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## Populism Against Progress

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**The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics**, by Christopher Lasch.  
*New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1991. 591 pp. \$25.*

This is a bold and incisive book by the well-known cultural critic and scholar best remembered for his pointed description in a 1979 book of the culture of narcissism. Although Christopher Lasch, like his predecessor Marshall McLuhan, is virtually a fixture of North American pop-culture, he teaches history at the University of Rochester rather than at a “prestige” university. The fact that someone of his caliber is at Rochester, rather than Harvard, underscores the ongoing decline of the big-name universities and the emergence of academically superior institutions of the so-called “second tier” in the United States.

The work begins with a quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne from which the phrase forming the title of the book is derived. The reference is to those who very stubbornly and “stoutly contend” that “Vanity Fair” rather than the real “Celestial City” is “the true and only heaven.” As one

reads the book, one can see “Vanity Fair” as an apposite image for contemporary society, with its ceaseless whirl, consumption, and meaningless circulation (of money, goods, and people), while “the Celestial City” would be the metaphor for a more settled society with a sense of limits, a genuine community. Those who most determinedly confound the two are the liberal evangelists of progress.

This work—written in a forthright style which should probably be a concomitant of any work espousing a populist approach—can be understood as, among other things, one of “philosophical archaeology.” Lasch reaches back into the past in an attempt to descry, describe, and revivify a populist tradition of social criticism (with which he largely identifies), which has set itself against the materialistic and consumptionist excesses of capitalism. The work is noteworthy for identifying, and bringing to

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broader attention, a fairly extensive Protestant, “Dissenting” and Calvinist-centered, English-speaking tradition of critique and resistance to capitalism. In this respect the work challenges somewhat the conventional understanding which places much of that opposition in the Catholic and Continental European context. Although the “anarcho-syndicalist” Georges Sorel—interpreted as a quintessential populist—is fairly extensively discussed, most of the other figures in the book, such as Thomas Carlyle with his emphasis on duty, William Morris with his crafts approach, G.D.H. Cole, the guild-socialist, and Josiah Royce, the philosopher of “social loyalty,” are part of the English-speaking context.

The book is in some ways a lament that modern-day socialism has been dominated almost exclusively by Marxism—the form of socialism which, with its emphasis on a strictly scientific underpinning and on purely economic achievement, was in fact, according to Lasch, the closest to the capitalism which it strove to oppose. One is reminded of a possible earlier approach to socialism in John Ruskin’s famous aphorism: “I am a Tory of the sternest sort, a socialist, a communist.” These were the schools and approaches (guild-socialism, utopian socialism, etc.) that were so vociferously and polemically condemned in Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*.

One of the real strengths of the book is its willingness to criticize conventional understandings of political categories, as in the first chapter, “The Obsolescence of Left and Right.”

There are also some well-directed criticisms at a certain type of conservatism, which Lasch characterizes, in the second chapter, as “Nostalgia: The Abdication of Memory.” The third chapter, although appreciative of “The Sociological Tradition and the Idea of Community” (which includes Burke), pointedly criticizes “*G e m e i n s c h a f t - s c h m e r z*.” Although a profound pessimist, Lasch tries to anchor his hopes in something that is at least within the realm of possibility.

Although Lasch might be sympathetic to a critique of contemporary society such as that expressed in Claes Ryn’s *The New Jacobinism*, he would probably strongly react against any attempt to defend a strong elitism or class privilege of any sort. Lasch undoubtedly would see Jean-Jacques Rousseau as one of the foremost critics, rather than intellectual architects, of contemporary society, especially in a work such as *The Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. As a populist and social democrat, Lasch rejects elitist philosophical liberalism and capitalism (which he sees as largely coterminous) while embracing democracy. This position sharply contrasts with that of a typical “paleoconservative” like Paul Gottfried, who defends a form of political liberalism and provisionally accepts capitalism while at the same time identifying the central problem of contemporary America as an excess of “democratic” or “social democratic” ideology. Lasch’s admonition to someone claiming to be a true conservative would be to become a friend of the common people,

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wholeheartedly as opposed to tactically or provisionally, .

Lasch very pointedly criticizes the so-called "New Class" which further strengthened its hold on America after the 1960s. As he makes this critique, he expresses a strong sympathy for the downtrodden working and lower-middle classes in America, whose outlook, although it includes obviously unsavory elements, puts some real limits on the grotesque hyperconsumption society which has now arisen.

The group whose outlook Lasch would probably reject the most strongly is the neoconservatives. In his estimation, they would form part of "the New Class." They are a group within it that is particularly adept at pushing for and defending consumptionist capitalism, that is able to derive enormous wealth and personal advantage from its political involvement, and that argues strenuously for, and often helps to bring about, the

"hard" side of managerial capitalism (e.g., budget cuts and plant closings). As an aggressively self-seeking, elitist and very powerful group, they are in no way like the sentimental "tree-huggers" often found on the Left.

Lasch would argue that neither the true conservative nor the true socialist can be impressed by America today—a restless culture based on the inflammation, through all-pervasive advertising, of the grossest appetites; saturated by relentless media images of violence and libidinous sexuality such as have never existed before in human history; and ultimately a society exhibiting great cruelty and the crassest self-interest.

Populism, in spite of its possible authoritarian colorations, may at this stage be the only force that can meaningfully confront this emergent dystopia. If it is really true, as Lasch argues, that we have moved today "beyond Left-Right," then perhaps the manifest conflict now is between populism and elitism.