
CURRENT BOOKS

Blaming the Elites

THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES and the Betrayal of Democracy. By Christopher Lasch. Norton. 248 pp. \$22

The title of Christopher Lasch's last and regrettably posthumous book pays a backhanded tribute to *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932), José Ortega y Gasset's worried meditation on the character of democratic society. Ortega y Gasset thought mass culture had created a new human type; the person whose horizons were bounded by the desire for creature comforts, whose attitude toward "high" culture was one of resentful suspicion, and who threatened liberal individualism by trying to impose the herd's mentality on the elite. Lasch, as one would imagine from his book's title, turns these old anxieties on their head: it is not the masses but their more-or-less liberal social superiors who have all but destroyed democratic values.

The Revolt of the Elites is one of several recent denunciations of the social irresponsibility of the beneficiaries of the economic changes of the past two decades. Robert Reich's *Work of Nations*, Mickey Kaus's *End of Equality*, Kevin Phillip's *Arrogant Capital*, and Charles Murray's contribution to *The Bell Curve* are a small sample of the variations lately played on a common theme that runs pretty much like this: since the 1960s, the American economy has generated increasing economic inequality. At the top of the economic ladder are what Labor Secretary Reich has called "symbolic analysts." At the bottom gasps a desperate new underclass. In between struggles an increasingly insecure and hard-pressed working class.

Like Reich and Kaus, Lasch is pained to observe the way the economic elite has separated itself from the rest of American society. Its children go to private schools, it lives in planned communities that pay for private policing, and its tastes and interests link it more closely to foreigners of the same eco-

nomie status than to Americans of a different status. This new elite has abandoned the rest of American society to its fate.

What Lasch catches with particular poignancy is the fate of those caught in the middle. They never aspired to climb some imaginary ladder. Indeed, Lasch challenges the idea that "social mobility" is an essential component of democracy. The folk in the middle, he insists, aim only to lead secure, self-respecting lives. A modicum of comfort is necessary for self-respect, but the indefinite accumulation of consumer goods certainly is not. Cultural goods of a slightly elusive kind are more necessary than any but the most basic economic goods. And these cultural goods depend on geographical and technical considerations in a more complicated fashion than most economists have understood.

Self-respect depends upon the respect of others, even though it enables us to survive the absence of that respect when necessary. It depends on our having something for which we respect ourselves—a skill, a job well done, children whom we have brought up to be good citizens and decent people. This means, in part, that we need to have stable, skilled work to do. We also must live in neighborhoods where others know us well enough to appreciate our worth. Torn-up neighborhoods, riven by crime, ethnic hostilities, and ineffectual schools will not do. Malls with their fast-food outlets and comfortless walkways will not do. Pubs and cafés do the trick; Main Street does the trick.

Unlike older American critics, who wrote off the small town as the home of prejudice and bigotry and hankered after the cosmopolitan city, Lasch celebrates the small town's virtues as well as the big city's. Or rather he sees, though he does not say so with any great clarity, that there need not be a sharp contrast between the one and the other. The greatest cities are cities of neighborhoods. But neighborhoods are just what the new, financially

driven economy has been wrecking, whether in their small-town or their big-city shape. As a consequence, democracy has been going down the drain, both politically and culturally.

One can of course debate how much of this should be laid at the door of an elite. One source of self-respect, according to Lasch, is a productive job, a job in which we create something that can be visibly better or worse made. The more production is replaced by services, he argues, the further we are from doing such work—and the more likely we are to despise manual work and admire cleverness to the exclusion of all else. But is this wholly true? Why—apart from income—must flipping hamburgers be less desirable than working on a GM assembly line? Why can't the "instinct of craftsmanship" survive in the crafting of software? But Lasch is certainly right about one thing: it is bloodless financial calculations that now largely drive the economic changes that he deplors.

Lasch is even more unhappy with the fragility of the American family. Parents struggle against the tide of sex and violence that pours out of the television and into the bedrooms of their children. They cannot pride themselves on having brought up their children well, since it is almost impossible to do so. Yet how can we lay this complaint at the door of the elite? Surely it is not the symbolic analysts who have determined television's popularity or who have made the burdens of family life so difficult.

The collective title of these essays is thus misleading, even if it was too good to pass up. The process Lasch describes and laments is not a "revolt" so much as a secession. We know what an insurgent elite looks like: Lenin's Bolsheviks or the Jacobins of the French Revolution—a revolutionary class or cadre bent on seizing the reins of power. Lasch's elite is not revolutionary, not insurgent, not even conscious of itself as an elite. Its desires are more nearly those of the masses as described by Ortega y Gasset—namely, de-

sires for wealth, creature comforts, worldly goods, security. Its desire to hang on to the economic power it has accumulated over the past two or three decades has nothing in common with the ambitions of revolutionaries. In



fact, what is wrong with this present elite is an unwillingness to do its social and political duty. And what is wrong with *The Revolt of the Elites* is that it is fairly unclear what that duty might consist of.

Lasch wrote *The Revolt of the Elites* under what he stoically describes as "trying circumstances." Indeed, he was dying of leukemia. So it may seem churlish to complain that a book so written against the clock is not wholly coherent or that it is easier to see what Lasch disliked about the world than to form any clear idea of what we might do to repair things. But in Lasch's case, it would be more churlish not to complain. His earliest books—*The New Radicalism in America* (1965) and *The Agony of the American Left* (1969)—were as good as Dwight Macdonald's or Edmund Wilson's critiques of our political culture. *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) threw a much-needed bucket of cold water on the nascent self-help movement, and it is hardly to be held against Lasch that it did little to slow the American descent into the present bog of self-exculpation and blaming. The best tribute to a critic such as Lasch is to argue with him.

The Revolt of the Elites shows Lasch in a

bind from which he could never quite escape. He was a populist who believed that the common people were intrinsically decent, morally serious, culturally conservative, sturdy and sensible. Yet statistics show they have been rather easily debauched, as evinced by soaring divorce rates, the low level of popular culture, abysmal levels of political knowledge and participation. What is the remedy? Is it to recall the elite to their duty of setting a good example to the lower classes? That hardly sounds like populism, though it is a rational enough view. Is it to deny that the people have been debauched? But then who subscribes to the cable channels that produce the garbage that pours into our children's minds, if not the common people? Something in Lasch's argument has to give. His contempt for self-indulgent upper-class liberals was so intense that he could not bring himself to see how far his critique of the decay of the republic reflects on all of us, not just on his favorite target.

The question about the relationship between the elite and the common people in a successful republic is a very old one. It goes back to Machiavelli and the politics of Renaissance Italy. It was thoroughly understood by James Madison and the American Founders, and it underpinned their understanding of the Constitution. The great question was how to instill civic virtue in ordinary people.

This is very much Lasch's theme. In the old story, it was understood that the common people could easily turn into a mob, that they were cowardly unless properly led, that they were superstitious unless their religious sentiments were disciplined. But if given a proper social and political discipline, they would be brave, loyal, public-spirited, rational, and far less likely to be swept away by greed and ambition than their social superiors. Governments get the people they deserve, and if you want to keep your republic, then civic education of the ordinary people is one of your main tasks. How badly our current rulers have done that job, they themselves have just begun to discover.

Lasch here claims that liberals have always hoped to do without civic virtue—a strikingly silly remark that suggests he never heard of John Stuart Mill. The proper retort is that he himself failed to take the full measure of the bleak elitism of the democratic and republican tradition that he set opposite to liberalism. This tradition was, as he says, “populist”; but it was also, as he is somewhat less candid about acknowledging, utterly elitist. The people were to curb corruption in their rulers, but only if they were taught their job by their rulers. The people could display civic virtue, but only if it was instilled in them.

To think that civic virtue can be instilled in us presupposes that politicians have enough control to provide the things that Lasch wanted, such as more democracy at work and the protection of a livable environment against greedy developers. It presupposes that politicians can instill an awareness that it is worth forgoing personal economic advantage for the sake of a more satisfactory social climate. The evidence of the past three decades is that politicians have no such control. The “symbolic analysts” whom critics such as Lasch blame for the decay of democracy were not invented by some evil force as a malign joke. They came into their own as a result of ill-understood and all-but-irresistible technical and commercial changes.

To control these changes, we need to do a great deal more than rail against the culture they have brought with them. Above all, we need a cool, sociologically intelligent understanding of what is and is not politically possible. Among the many reasons for lamenting Lasch's untimely death, we shall never know what he might have suggested once he turned from lamentation to construction. It is easy to be grateful for the savagery of his criticism, easier still to regret that there was not time for his mellowing and encouragement.

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