

Lasching out at the 'Elites'

Christopher Lasch, best known for his book "The Culture of Narcissism" (1979), completed this one shortly before dying of cancer last year. Written "under trying circumstances," as the historian (University of Rochester) puts it in acknowledging others' help with the project, his last take on American society today strikes a reader with all the force of Matthew Arnold's famous line, "Truth sits upon the lips of dying men."

"The Revolt of the Elites" did not have to be created from scratch, since a number of chapters appeared earlier in periodicals, albeit in somewhat different form. All have been revised to fit with other material in a social critic's tour of democratic horizons both here and, by implication, elsewhere.

The four ranges across Mr. Lasch's by now familiar thinking, plus that of a host of contemporaries ranging from Robert Reich, the current secretary of labor, to Jim Sleeper, Donald L. Nathanson and Allan Bloom.

It might be said to begin with the title's play on Jose Ortega y Gasset's 1930 classic "The Revolt of the Masses" and to end with the "problem of ecstasy" — how can the individual live without some vision that reaches beyond the necessarily limited horizon of daily existence? — posed by another '30s theorist of mass society, Karl Mannheim.

Unavoidably, invoking Mannheim brings up the usual embarrassment of a secularist liberal such as Mr. Lasch trying to hack a path to a less self-indulgent future through thickets of narcissism and greed, crime and illiteracy, academic "pseudoradicalism" and identity politics without recourse to the conservative critic's weaponry of universal truths, ideology and religious faith.

Interestingly though — it may be the most interesting thing about the book — Mr. Lasch has no doubt that want of religion or something very much like it lies at the heart of society's malaise today. Religion requires one to measure oneself against an externally imposed standard of con-

duct, a standard both other-oriented and sufficiently demanding to encourage humility.

Mr. Lasch realizes that a more religious outlook of yesteryear cannot be brought back simply because it would be socially useful, and this prompts a range of responses, one of which is frustration. So his chapter surveying books on the currently "trendy" subject of shame, among them ones by Mr. Nathanson and Leon Wurmser, finds him deploring the therapeutic society and exploding, "Maybe religion is the answer after all. It is not at all clear, at any rate, that religion could do much worse."

In a more deliberate mood, it is the paradox of religious faith "that the secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy" that Mr. Lasch finds applying no less to life without God than with him. And it is in William James' elegant (because at the same time homely) thought that "life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together" that Mr. Lasch finds consolation at the last.

Mr. Lasch would like to see a revival of American pragmatism, this and his political persona of populist ("for lack of a better term") suggesting to him that:

"A public philosophy for the twenty-first century will have to give more weight to the community than to the right of private decision. It will have to emphasize responsibilities rather than rights. It will have to find a better expression of the community than the welfare state. It will have to limit the scope of the market and the power of corporations without replacing them with a centralized state bureaucracy."

If the second half of that sounds like Swedish-styled social democracy, the front part is sterner and may be exemplified by Mr. Lasch's dim view of the pro-choice position on abortion inasmuch as "the privatization of morality is one more indication of the collapse of the community." The thought will suit conservative minds, but Mr. Lasch still is coming from the left, as becomes evident a few pages on when he

ON BOOKS
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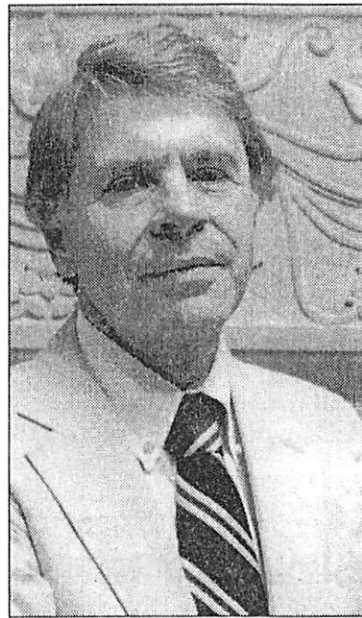
THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES: AND THE BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY
By Christopher Lasch
Norton, \$22, 276 pages

invokes the writer Ray Oldenburg to argue:

"[N]etworks . . . are anti-child . . . [and] elitist,' since most of them presuppose plenty of money and education, not to mention private transportation. They are designed, moreover, to shield people from the 'neighbors fate has put next door and across the way.'"

Is "fate" a word that can be expected to cut any ice in the therapeutic society? One could be forgiven for doubting it in an age of "skepticism indistinguishable from nihilism." But that is the test into which Mr. Lasch, in this often angry book, throws a lifetime of work.

The American tradition of populism is rooted in the notion of small-proprietorship as the foundation of citizenship. Mr. Lasch traces that story and more, in the course of which smallholders became hired employees and citizens became consumers. He notes the rise, willy nilly, of wealth and



Christopher Lasch's final book is wide ranging and forceful.

social class, and concurrently the withering of neighborhoods and institutions where different classes might meet as equals. He laments replacement of the early American resolve on the democratizing of competence by the shabbier notion of social mobility.

He casts a net wide enough to take in the usual sorry tales: school curricula rendered bland by the simultaneous success and failure of Horace Mann's innovations; university "canon" battles waged but without relevance to the needs of most students; journalism "professionalized" and an oral tradition of public debate reduced to TV reporters asking candidates questions and intruding themselves as obstacles between politicians and the people.

The revolting "Elite" of the title — here the author acknowledges debt to Mickey Kaus' book "The End of Equality" — are the perverse human harvest of the trends Mr. Lasch traces at least as far back as the late 19th century. Everyone knows who they are, this new aristocracy of specialists, the top 20 percent who, with the help of private schools, security guards and Federal Express, have all but severed relations with public life.

This elite, rather than the masses in Ortega y Gasset's vision of society, have become alienated and have given up the sense of responsibility for others on which the upper classes' defense of their privilege used to rest. Closing the resulting "chasm" between this elite and the rest of society is the job, practically (as opposed to spiritually) speaking, that Mr. Lasch sees as needing to be done and to which his book is directed.

The social forces presently at work do not promise much help. Mobility of capital, global markets and the migratory individual lives they encourage suit very well those who resent the intrusiveness and perceived narrow-mindedness of traditional community life. And resurgence of tribalism in other segments of the population only reinforce the elite's cosmopolitanism.

It is hard, even with the 104th Congress, to see how a 21st century as envisaged by Mr. Lasch might be achieved, unless some new plague strikes in such severity and causes so much despair that it triggers a mass spiritual conversion and revival. Mr. Lasch would not wish such a plague on us, one supposes. But he certainly understood well enough the straits we are in and the need for something new.