

THE TRUE AND ONLY LASCH

ON *THE TRUE AND ONLY HEAVEN*,
25 YEARS LATER

Susan McWilliams

Trying to remember the year 1991, the year Christopher Lasch wrote *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, can be like trying to conjure a foreign country.

Back then there were no tablets or e-books or smartphones. There was no Facebook and no Amazon and no Twitter and no Google. Only a handful of geeks and government agents had even heard the word *Internet*.

In 1991 the revolution that had Americans talking wasn't digital—it was Russian, with the last days of the Cold War passing more in whimpers than bangs as an attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev destabilized and eventually dissolved the Soviet Union.

There was a war in Iraq, but it was quick and decisive. There were wars against terrorists being fought around the globe, but there was no War on Terror. And there was nobody in the United States who seemed particularly concerned about the possibility of mass-murderous attacks on American soil.

It was a time before so many contemporary cultural touchstones: before 9/11, before Columbine, before Oklahoma City. Before

Harry Potter, before Lewinsky, before O.J. Before *Lawrence v. Texas*, before *Citizens United*, before *Bush v. Gore*. Before Obama, before the euro, before Y2K. Before Viagra.

Now think of all the distance that seems to separate then and now, all the change that marks the last quarter century.

That's why to read *The True and Only Heaven* today is to appreciate Lasch's genius in a way no one could have appreciated it in 1991. Although written then, the book cuts to the heart of now. Today it's clear what could not have been as clear twenty-five years ago: Christopher Lasch saw beneath the superficial ebbs and flows of American history and politics to the more enduring and decisive currents beneath.

Before anything else, then, reading *The True and Only Heaven* teaches you two things. First, despite what anyone might tell you and despite how things might seem, the defining features of American politics have not changed much in the past twenty-five years. And second, Christopher Lasch is a prophet of our time.

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Consider merely what Lasch calls the underlying premise of *The True and Only Heaven*: “that old political ideologies have exhausted their capacity either to explain events or to inspire men and women to constructive actions,” leading the “characteristic mood of the times” to be “a baffled sense of drift.”¹

It’s hard to think of a better way to capture the dynamics of the 2016 presidential campaign, isn’t it? This campaign season might best be explained as the product of a nationwide bafflement with a political system that seems to have drifted away from the central concerns of most people’s lives.

After all, despite our disagreements on all sorts of policy issues, Americans share the conviction that something is missing in our political practice. In the most recent American National Election Studies survey, only 19 percent of Americans agreed with the idea that the government “is run for the benefit of all the people.”² Across the political spectrum, one hears the refrain that Democrats and Republicans are indistinguishable—self-interested, detached from reality, beholden to special interests, and so on—and in fact, in 2016 if you type the words “Democrats and Republicans” or “Republicans and Democrats” into Google, the algorithms predict your next words will be “are the same.”

This year, the surprisingly successful campaigns of Senator Bernie Sanders and Donald J. Trump both have traded on the idea that some strange affliction is upon the nation and is largely embodied in an out-of-touch political establishment. As such, the United States needs a “revolution” or someone to “make America great again.” We have drifted and need radical governmental action to set us straight (though in both cases, particularly Trump’s, there’s more than a little lack of clarity about what the terms of that straightening would entail).

To that extent, it’s fair to say that Lasch, who died in 1994, would not have been surprised by the tenor of either the Sanders or the Trump candidacy. In fact, he explicitly imagined that there would arise in the United States vaguely oppositional movements that looked to some like “socialism” on the left and to others like “fascism” on the right, though Lasch thought “it ought to be clear by now that neither fascism nor socialism represents the wave of the future” (24). He would have seen Sanders and Trump, then, as additional symptoms of an underlying problem as opposed to that problem’s solution.

For Lasch, that great underlying problem was clear enough: that by the end of the twentieth century, the American left and right had “come to share so many of the same underlying convictions, including a belief in the desirability and inevitability of technical and economic development, that the conflict between them, shrill and acrimonious as it is, no longer speaks to the central issues of American politics” (23). That is, by the end of the twentieth century the dominant figures in American politics had all become uncritical believers in, and proponents of, the idea of progress.

By “the idea of progress,” Lasch had in mind the faith that we humans can continually improve our lot and standards of living, that we should seek to satisfy all our increasing desires without any consideration of natural limits or moral restraints. The underlying creed is that progress will lead us to the promised land, to “the true and only heaven” (a phrase borrowed from Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose story “The Celestial Railroad” prefigures many of Lasch’s themes).

Among contemporary American left-wingers—so many of whom, indeed, like to call themselves “progressives”—the commitment to ideas of progress manifests itself in

technological optimism, cultural cosmopolitanism, and various doctrines of personal liberation. Those on the right, meanwhile, share the technological optimism of the left but add to it a program of market deregulation and a vision of unending economic growth. (Lasch laments that, even by 1991, the conservative voices that were the last bulwarks of skepticism about progress in mainstream politics had been largely co-opted, marginalized, and heeded only in occasional right-wing lip service to “traditional values.”) Democrats and Republicans alike speak the languages of individualism and globalism, promising ever-expanding choices on an ever-expanding scale. No one of any prominence seems to be asking whether the visions attached to those promises are realistic, much less desirable.

Sanders and Trump are, again, good cases in point. Though each got traction for criticizing certain excesses of the political establishment—drawing attention to the costs of free-trade agreements, for instance, or lamenting the lack of restraints on the financial industry—neither candidate has questioned the underlying progressive ethos of that establishment. In fact, Sanders and Trump are themselves both fundamentally progressive candidates. They both make grand and optimistic promises that imagine ever-rosier futures; neither of them has asked voters to consider a return to more modest standards of living or to more restrained political ambitions. (Sanders, of course, is a self-declared progressive; Trump, meanwhile, is summed up by one biographer as someone for whom there is “never enough.”)³ Today even the political positions we think of as outlying tend to lie well within a progressive creed.

Lasch suggests that there are two problems with all this elite genuflection at the altar of progress. First, it both demeans and

is disconnected from the values of most Americans, who understand that you can’t have everything, who know that everything costs something, who want stable and satisfying lives for their children, and who have been on the losing end of enough programs of “improvement” to be skeptical about the dogma of progress.

(This is not an exclusively American phenomenon, to be sure; as I write this article, British voters have just elected to remove their country from the European Union. In response, the president of the EU admitted that “ordinary people” were frustrated with a progressive, technocratic, cosmopolitan elite. “Disillusioned with great visions of the future,” he mused, “they demand that we cope with the present reality better than we have been doing.”)⁴

Lasch’s own story resonates here. He was a child of middle America who, upon having children of his own, realized both the pervasiveness and the peril of the cult of progress in the United States. That’s because he realized that his children were growing up in a country that was essentially hostile to their flourishing, as evidenced by

our obsession with sex, violence, and the pornography of “making it”; our addictive dependence on drugs, “entertainment,” and the evening news; our impatience with anything that limits our sovereign freedom of choice, especially with the constraints of marital and familial ties, our preference for “nonbinding commitments”; our third-rate educational system; our third-rate morality; our refusal to draw a distinction between right and wrong, lest we “impose” our morality on others and thus invite others to “impose” their morality on us; our reluctance to judge and be judged; our indifference to

future generations, as evidenced by our willingness to saddle them with a huge national debt, an overgrown arsenal of destruction, and a deteriorating environment; our inhospitable attitude to the newcomers born into our midst; our unstated assumption, which underlies so much of the propaganda for unlimited abortion, that only those children born for success ought to be allowed to be born at all. (34)

On top of all that, and maybe even more than all that, Lasch realized that his children were growing up in a society where naked ambition and the willingness to get ahead at all costs count more than honest, devoted, productive work. Lasch found clear words to articulate the anxious questions that, felt but left unsaid, gnaw at so many hearts. This society may be all about progress, but progress toward what? And progress for whom?

Lasch raises his second major critique of the American cult of progress right at the beginning of *The True and Only Heaven*. “How does it happen that serious people continue to believe in progress,” he asks, “in the face of massive evidence that might have been expected to refute the idea of progress once and for all?” (13). After the modern-minded atrocities of the twentieth century, in the face of the collapse of the middle class and a widening gap between rich and poor nations (which he predicted would “generate more and more violent movements of insurrection and terrorism against the West”), and looking forward to the deterioration of the planet’s climate and resources, it seems more than foolish to put all one’s money in the bank of progress (23). We’re at a moment when “the exhaustion of the progressive tradition” is evident, but nobody seems to have an alternative to it (532).

To Lasch, it seems pretty clear what has gotten us to this point, to the draining dominance of the cult of progress in America. He first traces the origins of that cult back to the eighteenth century, when the founders of modern liberalism first argued that because human beings are creatures of insatiable desire, there needed to be a continual increase in productive capacities to satisfy those desires. Modern liberalism and progressivism go hand in hand; it’s hard to imagine the former existing without the latter. It’s a convincing argument, although not an altogether new one; plenty of other scholars made that case before Lasch did, and plenty have made it after him.

What makes Lasch’s contribution in *The True and Only Heaven* distinctive is that he adds to that analysis the claim that there has been long and vigorous opposition to progressive ideology in the United States, but the history of that opposition—what Lasch calls the populist tradition—has been ignored, obscured, and misunderstood. As a result, we have lost touch with what is our most serious intellectual resource for the interrogation of American progressivism and our best source of moral inspiration for developing an alternative to it in the twenty-first century.

Lots of folks have talked about populism, to be sure, but Lasch treats American populism with a sympathy and sophistication distinctively his own. By Lasch’s account, what unites the populist tradition is an appreciation for the idea of limits (as opposed to limitless expansion), an admiration for small-scale proprietorship (as opposed to widespread consumerism), a cultivation of the pursuit of useful callings (as opposed to luxury and worldly success), a commitment to self-governance (as opposed to rule by technocratic experts), and a sensibility of guarded hope (as opposed to blind opti-

mism). In Marxist terms, populists embody the sensibility of the petty bourgeois, with its emphases on loyalty, hard work, and self-discipline. American populists tend to be suspicious of innovation and in that sense track as conservative, but because, as Lasch teaches, resistance to innovation is an “indispensable ingredient in revolutionary action,” they also tend to track as radicals (215). (One of the things Lasch reminds us, again and again, is that in a progressive society, the most radical position is a conservative one.) They thus fall outside the categories (conservative/radical, Republican/Democrat, red state/blue state, popular/intellectual) into which Americans are used to dividing ourselves.

Lasch largely devotes *The True and Only Heaven* to bringing that populist tradition back to the surface of American thought. In his ranging historical tour de force, it’s almost as if he were writing an entirely new canon, if not altogether a new American history. He brushes the dust off of neglected thinkers like Randolph Bourne, Orestes Brownson, G.D.H. Cole, Josiah Royce, and Georges Sorel and makes them central to the story of American political thought. He shows that they, along with others, have been snubbed in most historical accounts precisely because their thinking did not fall neatly into our predetermined boxes. His project thus evokes one of the great paradoxes of human life: that people who defy easy intellectual categorization—people truly outside the dominant categories of their times—are the ones most likely to be sources of intellectual energy and moral vision, but they are also those at the greatest risk of being ignored simply because others find them confusing. Socrates was lucky to get the kind of attention in Athens that he did; history suggests that most people who travel outside the common paths are

rendered invisible by neglect rather than engaged by condemnation.

Lasch also rereads standard-bearing American thinkers like Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Martin Luther King Jr. in ways that showcase their populist and anti-progressive dimensions. He argues that the populist dimensions of these thinkers has been lost or misunderstood not only for the reason just outlined but also because we too often make the mistake of expecting people in elite positions to be on the side of the elite; it makes more intuitive sense to most of us to put a Harvard man like Emerson on the side of the cosmopolitan intellectuals and radical individualists, rather than to see him as on the side of the provincial farmers and as someone who revered the fact of human interdependence.

To be clear, Lasch doesn’t suggest at any point that the populist tradition is the solution to all progressivism’s problems. The populist tradition “asks the right questions,” he says, “but it does not provide a ready-made set of answers” (532). He acknowledges the often dangerous provincialism and nativism and anti-intellectualism that have often accompanied populist thought, though he faults liberals in particular for being so eager to distance themselves from those sins that they have lost sight of what is valuable in petty-bourgeois, lower-middle-class culture. (I think Lasch might have been heartened by a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, in which the left-leaning author asked “Is It Possible to Have Populism without Racism?” and decided the answer was yes, albeit provisionally so.)⁵

More foundationally, though, Lasch notes that the greatest weakness of the populist tradition is that it has provided so little in the way of a formal economic and political theory that it does not offer ready guidance to those who would like to realize its ideals

in practice. These days, that means that those who can be said to be the inheritors of the American populist tradition—people like Wendell Berry, Rod Dreher, and Jeff Taylor, among others—“call for small-scale production and political decentralization, but they do not explain how these objectives can be achieved in a modern economy.”⁶ Lasch leaves *The True and Only Heaven* with this problem hanging in the air.

I suppose that, especially for those who already have a populist bent, it may be a frustrating denouement; I think most populist-leaning thinkers today are already aware of the difficulty that attends bringing the populist tradition into the twenty-first century. When I assign a populist author to my students, most of them—sympathetic to populist ideas or not—jump to that critique right away. “It sounds nice,” they say, “but that’s just not how the world is anymore.” Or “How is anything like that supposed to happen today?” The question of to what degree, if any, it is possible to realize a populist vision in a modern, technological, large-scale, impersonal, bureaucratic world is quite evidently the great question with which all would-be populists need to wrestle.

For my part, I think that Lasch meant for *The True and Only Heaven* to function in the manner of one of Nietzsche’s great subtitles: as a “prelude to the philosophy of the future.”⁷ Lasch did not think that any populism of the twenty-first century could emerge in the United States until its proponents understood the history of American populism, including the intellectual and political reasons that have stymied populist energies in the past. Given that in *The True and Only Heaven*, Lasch repeatedly faults the left for its historical ignorance, it’s hard not to conclude that much of the project of this book is to combat that ignorance, not to

mention to convince those on the left that they have more in common with cultural conservatives than they think.

That latter project is, Lasch understood, central to any healthy recapitulation of American politics; until Americans see beyond the superficial and often incoherent divisions of our present political system, we are unlikely to get beyond our present situation: one group of progressive elites fighting another group of progressive elites and acting like the differences between them matter profoundly, while the mass of Americans feel that they’re made to choose, in voting, between two evils.

A massive political realignment—one in which populist sympathizers on the left and right overcome their conventional animosities in order to take on a greater foe—is the great looming hope of Lasch’s work. He embodied that hope in his own being; throughout his career, Lasch largely resisted being pinned down into any of our usual political categories. Having grown up in a family of New Deal liberals, he grew disenchanted with the self-centered antics and ideological purity tests of the New Left, not to mention its increasing distance from the middle class and that class’s moral realism. Lasch often found himself in agreement with cultural conservatives, and he did not shy away from being called one, but he was no fan of the advanced capitalism or Cold War militarism that Americans on the right came to promote in the late twentieth century. His refusal to take one side or the other often frustrated and confused his contemporaries, but Lasch knew that to do so would be the easiest—and worst—kind of giving up.

Lasch thus risked what he knew might be the fate of living outside the predetermined lines within a political order: being misunderstood or forgotten, dangers he exacerbated even more by writing as intricately

as he did. There aren't many books written at the pitch of *The True and Only Heaven* these days, books intended for a generally educated audience but that require serious intellectual effort of their readers. *The True and Only Heaven* is dense and multilayered and argued with sophistication. It exemplifies what Lasch thought was necessary for any credible alternative to progressivism to emerge: hard work, a willingness to wrestle with unconventional ideas, and a firm grasp of social and political history. Lasch's risk was thus, by his own account, the risk that needed—and needs—to be made.

In our own time, when the noise of progressivism is louder than ever—often represented, among other ways, in the understandable but naive claims that the world has changed fundamentally during the past twenty-five years—it is a better time than ever to turn and return to *The True and Only Heaven*, to dive below the distracting noise of the moment and consider the greater currents upon which we are carried. In doing so, we may also ensure that the challenges Lasch set for himself were not undertaken in vain, and that he may continue to help us tie present to past. †

- 1 Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 21–22. Further references to this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- 2 This figure dates to 2012. By comparison, in 1964, 64 percent of Americans agreed with the same statement. The American National Election Studies, the ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, www.electionstudies.org.
- 3 Michael D'Antonio, *Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015).
- 4 Raf Casert, "Tusk Comes Out Against Too Much EU Integration," Associated Press, May 30, 2016, www.bigstory.ap.org.
- 5 Benjamin L. McKean, "Is It Possible to Have Populism Without Racism?" *Washington Post*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/18/is-it-possible-to-have-populism-without-racism/>.
- 6 Lasch, 532.
- 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von C. G. Naumann, 1886).