

American Democracy: Does It Have a Future?

Book Review by Otis L. Graham, Jr.

Among the sensible people I meet, it is generally assumed that university professors are a (small) part of America's problem, along with TV and print journalists and their bosses, Hollywood executives, top lawyers, corporate officers from especially the big multinationals, foundation officials, leading clergy – in short, America's liberal elites, disconnected from the masses below them and arrogantly managing what average people hear, think and are allowed to discuss. Sensible people have complained about this for some time, and, being sensible, know that there are some exceptions. Among history professors, the group I know best, the exceptions occasionally openly rebel in print and become critics of the elite classes they belong to, and of the direction they are taking America. I think of the late Robert Wiebe (see his *Self-Rule*

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The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy
by Christopher Lasch
New York: W. W. Norton
276 pages, \$14.95 paperback



(1995), Fred Siegel (see his *Troubled Journey: From Pearl Harbor to Reagan*), the sociologist-historian Todd Gitlin (see his *The Twilight of Common Dreams* (1995)), William Leach (see his *Country of Exiles* (1999) and the non-academic Michael Lind (see his *The Next American Nation* (1995)). For some years now and until his death in 1996, the most influential of this small school of counter-establishment historians was surely Christopher Lasch. His last book, a collection of essays entitled *The Revolt of the Elites*, passionately expressed his own revolt against those elites, along with searching insights into American cultural directions seen in the light of history.

“Kit” Lasch was a former lefty (he might still have identified himself that way in the 1990s, but among lefties, he was no longer a lefty), which did not make him unusual when he began his career in the 1960s. What set him apart was his chosen audience, the American reading public. After his first, “academic” history (*The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (1962)) Lasch wrote for intelligent generalists, and became essentially a contemporary social critic whose intellectual base was in historical learning. His *The New Radicalism*

in America (1965) was widely reviewed and probably engaged both academic and public audiences, but subsequent books, especially *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), a defense of family in a time of rising divorce rates, and *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) connected to large audiences, including every book club in my home town of Santa Barbara. Professional historians, it was my impression, did not much read or discuss Lasch, and he did not much care.

“...the privileged class... has never been so dangerously isolated from its surroundings”

– Christopher Lasch

The Revolt of the Elites is vintage Lasch – a cluster of scintillating essays rather than a coherent whole, brilliantly written in places, restlessly moving across a vast topical and historical terrain. His main theme in this book could be said to have been his central lifelong theme – “the question of whether (American) democracy has a future.” This may have seemed a bit melodramatic in 1995, era of stock market boom and international “We’re # 1.” But worries about the condition and future of American democracy not only are always with us, but had seemed well-founded to many even in the euphoric 1990s. While the class-related problems of the 1980s had eased somewhat – urban decay, rising crime rates, de-industrialization – the 1990s did not end the sense that the middle class was shrinking between a polarizing rich and poor, and cultural concerns were intensified. Where were multiculturalism, unimpeded globalization, mass migration, tribalism in politics, and especially a corrosive cultural relativism – all of these invented and welcomed by the nation’s elites – taking the country? Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the eternal optimist, had just written his only worried book, *The Disuniting of America* (1991), and there was a palpable uneasiness about America’s direction felt in different ways by the public and by intellectuals. Books that would explain to us what was wrong with us would find eager audiences. I do not know what sales *The Revolt of the Elites* enjoyed, and Lasch

was certainly not the first writer to complain of elite disconnect. Note the wide readership for two books explaining how the liberals lost touch with the American electorate including their own base – Thomas and Mary Edsall’s *Chain Reaction* (1991), and E. J. Dionne’s *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1991), or angry attacks on liberal/cosmopolitan elites by writers such as Robert Reich, Richard Bernstein, Russell Jacoby and Robert Hughes, not to mention an avalanche of books on the “culture wars.”

The special merit of this last Lasch book is a vast reconnaissance of cultural/intellectual problems and trends in a small space. He begins with a scathing chapter on the social gap that is widening between America’s new elites and commonalities of all kinds. We have always had elites, but the “privileged class... has never been so dangerously isolated from its surroundings,” by which he means the loyalties of locality, neighborhood, region. He returns to this theme several times from different angles, and in other chapters addresses other malfunctioning areas of American life: the universities; a deteriorating public debate; the rise of the “self-esteem” movement in American religion, crowding out religion’s critical capacities; the decay of public institutions. None of these is new. But Lasch brings to them two enriching qualities. The first is a backward-ranging historian’s memory, so that contemporary troubles may be seen in the light of what Emerson or Lincoln or Dewey or Lippmann or Jane Addams thought and did. The second is a fast-moving critical assessment of contemporary writers the reader may have missed or forgotten: Jane Jacobs, Michael Sandel, Amitai Etzioni, Robert Reich, Phillip Rieff. This little book places itself at the intersection of past and present concerns, engaging the best commentary produced in arguments from a past we may have forgotten or a present we have been too busy to engage.

And what should be done, what are we to conclude, where are we going? Lasch offers nothing along these lines, and he never did. He puts ideas in play, and you figure it out for yourself. •