Review: Christopher Lasch, the New Radicalism, and the Vocation of Intellectuals

Reviewed Work(s): The New Radicalism in America by Christopher Lasch

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Source: *Reviews in American History*, Mar., 1995, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Mar., 1995), pp. 176-191

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2703255

IN RETROSPECT

CHRISTOPHER LASCH, *THE NEW RADICALISM*, AND THE VOCATION OF INTELLECTUALS

Robert B. Westbrook

> *The New Radicalism* is really a brilliant book, a book of such importance that people will be talking about it as long as they are talking about 20th Century history. It is an unconventional book, because it is based not on massing evidence but on *thinking* about history, an endeavor that has largely gone out of fashion.
>
> —William Leuchtenburg to Christopher Lasch, July 5, 1965.

In a foreword to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Richard Hofstadter's *American Political Tradition* (1973), Christopher Lasch paid tribute to the late historian and teacher who, above all others, had provided a model for his own vocation.

> Even though his career was cut short in its prime, leaving us immeasurably impoverished by the loss, Richard Hofstadter left a full and rounded body of work, not merely one or two important books, which is the best that most historians can hope for. . . . Hofstadter's imagination never rested for long, and his thought ranged widely, embracing political, social, and cultural history—he was impatient with such distinctions—and extending to all periods of American history. Yet his ideas constantly return to certain central preoccupations stated at the outset of his career.[1]

In the wake of Lasch's own untimely death in February 1994, a certain eeriness settles over these words, for they apply as well to Lasch as to Hofstadter. Moreover, Lasch shared many of Hofstadter's "central preoccupations," including a concern for the role of the intellectual in modern American society and culture. It was this concern that animated *The New Radicalism in America*, the book that established Lasch's reputation at a young age as a penetrating and controversial social critic. *The New Radicalism* was also the book that made Lasch a figure of commanding importance for the generation of historians that followed his. For those of us middle-age who now find ourselves standing in something of the same relation to Lasch as he stood to

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Hofstadter, a relation at once admiring and contentious, *The New Radicalism* is the book with which a retrospective view of the life and work of Christopher Lasch must begin.

In an American Historical Association convention session honoring Lasch shortly before his death, Richard Fox recalled his first encounter with Lasch's writing, offering what seems to me to be a representative account of the experience of those of us who found a lodestar in *The New Radicalism.* As Fox said:

> Each of us, if we are lucky, encounters in adolescence or early manhood some writer, some artist, some musician, who seems to speak as much from us as to us, who gives voice to thoughts or feelings we may well not yet have articulated, but which we recognize immediately, mysteriously, as our own, as coming from us too. To encounter such a writer when we are passing from one regime of selfhood to another is startling, enthralling, transformative. Such a meeting gives us a model to emulate, and it gives us more: the realization that we have been invited to take up a calling and to join a community. [Lasch's] *New York Review* essays in 1969 had that sort of impact on me. They led me to *The New Radicalism in America,* the reading of which quite literally changed my life course by tipping the scales and persuading me to become an historian, not the journalist I was thinking about being. . . . [Lasch's] prose in the whole book sounded like music and felt like revelation. I wanted to know what he knew, and write as he wrote.

As Fox suggests, those of us with intellectual aspirations struggling to figure out what sort of life to make for ourselves amidst the political turmoil of the late sixties found in *The New Radicalism* an "assertion of the intellectual vocation" quite at odds with that proffered by our liberal elders or most of our radical contemporaries, an assertion centered in Lasch's effort to defend a role for intellectuals as social critics at once detached and engaged. If we (like many of his critics) were more certain of Lasch's view of the irresponsibilities of the intellectuals whose careers he surveyed in his book than of the alternative he wished to hold out to us, we strained to grasp his point and to learn from the manner in which he practiced his ideals in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* and other journals of opinion. Because Lasch so forcefully made the responsibilities of the intellectual one of his preoccupations, those of us who hoped also to exercise those responsibilities looked to him—and continued to look to him—for instruction in their practice, even when we found ourselves at odds with the substance of his arguments.[2]

This is not to say, especially in retrospect, that *The New Radicalism* was not the confusing, ill-conceived, and sometimes wrong-headed book that its critics said it was. If the book was not, as Arthur Mann charged in a scathing review, "flawless in its failure," it was, in important respects, weak. And its shortcomings need not be obscured in order to appreciate its persistent virtues.[3]

Something of the book's weaknesses can be suggested simply by describing its argument and method. The "main argument" of the book, Lasch said, was that "modern radicalism or liberalism can best be understood as a phase in the social history of intellectuals." In the United States in particular, "the rise of the new radicalism coincided with the emergence of the intellectual as a distinctive social type." Although intellectuals—people "for whom thinking fulfills at once the function of work and play"—had long existed in literate societies, only since the turn of the century had they constituted a self-conscious subculture, a class or status group that stood apart from and at odds with bourgeois culture. This development was part of a larger process, "the cultural fragmentation that seems to characterize industrial and postindustrial societies." The subculture of intellectuals was symptomatic of the decline of community and the emergence of a "mass society" which tended "to break down into its component parts, each having its own autonomous culture and maintaining only the most tenuous connections with the general life of society—which as a consequence has almost ceased to exist" (pp. ix–xi).[4]

The newness of the new radicalism, Lasch contended, lay in its "confusion of politics and culture" (p. xiv), a promiscuous mixing of political and cultural means and ends in which political reform came to be conceived as an instrument of cultural renewal and cultural change as a form of political action. "The new radicalism differed from the old," he said, "in its interest in questions which lay outside the realm of conventional politics":

> It was no longer his political allegiance alone which distinguished the radical from the conservative. What characterized the person of advanced opinions in the first two decades of the twentieth century—and what by and large continues to characterize him at the present time—was his position with regard to such issues as childhood, education, and sex; sex above all. Politics by comparison was almost immaterial, if by politics one refers to the traditional business of government and statecraft: taxes, tariffs, treaties. But the new radicals had not so much abandoned politics as redefined it, bringing to political debate questions formerly reserved to art and letters. (p. 90)

This shifting of the terrain of politics to spheres of experience once regarded as private, Lasch argued, reflected the anxieties and ambitions of intellectuals at once cut off from middle-class society and yet eager to reconstruct it.

In the identification of many new radicals with social outcasts such as "women, children, proletarians, Indians, and Jews" (p. 147), Lasch saw further evidence that the new radicalism was tied to the emergence of intellectuals themselves in exile from middle-class society. In revolt against the "overcivilized" households in which they were raised, radical intellectuals looked for countercultural inspiration in repressed instincts, buried levels

of the self, and the "uncivilized" lives of primitive peoples and lower classes. Yet, he observed, the new radicals were hardly content with their marginal role or at ease with social conflict. Their new brand of "cultural politics" with its essentially "educational" program for social transformation betrayed its origins in the will to power of a newly self-conscious intelligentsia by suggesting that men and women of learning ought to occupy "the strategic loci of social control" from which they might foster the "adjustment" to modernity of their fellow Americans, including those outcasts with whom they sometimes identified (p. xiv). "The new radicals," Lasch remarked, "were torn between their wish to liberate the unused energies of the submerged portions of society and their enthusiasm for social planning, which led in practice to new and subtler forms of repression" (p. 168).

For Lasch the most troubling feature of this effort of the new radicals to overcome their social and cultural isolation was the loss of the detachment it entailed, a detachment that he regarded as essential to the vocation of the intellectual. The intellectual, he said, is "a person whose relationship to society is defined, both in his eyes and in the eyes of the society, principally by his presumed capacity to comment upon it with greater detachment than those more directly caught up in the practical business of production and power." Because detached social criticism was the business of intellectuals, their relationship to the rest of society was "never entirely comfortable" (p. ix). This discomfort, Lasch implied, was something intellectuals would have to live with if they were to be true to their vocation. But all too often the new radicals sought to relieve their discomfort by abandoning their detachment. At their worst, they gave in to an "outraged envy" of men of power and went in search of a piece of the action for themselves. One could see this envy, he said, "in the discontent of intellectuals not only with the old conception of culture but with intellectual life itself; in their eagerness to escape from the isolation to which intellectuality seemed to condemn them; in the self-effacement and self-contempt which made them yearn to put their abilities at the service of the community." For the new radicals, "disinterested inquiry and speculation could no longer suffice"; they "could find comfort and meaning, it appeared, only in large, encompassing movements of masses of people, of which they could imagine themselves a part" (p. 64).

Lasch sought to make this argument by means of a series of biographical essays, portraits of "progressive intellectuals" whom he took to be exemplary new radicals. Jane Addams, Randolph Bourne, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Lincoln Colcord, Colonel Edward House, and Lincoln Steffens received chapter-length treatment, while more thematic chapters on feminism, "politics as social control," and the response of *The New Republic* to World War I rested on shorter sketches of the work of, among others, Robert Herrick, Charlotte

Perkins Gilman, Fremont Older, John Dewey, Edward A. Ross, and Walter Lippmann. The book's final chapter, "The Anti-Intellectualism of the Intellectuals," examined the legacy of the new radicalism after 1920, finding its characteristic features and flaws in both the "hard-boiled" liberalism of the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr, Sidney Hook, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and in the "increasingly shrill, increasingly desperate, and increasingly bizarre" radicalism of intellectuals such as Dwight Macdonald. The book ends (in "a clatter of loud Wagnerian chords," Lasch told a friend) with a portrayal of Norman Mailer as the apotheosis of the new radicalism.[5]

> With Norman Mailer, the body of ideas and assumptions which I have called the new radicalism achieved some kind of final and definitive statement. The confusion of power and art, the effort to liberate the social and psychological "underground" by means of political action, the fevered pursuit of experience, the conception of life as an experiment, the intellectual's identification of himself with the outcasts of society—these things could be carried no further without carrying them to absurdity. Perhaps Mailer had carried them past that point already. (p. 347)

As this brief summary suggests, Lasch assembled a peculiar cast of characters in *The New Radicalism.* Holding them together in a single book with a singular argument, especially one as sweeping as that which Lasch advanced, proved difficult. As William Leuchtenburg told Lasch, he had undertaken "a kind of high wire act."

> It just is not possible, one says, for you to put together such incongruous people or to rest such bold assertions on so few footnotes—and one thanks God that you have gotten away with it in this chapter only to be unnerved to see that you are trying something still more difficult in the next chapter until finally comes the climax when a book on Jane Addams ends with Norman Mailer—and you shudder and say O my God he's not really going to bring in Norman Mailer—only to see you carry that off triumphantly too. . . . You make reading the book not something to be commented upon at a distance but something to be lived through and experienced.

Unlike Leuchtenburg, others were certain that Lasch had fallen off the wire. "Even the most credulous reader," Mann sniffed, "is likely to question an interpretation that Jane Addams set ideas in motion that culminated in the fantasies of Norman Mailer." Yet even if one finds Lasch's fine thread of argument connecting Addams and Mailer and finds it persuasive, one is still not quite sure what to make of his odd assortment of characters, for he offered no rationale for his selection of subjects. He himself admitted that "it is not possible to write about these people as a group, since they weren't, most of them having not had contact with each other at all." Lasch's new radicals

cohere as a group only in the pages of *The New Radicalism*, and to some critics it appeared that he had chosen his subjects to exemplify rather than test his general argument. As Max Beloff put it, "while one can illustrate a sociological argument with instances, one cannot build one on them."[6]

Having read through Lasch's papers from the early 1960s, I believe the explanation for the peculiar congregation in *The New Radicalism* is more mundane. This was a book for which, in a sense, Lasch did little fresh research. Although it is filled with material from manuscript sources, this research and most of the work in published sources evident in the book had been done in the course of work on four other projects: Lasch's doctoral dissertation (published in 1962 as *American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*), a short book on Jane Addams (never published), a book on the history of American women and feminism he planned to write with William Taylor (aborted), and a textbook on the period 1877–1914 that was to be published in a series that he and Taylor put together (abandoned). And much of what he had to say in the final chapter of *The New Radicalism* drew on his initial ventures as a public intellectual in the early sixties in journals such as the *Nation* in which he began to break from the "realism" of George Kennan that had shaped his thinking in the 1950s and to articulate a critique of Cold War liberalism. While Lasch was apparently thinking about writing "a social history of the American intellectual from about 1880 to the present" as early as the fall of 1961 and some of the arguments in *The New Radicalism* begin to emerge then in his correspondence and in lectures at the University of Iowa, he does not seem to have committed himself to a book like *The New Radicalism* until the spring of 1963.[7] At that time, he and his family decided to spend a year's leave from teaching in England, and with Hofstadter's encouragement, he went to work there on a book of biographical essays based on material that he had gathered largely for other purposes.[8] The general argument Lasch advanced in *The New Radicalism* was one that seemed to make sense of the wide, deep, but unsystematic and even inadvertent research he had already done. In important respects, the book was the peculiar sort of book it was because it was a book written in haste, the kind of book that he (unlike most of us) could write quickly in a relatively isolated Cambridgeshire cottage. Although he made use of a little writing he had already done, Lasch wrote most of *The New Radicalism* in nine months.[9]

If Lasch was willing to acknowledge that his new radicals were "a motley crew if I ever saw one," he nicely evaded the charge that they were "unrepresentative" men and women.[10] If these intellectuals were not "typical of their times," they were, he argued, representative or, perhaps better, symptomatic of their times in that their experience "could only have happened at a particular place at a particular time" (p. xviii). But this was a claim that he did

little to substantiate, and a number of critics pointed out the similarities between his interpretation of the world of progressive intellectuals and that offered by Stanley Elkins in his book, *Slavery* (1959), of the "anti-institutional" reformers of the antebellum period. Lasch responded weakly to this criticism and admitted that "the strongest criticisms of my book are those which argue that the new radicalism was not new after all."[11]

Lasch's failure to establish conclusively the newness of the new radicalism reflected a more substantial weakness of his book, for far from empirically working up the social context behind the emergence of American intellectuals as a self-conscious status group, he merely deduced that context from the theory of mass society that informed his analysis, locating the collapse of "community," the erosion of "patriarchy," and the emergence of "mass man" and isolated "subcultures" in the late nineteenth century when his subjects came of age. The deficiencies of this argument are perhaps most apparent in Lasch's portrait of the world that was lost, the world of communities in which "in a sense, the private life did not exist at all, in a setting in which so much emphasis was placed upon the duties and responsibilities of life, so little upon its opportunities for new forms of experience." Here, he continued, "what one owed to others was always so much more apparent than what one owed to oneself. All the details of personal intercourse, moreover, were circumscribed by elaborate forms and conventions, as if to emphasize their quasi-public character; and under those conditions there was little opportunity for the naked embrace of the spirit which the modern world has since learned to understand as the essence of love and friendship, the essence of life itself" (p. 110). Whether this terribly abstract formulation accurately described nineteenth-century American communities was very much open to dispute, and Lasch provided little evidence to suggest it did, only lyrical reworkings of what had already become sociological clichés.[12]

Lasch's focus on the cultural radicalism of modern American intellectuals slighted the considerable energy they had invested in what he regarded as persistent forms of the "old radicalism." As William Phillips complained, Lasch had little or nothing to say about "the Socialists, the IWW, the Communists, Norman Thomas, Eugene Debs, the civil rights movement, Marxism, the pacifists, the anarchists, Students for a Democratic Society. . . . There is one reference to Trotsky, as there is to Frank Sinatra." While Lasch could rightly deny that this sort of radical politics was his concern, he missed a good bet in saying so little about it. A solid case could be made that the same anti-intellectualism and will to power that he saw infecting the new radicalism of the intellectuals was apparent as well in their embrace of the newer forms of the old radicalism. At the very least, Lasch might have saved himself some of the abuse he suffered from such anticommunist stalwarts as John

Roche and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., had he pointed out at greater length than he did that when it came to whoring after power, the intellectuals in and around the Communist party could hold their own with Cold War liberals (some of whom picked up their disposition for hard-boiled "realism" in the CP and its environs).[13]

One might also contend, as none of Lasch's critics did when *The New Radicalism* appeared, that he was too quick to attribute the discontents and enthusiasms evident among his subjects to members of an isolated subculture alone. In important respects, the "new radicalism" was more of a popular movement than he indicated, more "typical" than he imagined. The attack on a desiccated, overcivilized, and repressive bourgeois culture, the mobilization of political energies on the cultural terrain of education and sexual behavior, and the effort to invest power and social control in the hands of experts were initiatives hardly confined to intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Indeed, since the publication of *The New Radicalism* a number of historians have found in the "consumer culture" of the urban bourgeoisie, which emerged alongside his new radicalism, much the same "quest for 'real life'" that Lasch believed was "evidently destined to remain the exclusive possession of a small minority" (p. 147).[14] And Lasch himself would eventually extend criticisms he made of the new radicals to the culture as a whole. For example, one can see in Lasch's portrait of the sexual politics of Mabel Dodge Luhan an anticipation of the much broader indictment of the "sociopsychology of the sex war" he would draw up in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978). Luhan's "intensely analyzed emotional life," Lasch argued, was "a result of the withering away of the larger social context of existence, which causes people in their loneliness to seek an intimacy even in casual friendships which hitherto was expected only of a few special relationships, if indeed it was expected at all" (p. 108). She celebrated sex as a "communion of souls," but afflicted with the "habit of seeing all human relations as a form of politics," she conceived of her own sexual life as a battle of wills, a "struggle for mastery" (p. 134). In the *Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch described a widespread "cult of intimacy" that concealed a "growing despair of finding it" and fueled "sexual combat" between enraged women and fearful men (p. 188–89). In this context, Luhan seemed less the marginalized eccentric than the harbinger of wider sexual warfare. From this perspective, much of the new radicalism was less adversarial, or at least less obviously adversarial, than Lasch thought. Many of its elements were less the property of an isolated intellectual subculture than the stock-in-trade of a rapidly growing new middle class.

The New Radicalism remains a book worth reading and rereading today less for its "main argument" than for the subsidiary arguments that accompany it. This was Hofstadter's view, and he put it to Lasch quite nicely. "Actually,

though I think the greater part of your general argument is valid, or persuasive at least," he wrote, "I think the most valuable thing about your book is the steady flow of marginal insight, about the people you've chosen, the intellectual life as vocation, and the development of our culture." Drawing on Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between the fox who knows many things and the hedgehog who knows one big thing, Hofstadter suggested that Lasch was, in the end, more fox than hedgehog. "This," he said, "is why the book can be read with great pleasure and profit by someone who happens not to agree with your central point, and why I think you will still find people reading it when you are an old man."[15]

Among the foxy aspects of *The New Radicalism* that make it a great and enduring book, I would put first the sheer brilliance of the portraits of its subjects. In both substance and style they remain models of the biographer's art, combining an acute sensitivity to the dynamics of the inner life of some very complicated individuals with a novelist's eye for the telling detail. Often one finds *The New Radicalism* most engaging at those points at which Lasch wandered away from pressing his organizing thesis and examined the lives of his subjects in leisurely detail. Each of his extended portraits (and some of the briefer sketches) immediately became essential reading for students of the careers of these figures. And it remains the case that one cannot write about Addams, Bourne, Luhan, or Steffens without confronting Lasch's treatment of them.

As he indicated in his preface, Lasch was well aware of the political risks he ran in exploring the motives of radical intellectuals. To some, he remarked, his efforts to understand where the new radicalism came from would seem "an insidious attempt to discredit the ideas of radicals and reformers by 'psychologizing' them away" (p. xvi). At least one reader, his friend Staughton Lynd, had been raising this objection to him for years, worrying that Lasch was joining forces with Hofstadter by launching ad hominem inquiries that ended up "questioning the validity of radical action by exploring its psychic origins." Lasch had indeed defended Hofstadter from critics such as Norman Pollack, whom he regarded as terrible simplifiers, but he did not see why the sort of psychological analysis which Hofstadter practiced and which he admired need entail the conservative consequences Lynd feared. In any case, he was not himself in search of sordid "hidden motives," for he took his cues from the explicit accounts that Jane Addams and others offered of their own motives. "The real choice," he wrote Lynd in the summer of 1962, "is not so much between looking for hidden motives on the one hand and discounting almost automatically what people say just because it was said, and on the other, discounting everything which does not appear in black and white on paper, as it is between recognition of the difficulty of understanding what

people mean when they say something and assuming that it is really quite simple. . . . At its best, [psychological analysis] pays much more attention to what people say than those who attack it." But Lynd remained unmoved, and the debate became increasingly acrimonious. Finally, after Lynd once again charged Lasch with psychologizing away Jane Addams's radicalism in the manuscript of the first chapter of *The New Radicalism*, Lasch exploded. "I continue to be disturbed by your willingness to exchange analysis for propaganda," he wrote. "I consider it my job to try to understand Jane Addams, not to dilate endlessly on the truth and beauty of her works. But in any case understanding how such a woman came to spend her life the way she did does not necessarily detract from the validity of her works. Why should it? But this is the point on which you cannot be convinced. To you the radical tradition is sacred and must not be analyzed, except to murmur approvingly."[16]

This dispute with Lynd points to what I take to be the other fox-like feature of *The New Radicalism* that lends it persistent power: Lasch's attack on the anti-intellectualism of his intellectuals and his attempt to work out an ideal of "detached engagement" for intellectuals that was not oxymoronic. Shortly before he died, Lasch told me that in the course of a number of interviews he gave in his last months, he had at last realized what *The New Radicalism* was really about. As he put it in one of those interviews, it was "a book about intellectuals who weren't content to be intellectuals but wanted to be something else—movers and shakers, or the power behind the throne, or revolutionaries, or Indians or members of some allegedly simple culture that enjoyed a direct, unmediated connection with nature." Although Lasch disclaimed any desire to write "another *Trahison des Clercs*" (p. xvi), that is precisely what he did. Much of the force of *The New Radicalism* lies in Lasch's cataloguing of the various ways in which he believed American intellectuals had gone about betraying the intellectual vocation and in his struggle to articulate and defend his own complex notion of that vocation.[17]

The principal voice in the book of Lasch's alternative is Benjamin Ginzburg, an obscure philosopher and socialist. Writing in 1931 at a moment at which liberal and radical intellectuals were beginning an extended stint of the "old" radicalism, Ginzburg warned them against a "messianism" that "sets up social reforms as prior to intellectual faith and political action as prior to cultural activity." For intellectuals, "the messianic inversion of values leads to a depreciation of their intellectual crafts in favor of a mysticism of social action." The role of intellectuals, he argued, lay first and foremost in "the cultivation of intellectual values," but few American intellectuals seemed satisfied with this. Anticipating Lasch's argument, he observed that "in no country is the intellectual so preoccupied with affecting the course of politics

to the exclusion of his intellectual interests. The less power he has of determining conditions, the more passionate, it would seem, is his will-o'-the-wisp quest of political influence." Ironically, Ginzburg concluded, the real power of intellectuals lay not in political action conventionally conceived but in "clarification of political and social ideals" and above all in "the cultivation of a cultural-intellectual conscience whence these values derive."[18] Ginzburg, Lasch emphasized, was not calling upon intellectuals to retreat from politics altogether but rather urging them to recognize that what political power they had could best be exercised indirectly by shaping values. "Ginzburg's radicalism," he said, centered on "a recognition that intellectuals had more influence over politics as *intellectuals* than as political activists in their own right" (p. 298).

Few of Lasch's readers grasped his (or Ginzburg's) argument. Nearly all saw him advising intellectuals to make an irresponsible retreat from politics. Liberals bristled at his criticisms of their service to the national security state, of their love affair with the Kennedy administration, and of their insistence that one must "choose the West" in the Cold War, as if that conflict could be reduced to such simple (and "messianic") terms. On the other hand, radicals took him to be promoting "alienation" at a time when they sought "commitment." Once again, these issues were ones that Lasch debated privately with Lynd long before he wrote *The New Radicalism.* While Lynd shared Lasch's contempt for Cold War academics, he saw the alternative for intellectuals in a radical activism toward which Lasch was a good deal more skeptical. "As you say," Lasch wrote Lynd in 1962, "the universities are strongholds of anti-radicalism":

> The man who throws himself into radial politics is better off, unquestionably. But I think he is better off insofar as his radical activism represents a form of withdrawal and detachment from the values that prevail in the university and in society in general. I don't think his advantage lies in the commitment he makes to radicalism, as opposed to the lack of commitment of the ordinary professor. The trouble with the latter is surely not that he lives in an ivory tower but that he is so pathetically far from living in one, because he is committed, often in a very immediate way, to the current consensus. In the bigger schools this commitment more and more takes the immediate and tangible form of working for the government as a technical advisor; helping the government find new ways of blowing people up, or find new ways of persuading Africans to be on our side. Well, it may be that a man has to become a radical and an activist in order to avoid being drawn into this miserable academic routine. If he can't keep his detachment within the academic setting, and I'm quite willing to concede that he can't, then by all means let him be an activist. The only trouble with the radical movement that I can see is that it often seems to impose a conformity of its own. I sense this in the writings of some of the people associated with radical movements—a kind of glibness, and the unquestioning acceptance of assumptions which need to be

> questioned and argued; all of which is just as destructive of independence of mind as conformity to the clichés current in academia.[19]

It is not surprising that Lasch found himself misunderstood, for he was urging intellectuals to be both detached and engaged, which, to many, was plainly contradictory advice. But as Lasch saw it, detachment, which he distinguished from indifference and alienation, was essential to effective social criticism. Engaged intellectuals had to remain detached or they ceased to be intellectuals. And, for him, being detached was in the end less a matter of institutional location than of perspective. As he put it to Leuchtenburg (who was at once his most enthusiastic reader and his most perceptive critic):

> I only ask that [intellectuals] act like intellectuals. It isn't really a matter, necessarily, of whether or not to engage in practical politics; if that is really the course in which one thinks he can do the most good, I see no reason why he should not take it. I don't think one automatically ceases to be an intellectual when he gets on the inside of things. . . . But the point is that most of the intellectuals engaged in this enterprise are not speaking for intellectual values at all. When they try to speak a language which powerful people can understand, they soon forget that there is any other language. Again, I do not attribute this simply to the act of getting into power. It is a state of mind which pervades the intellectual community, including those who do not have power. . . . I am not advocating a fashionable cult of "alienation" and demanding symbolic gestures of withdrawal and rejection. I am only demanding what the new radicals promised but drew back from, trying to see middle-class society from the outside in, and then using this perspective to analyze, criticize, argue, persuade, in one's "work" or in one's polemics, it makes no difference. In other words, some perspectives seem to me more fruitful for intellectual work than others, and I would like to see more people cultivate those perspectives. But the work is still intellectual.

The principal threat to intellectual independence, Lasch argued, was "a manipulative habit of mind," which was easier to cultivate within the corridors of power but was not confined there. Indeed, as he had earlier complained to Lynd, intellectuals in the emerging New Left were sometimes as guilty of anti-intellectualism as the liberals they attacked. There, too often, "one forsakes the language of criticism, the Western tradition of rational discourse for the obscurantist jargon of the 'movement.' And this seems as bad in its way as the language of power."[20]

"Detached engagement" was an understanding of the vocation of the intellectual to which Lasch continued to hold for the rest of his life. But his rendering of this complicated and seemingly contradictory notion shifted in important ways, becoming less abstract and consequently, I would say, more attractive. Between *The New Radicalism* and *The True and Only Heaven* (1991) one can discern a basic rethinking of what might be termed the epistemologi-

cal (even metaphysical) underpinnings of the intellectual's role and the development of a perspective quite different from that of Benjamin Ginzburg, the presiding spirit of the earlier book. Ginzburg's argument, which he termed "rational intellectualism" or "rational critical religion," seems to have been grounded in a universalism and rationalism (even Platonism) of the sort we have come to call "foundationalist" in that it sought to provide intellectuals with a transcendent standpoint outside of the contingencies of history and culture. It is not altogether clear if Lasch shared this philosophy when he wrote *The New Radicalism*, but he does not challenge Ginzburg in this respect and his own invocation of "intellectual values" and "the Western tradition of rational discourse" suggests that he found Ginzburg's foundationalism attractive. By the 1980s Lasch was sharply critical of such rationalism, and he tried to fashion a defense of the critical independence of the intellectual which dispensed with such foundations. Just because it was impossible to achieve a rationalist "view from nowhere" on one's society, he argued, did not preclude a significant measure of detachment. It was possible for intellectuals to be *in* without being *of* their culture.[21]

Hence, at the end of his life, Lasch found Michael Walzer's conception of the "rooted" or "connected" intellectual an attractive one. On the face of it, Walzer's conception is at odds with Lasch's earlier defense of "detachment." As Lasch said in an interview:

> One type of social critic, according to Walzer, tries to stand outside his society and to see it as an outsider, the way an anthropologist studies a primitive tribe. This kind of criticism stands in relation to the society in question in a position of complete detachment, as if the critic's only allegiance were to justice and truth in the abstract. The critic adopts the point of view of an outcast or stranger. Connected critics stand within the society under criticism. Their position is one of provisional loyalty. They hold society up to its own highest standards, appeal to its own traditions in order to show how far its practice falls short of its principles.[22]

Here, quite literally, detachment and alienation are one: the detached intellectual is one who takes the view of an alien. But absent a transcendent realm from which to hail, this alien perspective is a view not from nowhere but from somewhere else, that is, loyalty to another community. Without rationalist foundations, wholesale detachment is impossible; one must choose one's fellows. And in his last years Lasch connected himself to American culture in profound fashion, finding (some would say constructing) an indigenous, "populist" tradition to which he gave his provisional loyalty.[23]

But if connected criticism forbids wholesale detachment, it does not thwart a more modest distancing of intellectuals from the practices of their society. For the connected critic, as Walzer says, "what is crucial is the critic's

independence, his freedom from governmental responsibility, religious authority, corporate power, party discipline. He is an oppositional figure, and he must remain independent if he is to sustain his opposition." Thus if Lasch, in an important sense, abandoned "detachment," he never relinquished a defense of critical independence, which is often precisely what he meant by "detachment" in *The New Radicalism*.[24]

No one can doubt Lasch's own critical independence. Having raised the hackles of ideologues on the right and left in 1965, he persisted in making both camps uncomfortable for the rest of his life. His ideal of the intellectual's vocation is a difficult one to grasp, and it is the sort of ideal that is understood less by trying to define it than by pointing to its exemplary practice. And no one practiced it better in the thirty years following the publication of *The New Radicalism* than Christopher Lasch himself. No matter how well we may have learned the lessons he had to teach us, our culture and our politics are much the poorer without him.

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1. Christopher Lasch, "Foreword" to Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1973), p. vii. Strictly speaking, Lasch was not Hofstadter's student. He never took a class with him in graduate school at Columbia. The adviser for his dissertation, later published as *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (1962), was William Leuchtenburg. Lasch's close relationship with Hofstadter began when he served one summer as his research assistant and grew increasingly significant in the early 1960s. Hofstadter acted as something of a midwife for *The New Radicalism*, helping Lasch secure a contract with Knopf and providing steady advice on the manuscript. The complex relationship of *The New Radicalism* to Hofstadter's work was a source of some anxiety for Lasch. He worried that Hofstadter "would not like this book very much, [a concern that] is extremely painful to me because of my enormous indebtedness to you—I don't mean merely the Knopf contract and the encouragement to write this book, but more important, what you did for intellectual history in *The American Political Tradition* and *The Age of Reform*. I have tried to acknowledge very explicitly, in what I have written, how much I owe to these books; but that very fact may contribute to the awkwardness of your position, in being confronted with a book the conclusions of which will probably strike you as quite unwarranted" (Christopher Lasch to Richard Hofstadter, July 8, 1964).

2. "A Tribute to Christopher Lasch," Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, San Francisco, January 8, 1994, pp. 23–24. If, as Lasch wrote in *The New Radicalism*, the value of an intellectual's criticism "is presumed to rest on a measure of detachment," then one might well discount the judgments I offer in this essay, for Christopher Lasch was not only my colleague but my friend. Yet, though I cannot pretend to a full measure of detachment where he is concerned, I have tried to sustain here the critical distance between his thinking and mine that made our friendship such a wondrous mix of affection and argument. See Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (1965), ix.

3. Arthur Mann, review of *The New Radicalism in America, Journal of American History* 53 (1967): 872.

4. Although Lasch repeatedly referred to intellectuals as a "class," the Weberian term "status group" was better suited to his argument. "I feel myself rather closer to Weber than to Marx," he wrote Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker (Christopher Lasch to Herbert Aptheker, February 16, 1964).

5. Christopher Lasch to William Leuchtenburg, May 14, 1964.

6. William Leuchtenburg to Christopher Lasch, July 5, 1965; Mann, p. 872; Christopher Lasch to Alfred Knopf, November 12, 1963; Max Beloff, "Traps for Intellectuals," *Listener*, (March 3, 1966): 323. I am grateful to William Leuchtenburg for permission to quote from his correspondence with Lasch.

7. Christopher Lasch to Rowland L. Mitchell, October 31, 1961. In listing his work in progress in a letter in late 1962, Lasch did not include a book on intellectuals (Christopher Lasch to Wayne Andrews, November 11, 1962). See the anticipation of a central argument of *The New Radicalism* in a September 8, 1962 letter to Staughton Lynd: "The mystique of action, of 'doing something about it,' the cult experience, of 'life,' of the working class—these things made the progressives impatient with intellectual activity itself. But once they got involved with what they liked to think of as 'life,' it seems to me that they surrendered the only point of view from which they could successfully criticize society, surrendered the detachment necessary to such criticism. Their support of the First World War—not so much their support, for there were arguments that could have been made in favor of American intervention, as their willingness to acquiesce in Wilson's understanding of what intervention meant—seems to me to clinch the argument; for here was the final capitulation, in the name of making an active contribution to social life, in the name of 'service,' in the name of confronting experience directly instead of through books, to the demands and needs of the national state—needs which had nothing whatever in common with the values the progressives were supposedly trying to uphold."

8. The first document sketching the dimensions of *The New Radicalism* in any detail is a letter to Hofstadter in the summer of 1963 (Christopher Lasch to Richard Hofstadter, July 24, 1963). Even then Lasch said "I have not yet tried to reduce the idea to any kind of outline or prospectus." He also indicated he would probably have chapters on Theodore Roosevelt and Charles R. Crane, which never eventuated, though they are further evidence that he intended to rely principally on research he had done for other purposes. He thought for a time of writing a dissertation on Roosevelt as historian and had written an introduction to a reprint of *The Winning of the West*, and had worked through Crane's papers while researching his dissertation.

9. In these same months, Lasch began and completed the editing of his valuable anthology of Jane Addams's writing, *The Social Thought of Jane Adams* (1965).

10. Christopher Lasch to Henry Steele Commager, November 12, 1963.

11. Mann, p. 871; Marcus Cunliffe, "Goulasch," *Encounter*, September 1966, p. 76; Staughton Lynd to Christopher Lasch, June 12, 1964; Michael Parrish to Christopher Lasch, May 19, 1965; Christopher Lasch to Robert Skotheim, February 3, 1966. Elkins himself did not make this particular criticism of *The New Radicalism* (Stanley Elkins to Christopher Lasch, May 22, 1965).

12. See Stephan Thernstrom, "The Intellectual in Mass Society," *Dissent* (January–February 1966): 103.

13. William Phillips, "Fashions of Revolt," *Commentary* (October 1965): 85. See John P. Roche, "Profiles in 'Tsoores'," *New Leader* (16 August 1965): 14–16; and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Intellectuals Under Fire," *Sunday Times* (London), February 27, 1966.

14. T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," in Richard W. Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption* (1983), p. 10.

15. Richard Hofstadter to Christopher Lasch, September 27, 1964. I quote from Richard Hofstadter's correspondence with Lasch with the permission of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University, where Hofstadter's papers are housed.

16. Staughton Lynd, "Jane Addams and the Radical Impulse," *Commentary* (July 1961): 54; Christopher Lasch to Staughton Lynd, July 8, 1962; Christopher Lasch to Staughton Lynd, 16

June 1964. For Lasch's criticism of Pollack see his "Letter to the Editor," *American Historical Review* 68 (1963): 910–11. Stephan Thernstrom perceptively summed up the differences between the "psychologizing" of Hofstadter and Lasch: "If [Lasch] casts a cold eye on the failings of the men and women with whom he deals, he casts a still colder eye on the society they struggled to change" ("The Intellectual in Mass Society," p. 103).

17. Casey Blake and Christopher Phelps, "History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch," *Journal of American History* 80 (1994): 1324.

18. Benjamin Ginzburg, "Against Messianism," *New Republic* (February 18, 1931): 15–17.

19. Christopher Lasch to Staughton Lynd, October 22, 1962.

20. Christopher Lasch to William Leuchtenburg, July 17, 1965.

21. On Lasch's latter-day epistemology, see "Academic Pseudo-Radicalism: The Charade of Subversion," *Salmagundi* 88–89 (Fall 1990/Winter 1991): 25–36.

22. "History as Social Criticism," p. 1329.

23. On Lasch's connected populism, see *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), esp. chs. 1, 5, 7–11. Lasch's "rootedness" was evident as well in a course on "The Promise of American Life" which he and I taught together, the title of which was not, as many of our friends supposed, entirely ironic.

24. Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (1988), p. 237.