liberalism.

According to Röpke, the problem is that rationalism expanded also in the economic domain. The result, then, was the idolatry of economic liberalism: due to the aberration of rationalism, “it was seriously believed that a market economy based on competition represented a world of its own, an ‘ordre naturel’, which had only to be freed from all interference in order to stand on its own feet”<sup>875</sup>. Actually, Röpke continued, “what was in reality a highly fragile artificial product of civilization was held to be a natural growth”<sup>876</sup>. Historical liberalism of nineteenth century did not understand that, or at least it demonstrated its partial blindness in this respect: “competition reduces the moral stamina and therefore requires moral reserves outside the market economy”<sup>877</sup>. He paradigmatically argued in *Civitas Humana* as follows: “The social and humanitarian

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<sup>874</sup> W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., p. 49. On that, the German is reminiscent of a thought of Edmund Burke, that he quoted in exergue of *A Humane Economy*: “Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites, – in proportion as their love to justice is above their rapacity, – in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption, – in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”, E. Burke, *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), in E. Burke, *Storia e tradizione*, cit., p. 128.

<sup>875</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>876</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.

<sup>877</sup> *Ibidem*.

principle in the frame must balance the principle of individualism in the core of the market economy if both are to exist in our modern society and at the same time the deadly dangers of mass civilisation and proletarianisation are to be avoided.”<sup>878</sup>. Even more than that, markets need an ethical, legal and institutional framework in order not to degenerate<sup>879</sup>.

The first is even more important, and it is diriment here. We have said that in nineteenth century rationalism and historical liberalism developed: they were, respectively, a degeneration (in the sense of idolatry) of reason and the concept of liberty. The economic system derived could only result in the same wrong direction. The idea of commercialization tended to absorb every other way of seeing life. Besides, society, by means of rationalism, became literally, Röpke wrote, a machine<sup>880</sup>: something, in other words, to be directed from a top-down process. But rationalism influenced also the way of thinking the scale of industries and, in general, markets: instead of considering them something that emerged from bottom-up and developed horizontally, “the cult of the colossal”<sup>881</sup> became part of the *Zeitgeist*. His anti-modern streak came out when he explicitly argued that, even if “we cannot simply

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<sup>878</sup> W. Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>879</sup> For an overview of the topic see the introduction to W. Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, in particular pp. 24-34.

<sup>880</sup> See especially W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., pp.157-159.

<sup>881</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 62-71. The cult of the colossal means, to the German, “kowtowing before the merely ‘big’ – which is thus adequately legitimized as the better and more valuable – it means contempt for what is outwardly small inwardly great, it is the cult of power and unity, the predilection for the superlative in all spheres (...). Since the cult of the colossal reduces qualitative greatness to mere quantity, to nothing but numbers, and since the quantity can only be topped by ever greater quantity, the intoxication with size will in the end exceed all bounds and will finally lead to absurdities which have to be stopped”, *ibidem*, pp. 66-67.

reverse economic and social development by one or two hundred years”, nevertheless “we must also warn against the superstition that the experience of the masses is now absolutely dependent on leaving our present overwrought industrial and urban civilization completely undisturbed”<sup>882</sup>: “our life – Röpke continued – (...) would be far more natural, healthy and happy if certain technical and organizational developments could be reversed”<sup>883</sup>. His idea, plainly said, was to decentralize markets, by putting them back to small-scale communities, but never abandoning international trade<sup>884</sup>. Only in small-scale communities, Röpke believed, individuals can mature the necessary, responsible and ordered liberty apt to a free and independent people who still appreciate “the unbought graces of life”.

In this respect, he quoted a thought extracted from Pascal’s *Thoughts* (n. 378): “To leave the mean is to abandon humanity. The greatness of the human soul consists in knowing how to preserve the mean”<sup>885</sup>. Contemporary capitalism, instead, had simply abandoned the right way according to which economic domain has its own proper and limited space of action: materialism, utilitarianism, “the cult of the colossal” devastated the basis of true free economy. Economics became what he called “economism”: the ideological idolatry of economic consumerism. In important pages of *A Humane Economy* – that has to be noted is the translation of what would be literally *Beyond Supply and*

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<sup>882</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>883</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>884</sup> In this respect, Röpke is liberal, whereas Lasch, who however had scarce skills in economic domain, was much more critical of globalization and international trade.

<sup>885</sup> W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., p. 62.

*Demand*: in German, *Jenseits von Angebot und Nachfrage*<sup>886</sup> – he spoke not incidentally about market “conditions and limits”. In his opinion, in fact, social rationalism instilled the idea of market economy as “no more than an ‘economic technique’ that is applicable in any kind of society and in any kind of spiritual and social climate”<sup>887</sup>. Rather, the German thinker argued that “market economy is a form of economic order belonging to a particular philosophy of life and to a particular social and moral universe”: “it can thrive only as a part and under the protection of a bourgeois system. This implies the existence of a society in which certain fundamentals are respected and color the whole network of social relationships: individual effort and responsibility, absolute norms and values, independence based on ownership, prudence and daring, calculating and saving, responsibility for planning one's own life, proper coherence with the community, family feeling, a sense of tradition and the succession of generations combined with an open-minded view of the present and the future, proper tension between individual and community, firm moral discipline, respect for the value of money, the courage to grapple on one's own with life and its uncertainties, a sense of the natural order of things, and a firm scale of values”<sup>888</sup>. That is another way to say that what is called capitalism, a system in which social rationalism created huge-scale economies and big concentrations of wealth, individuals became part of a mass, bourgeois culture has been replaced

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<sup>886</sup> In a page he wrote explicitly as follows: “The decision on the ultimate destiny of the market economy, with its admirable mechanism of supply and demand, lies, in other words, beyond supply and demand”, W. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, cit., p 35.

<sup>887</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>888</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

by consumerism and a spirit of dependence, is totally another thing: “To say that the market economy belongs to a basically bourgeois total order implies that it presupposes a society which is the opposite of proletarianized society, in the wide and pregnant sense which it is my continual endeavor to explain, and also the opposite of mass society as discussed in the preceding chapter. Independence, ownership, individual reserves, saving, the sense of responsibility, rational planning of one’s own life—all that is alien, if not repulsive, to proletarianized mass society”<sup>889</sup>.

It was of crucial importance to Röpke, therefore, to preserve those conditions in which an effective free economy could prosper: more than that, and considered the wrong road taken, it was necessary a radical program of reform for rediscovering them<sup>890</sup>. Mass and concentration, big business, uprootedness and consumerism, typical of a dependent-labor society<sup>891</sup>, could be replaced, in Röpke’s opinion, in humane, independent communities – a humane scale order – that followed a balance between economic domain and what is pre- or beyond economics: “Individual responsibility and independence in proper balance with the community, neighbourly spirit, and true civic sense—all

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<sup>889</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>890</sup> For the detailed program see in particular his *Civitas Humana*, cit., part III. For an introduction see W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., part II. For an overview: “Decentralization, promotion of smaller productions and settlement units and of the sociologically healthy forms of life and work (after the model of the peasant and the artisan), legislation preventing the formation of monopolies and financial concentration (...), strictest supervision of the market to safeguard fair play, development of new, non-proletarian forms of industry, reduction of all dimensions and conditions to the human mean”, *ibidem*, p. 179. M. Oakeshott argued that liberty is first and foremost “the absence from our society of overwhelming concentrations of power”, in Id, *The Political Economy of Freedom* (1949), in Id, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, cit., p. 388.

<sup>891</sup> W. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, cit., p. 32.

of these presuppose that the communities in which we live do not exceed the human scale. They are possible only on the small or medium scale, in an environment of which one can take the measure, in conditions which do not completely destroy or stifle the primary forms of human existence such as survive in our villages and small- or medium- sized towns”<sup>892</sup>. A healthy and well-structured society, namely a society made of a large middle class of independent individuals who possess small and middle or moderate property, is what the German thinker – and Lasch too – hoped for: a “third way” or “economic humanism” which could go beyond “the sterile alternative between laissez-faire and collectivism”<sup>893</sup>.

What Röpke was interested in was restoring the conditions for a truly free society: a society in which liberty could be responsibly exercised since there exist those moral and cultural reservations, as well economic ones (independence derived from the ownership), that can nurture it<sup>894</sup>. Deproletarianisation and decentralisation meant to him first and foremost “a society in which the greatest possible number of people leads a life based on private property and self-chosen occupation, a life that gives them inward and, as much as possible, outward independence, which enables to be really free and to consider economic liberty as a matter of course. It is at the same time a form of society – Röpke continued – whose arbiters are not the proletarians (...) but men who, thanks to their way of working and living, depend on one but themselves

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<sup>892</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>893</sup> W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>894</sup> I did not consider the deep religious sentiment of Röpke. He was a Protestant, but he highly valued Catholicism as well. Even more than Lasch, the late Lasch as we have seen, religion is a crucial check to individual appetites and *hybris*, and also a fundamental bulwark against the emergence of secular religions.

and do not allow the affairs of the world to touch them; these are to be found among the best types of peasants, artisans, small traders, member of the free professions and trusty officials and servants of the community”<sup>895</sup>.

Lasch thought the same as well: a society made of small and middle independent and proprietary owners, rooted in the true natural communities, characterized by the sense of limits and morally strenuous and unoccupiable<sup>896</sup>. As a thinker, who was highly valued both by Röpke and Lasch<sup>897</sup>, argued, Hillaire Belloc, against both capitalism and collectivization “the main task remains: not that of elaborating machinery for the reaction towards right living, but of forwarding the spirit of that reaction in a society which has almost forgotten what property and its concomitant freedom means”<sup>898</sup>. The conservatism of the Eighties, Lasch wrote in 1986, was only partially in the right way<sup>899</sup>. In fact, its defence of particularism, traditions, common people had opposed the left of the elites and of an abstract universalism and, for this reason, the left lost its “common touch” and the favour of the “Middle America” as well. At the same time, though, Lasch considered the logic of consumerism, as it was subtended to progressive capitalism, a problem: it “undermines the values

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<sup>895</sup> W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>896</sup> See in particular Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit.

<sup>897</sup> We have already said of the influence of Belloc and Chesterton for Lasch. As for the German, the English Distributists were important too. In the bibliography concerning “proletarianization”, he explicitly quoted both Chesterton’s *The Outline of Sanity*, cit., and Belloc’s *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*, cit. See W. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>898</sup> H. Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*, cit., p. 99.

<sup>899</sup> Ch. Lasch, *What’s Wrong with the Right*, cit. Remember that Lasch, even if he was viscerally critical of Reagan, recognized nevertheless that he raised some crucial points for a simpler, traditional and more rooted society: “Reaganism is just the beginning – a sugar-coated foretaste of a ‘new politics of old values’, not the thing itself”, Ch. Lasch, *Reagan’s Victims*, cit., p. 8.



of loyalty and permanence and promotes a different set of values that is destructive of family life – and much else besides”<sup>900</sup>. But Lasch deemed perilous and wrong another excess, namely the idea of tradition without reason. According to him, tradition and reason were not antithesis. Rather, there were two crucial elements of the same coin<sup>901</sup>. Tradition is part of the individual life, but, at the same time, it does not become a dogmatic prison: tradition without reason is blind. At the same time, though, reason without tradition runs the risk to become an abstract tool for replacing reality with an enlightened thought: therefore, it could lead to a paradoxically enlightened form of sectarianism, intolerance, Manicheism. According to Lasch, hence, a true traditionalism “does not call for a restoration of the past. It holds that shared memories – not shared values – are what constitute a community, even if those memories are often divisive. Without a sense of our collective past, transmitted in stories, myths, and rituals – Lasch concluded – we can achieve little understanding of ourselves even as individuals”<sup>902</sup>. According to Lasch, by quoting a thought both of Röpke and Weaver, his ideas were not

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<sup>900</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>901</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Response to Fischer*, cit. Lasch was critical of Burke because he considered him a thinker of “oblivion”. According to Lasch, Burke hypostatized tradition by letting it become a custom not subject to any reconsideration and to memory of a cultural group. See also Ch. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, cit., pp. 127-132. However, things could have been different. Indeed, Lasch Burke did not praise a tradition hypostatized and dogmatically understood: he just criticized a spirit of innovation devoid of any traditional attachment, precisely as Lasch did. As Burke stated, thus, “A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors. Besides, the people of England well know, that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free; but it secures what it acquires”, E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, cit., pp. 121-122. On the differences but also similarities between them see J.R. White, *Burke’s Prejudice: The Appraisals of Russell Kirk and Christopher Lasch*, cit.

<sup>902</sup> Ch. Lasch, *A Response to Fischer*, cit., p. 6.

romantic, in the sense of a nostalgic mythology of the past, but “it certainly is romantic, if by that term we understand resistance to the destruction of dignity and poetry and the ‘unbought graces of life’. If this is romanticism, we profess it unreservedly and proudly, and we will not allow ourselves to be intimidated or abashed by these would-be masterminds. We do not want to set the clock back; we want to set it right”<sup>903</sup>.

### ***6.3 The Ethos of a Human-Scale Order.***

As we have seen early, Lasch had been trying at least since the years of his contribution to the journal “democracy” to unite radical as well cultural conservative elements, by keeping however anti-capitalism as a constant element. In an article published in 1982, for instance, and it has to be noted that it coincides with the first years of Reagan’s presidency, Lasch argued that “political radicalism increasingly has to identify itself with values usually identified with cultural conservatism. Political conservatives – Lasch continued – have too long monopolized the values of family, law and order, patriotism and continuity, and it is time for radicals (if indeed it is not already too late) to reclaim the ground they have ceded to their political opponents”<sup>904</sup>. Lasch was speaking of mainstream conservatives, namely neoconservatives which were the

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<sup>903</sup> The quotation is in W. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, cit., p. 88. Weaver entitled an article *Setting the Clock Right* and he ended as follows: “our response to the old chestnut ‘You can’t turn the clock back’ will be ‘I’m not turning it back; I’m setting it right’”, R. Weaver, *Setting the Clock Right* (1957), in T. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition*, cit., p. 566.

<sup>904</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Faith*, cit., p. 22.

crucial cultural intellectual figures of Reaganism. In an article of some years later, 1986, Lasch argued that a conservatism well understood could not be allied with capitalism, namely with a big-scale market, for it constituted the very enemy of a traditional society: “That cultural conservatives should oppose capitalism almost goes without saying. The free market is the great destroyer of tradition. It fosters a rootless, restless mode of life. It promotes change for the sake of change. Its ideal embodiment and symbol is the bulldozer”<sup>905</sup>. However, he continued to observe how conservatism, the mainstream conservatism was not capable of catching and understanding his argument: conservatism was reduced, in his times, to a plea for capitalism, which Lasch considered a true nonsense. He found himself as a maverick trying to preach a cultural conservative option, hinged on Jeffersonian democracy, small-scale market, traditional values, political decentralization without much success.

Towards the late Eighties, then, his friend Richard John Neuhaus invited him to speak in a conference, which had place actually the following year, in 16 and 17 November 1989, about the relationship between conservatism and capitalism: a crucial theme for Lasch<sup>906</sup>. Indeed, he answered by saying that the chosen topic reminded him a conference organized some years before the “New Oxford Review”. Lasch wrote in the answer that, in his opinion, “conservatism and capitalism are incompatible”<sup>907</sup>. Besides, he tried to advise, but without

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<sup>905</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Contribution to ‘Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism’*, cit.

<sup>906</sup> R.J. Neuhaus to Kit (Ch. Lasch), 20 July 1988, Lasch Papers, Box 28, Folder 23.

<sup>907</sup> Ch. Lasch to Richard (Neuhaus), 15 August 1988, Lasch Papers, Box 28, Folder 23.

positive results, to invite some voices that were, like him, at odds with contemporary, exhausted political labels, and instead were independent-minded: Mel Bradford, Wilson Carey McWilliams, Lawrence Goodwyn, Paul Gottfried, Dale Vree, *inter alia*<sup>908</sup>. But the conference, as he admitted in a letter addressed to Dale Vree after the conference, was a disaster, for the theme was not really faced and the speakers were mostly neoconservatives: if the meeting “was designed to see if certain kinds of radicals and certain kinds of conservatives had anything to talk about. It turned out that we didn't. Neo-conservatives of this stamp are a lot more interested in capitalism than cultural conservatism. The latter interests them only insofar as hedonism and moral disorder are thought to undermine productivity. The more thoughtful of these people, like Peter Berger, aren't cultural conservatives at all. They're liberals - in their values as in their economics”<sup>909</sup>.

In his contribution, Lasch emphasized some aspects that he deemed fundamental for a true moral-realism conservatism. First of all, and foremost, Lasch underlined that “the essence of cultural conservatism is a certain respect for limits”. According to Lasch, therefore, there could not exist a conservative option without the rediscovery of some kind of human limitedness: “The central conservative insight is that human freedom is constrained by the natural conditions of human life, by the weight of history, by the fallibility of human judgment, and by the perversity of the human will. Conservatives are often accused of an exaggerated esteem for the past, but it is not the moral superiority of the

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<sup>908</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>909</sup> Ch. Lasch to Dale (Vree), 2 December 1989, Lasch Papers, Box 7b, Folder 3.

past so much as its inescapability that impresses them. What we are is largely inherited, in the form of gender, genetic endowment, institutions, predispositions—including the universal predisposition to resent these constraints on our freedom and to dream of abolishing them. What was called original sin, in a bygone age, referred to the most troubling aspect of our natural inheritance—our natural incapacity for graceful submission to our subordinate position in the larger scheme of things”<sup>910</sup>. According to him, to accept those natural and intrinsic limitations could have been make individual less resentful and more capable of self-control and self-government. That was, it must be noted, a teaching that Lasch derived from his growing approach to religion, probably thanks to the influence of Dale Vree<sup>911</sup>. As such, elsewhere he wrote that “religion is not only a refuge, a means of security in a troubled world. It is also a challenge to self-pity and despair (...). Submission to God makes people less submissive in everyday life. It makes them less fearful but also less bitter and resentful, less inclined to make excuses for themselves”<sup>912</sup>. But the respect of human limitations, in Lasch’s understanding of it, led also to the respect of the past, and that meant authority as well, such as the familiar one: “The value of conservatism lies in the understanding that

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<sup>910</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit. Note that the original title of his lecture was *Notes on Cultural Conservatism, Proprietorship and the Radicalism of the Petty Bourgeoisie*, Lasch Papers, Box 28, Folder 23.

<sup>911</sup> On that see especially chap. 4.

<sup>912</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Misreading the Facts About Families*, cit., p. 138. That is quite familiar with the famous statement by Alexis de Tocqueville about the relationship between religious sentiment, independent mind and political liberty: “For me, I doubt that man can ever bear complete religious independence and full political liberty at the same time; and I am led to think that, if he does not have faith, he must serve, and, if he is free, he must believe.”, A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol II, cit., p. 745. On that point, see specifically A. Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015.

those who seek to escape the past forfeit any hope of coming to terms with it and expose themselves to an unexpected return of the repressed; that we can never wholly overcome our origins; and that freedom, accordingly, begins with an acknowledgment of the constraints within which it has to operate”<sup>913</sup>. At the same time, a human-scale order based on conservatism emphasizes the rootedness in places and time of concrete persons, without, as a matter of fact, any fatal conceit for creating, by an enlightened vision, a heaven in this world: “Another countervailing tendency in conservative thought is the preference for local over centralized authority. Precisely because conservatives understand how easily we succumb to temptation, the temptations of power most of all, they try to see to it that power is dispersed as widely as possible. A sense of limits reveals itself, in another way, in the conservative belief that we love and respect particular individuals, not humanity as a whole, and that the seductive promise of universal brotherhood is a poor substitute for local communities in which the holders of power are immediately accountable to their neighbours”<sup>914</sup>. “The source for conservatism – it could be argued – is a natural attitude that combines enjoyment of something valued with the fear of losing it”<sup>915</sup>.

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<sup>913</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit.

<sup>914</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>915</sup> J. Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1998, p. 5. For a similar account, but less nostalgic, see what Michael Oakeshott wrote: “To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss. Familiar relationships and loyalties will be preferred to the allure of more profitable attachments; to acquire and to enlarge will be less important than to keep, to cultivate and to enjoy; the grief of loss will be more acute than the excitement of novelty or promise”, M. Oakeshott, *On being Conservative* (1956), in Id, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 408-409.

That conservative respect for limits, from an economic point of view, led Lasch to consider a small-scale market as a crucial element of a good society. In this respect, as we have already noted, he was influenced in particular by Belloc, an author that Lasch quoted in the essay we are dealing with<sup>916</sup>. Capitalism, according to Lasch, tended naturally to concentrate power and property as well. As a matter of fact, in order to avoid what Belloc called “servile state”, namely a society made of dependent individuals upon others, the best was a wide distribution of it, in order to resist the power of the growing corporate Leviathan and, at the same time, develop self-government and responsibility, necessary elements of a Jeffersonian democracy: “Capitalism’s relentless erosion of proprietary institutions furnishes the clearest evidence of its incompatibility with anything that deserves the name of cultural conservatism. There is obviously a good deal to be said, from a conservative point of view, for the institution of private property, which teaches the virtues of responsibility, workmanship, and self-subordinating devotion to humble but indispensable tasks. Twentieth-century capitalism, however, has replaced private property with a corporate form of property that confers none of these moral and cultural advantages. The transformation of artisans, farmers, and other small proprietors into wage-earners undermines the “traditional values” conservatives seek to preserve”<sup>917</sup>. In the end, Lasch thought, a good society should have been built only by everyday actions of individuals

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<sup>916</sup> See H. Belloc, *The Servile State*, cit.; *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*, cit. See also the book of another distributist, G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*, cit.

<sup>917</sup> Ch. Lasch, *Conservatism Against Itself*, cit.

rooted in places and traditions, having a definite property to take care of, and respecting the sense of limits typical of creatures that know that they are just a part of bigger, mysterious order of things: “The ideal of universal proprietorship embodies a humbler set of expectations than the ideal of universal consumption, universal access to a proliferating supply of goods. At the same time, it embodies a more strenuous and morally demanding definition of the good life”<sup>918</sup>.

As Hilaire Belloc wrote in an essay, *The Modern Man* (1936), the modern man, or what Lasch would have called the narcissist, “has lost the old doctrinal position on transcendental things”<sup>919</sup>, that caused him a hybris attitude which revealed itself to be, however, a very poor attempt to deny his humble condition; “he has lost his economic freedom”<sup>920</sup>, which let him be more dependent and weak facing others and in particular the political Leviathan and the corporate capitalism linked to it; “there has been produced in him, by this loss of economic freedom, coupled with the loss of the old religious doctrines, an interior conception of himself which moulds all his actions”<sup>921</sup>, which means, to Belloc, the developing of a “servile mind” or, as Lasch would have said, the erosion of those inner, moral and traditional sources that let the individuals capable of standing. In the words of Wilhelm Röpke, in a society in which “atomization, mass, proletarianization” no longer exist, and independence spirit replaces servile minds, “wealth would be widely

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<sup>918</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>919</sup> H. Belloc, *The Modern Man*, in H. Agar, A. Tate (eds.), *Who Owns America?*, cit., p. 335.

<sup>920</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>921</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 334-335.



dispersed; people's lives would have solid foundations; genuine communities, from the family upward, would form a background of moral support for the individual; there would be counterweights to competition and the mechanical operation of prices; people would have roots and would not be adrift in life without anchor; there would be a broad belt of an independent middle class, a healthy balance between town and country, industry and agriculture.”<sup>922</sup>.

Lasch argued, as Belloc did too, that the only order appropriate to human creatures full of dignity, capacity of choice because constrained by and aware of their limits, would be a human-scale decentralized order, starting from the very source of human moral realism of ordinary people, the family: “The service rendered by the family to democracy – Lasch argued – can be described in political as well in psychological terms. (...) Considered from a political point of view the family performs something of the same functions as the voluntary associations men and women organize in order to achieve purposes they could not achieve alone. Like other forms of association, the family provides a barrier between the individual and the state. It instills loyalties that take precedence over those of the state, which is why the champions of the state power have always hoped to do away with the family and to make the citizen directly dependent on the state”<sup>923</sup>.

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<sup>922</sup> W. Röpke, *A Humane Economy*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>923</sup> Ch. Lasch, *The Future of the Family*, cit., pp. 6-7.

## **Conclusions. Christopher Lasch: Anti-Capitalist Conservative.**

In this study, I tried to show the intellectual journey of Christopher Lasch by means both of first-hand materials, that I found during a period of archival research, and secondary sources. In particular, I identified three moments, which corresponded to Lasch's participation to three distinct cultural journals, namely "democracy", "Telos", "New Oxford Review", as crucial steps for Lasch's mature intellectual vision. In fact, radicalism, populism and cultural conservatism mixed themselves, in Lasch's perspective, according to a peculiar synthesis which, actually, never created a definite and clear vision. Nevertheless, all these moments shared a common element which permanently remained in the pages written by Christopher Lasch: the radically anti-capitalist tone.

Lasch was a radical, for he could not accept change and progress for their own sake, and therefore he opposed them as enemies of a good society constituted by ordinary people; he was a populist, for he considered ordinary, common citizens who try to conduct their lives according to their proper cultural heritage, and not a monolithic, organicist people, as the best check to the conceit of liberal elites of rebuilding, by a top-down rationalistic plan, society as a whole; he was a conservative, for he saw that the present without the past could not exist, at least not without leading to a general apathy and cultural disorientation that could cause despotism, and reason without tradition could dazzle and blind perhaps more than a tradition devoid of any reference to reason. He

was a conservative, besides, since he understood, and was absolutely convinced, that without some human structures, first and foremost the family, and moral resources cultivated in a small-scale community, human life and a sane human order is not even conceivable. His anti-capitalism, in the end, manifested itself in the rejection for the form taken by markets: capitalism was to him another name for huge-scale production, materialist ideology of consumption, and economy controlled by a small group of oligarchical elite.

His anti-capitalist conservatism was the quite the natural result of years of social criticism. He never come back to the Left, first of all, since that was become the political and cultural enemy of ordinary people. He never fully embraced the American (paleo)conservatives, then, due to their nostalgia for a mythological past – despite the fact, we have seen, Lasch was often romantic in his ideas. In addition to that, he could not accept the acritical paeans of the pro-capitalism conservatives: consumerist capitalism leads to corrosion of those natural, moral and pre-economic structures which are the basis of a *good, humane* life.

A memory of his daughter Elizabeth as expressed in a beautiful discourse during a meeting of the “American Historical Association” well explains Laschian belief that life is too mysterious and many-sided to be completely grasped and understood, and therefore it results to be antithetical to every ideology: “My father’s effect on me is best understood through the image of a compass. Reluctant to show a map, to take away the adventure and mystery, and unwilling to dwell on the destination alone, he helped constitute the most basic and vital inner

resource for finding my way even through impenetrable fog”<sup>924</sup>. And again: “Perhaps the most constant thread joining all of his endeavours – his piano playing, his writing, his fatherhood, his home improvements, his furniture making, his teaching, his cooking, and all of the other activities he somehow squeezed into a day – was his natural tendency to make things grow. He exemplified the traits of successful gardener – gentle and regular attention, awareness of seasons and their attendant responsibilities, interest in the weather and physical conditions, love of the particulars of place and land itself”<sup>925</sup>.

By means of his love for the natural and intrinsic imperfection of this world, he was a steward of human life itself, even though he demonstrated to be a little limited, due to his fierce and rooted prejudices, while opposing liberalism and capitalism.

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<sup>924</sup> E. Quinn-Lasch, *Tribute to Christopher Lasch*, American Historical Association, San Francisco, California, 8 January 1993, document found in Lasch Papers, Box 68, Folder 13.

<sup>925</sup> *Ibidem*.

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