

{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the
University of Virginia

From Apprentice to Master: Christopher Lasch, Richard Hofstadter, and the Making of History as Social Criticism



Jeff Ludwig

Volume 44 (2011)

University of Rochester

[Y]ou begin to suspect that the appeal lies not just in what is obvious about Hofstadter— that he was a wonderful craftsman and writer endowed with a great gift for telling, phrasing formulations— but that his work had in some way, if it doesn't sound too pretentious to say this, some kind of mythic resonance.[1]

Like all other aspirants to the American historical profession, Christopher “Kit” Lasch (1932-94), began his career as a student. Unlike most would-be initiates, however, Lasch had the good fortune to win admission into the country’s then-premier graduate institution— Columbia University—in the middle 1950s, at the height of its reputation. There he encountered some of the most celebrated liberal minds of that era: Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, Robert Merton, and of course, Richard Hofstadter (1916-70). Hofstadter was the history department’s standard-bearer and superstar. His *American Political Tradition* (1948) and *Age of Reform* (1955) helped set the historiographical tone of a “Cold War consensus” intellectual climate. Hofstadter was, in other words, a master craftsman of history, the man under whom the most ambitious understudies enlisted for professional training. As his biographer notes, “His name and reputation attracted unusually large numbers of students seeking a distinguished sponsor for their work.” Hofstadter stood as the great polestar for an entire generation of disciples.[2]

Ironically, Lasch initially never sought to position himself among the many hopefuls waiting in line to become the next Hofstadter protégé. Instead he drifted into Columbia in the autumn of 1954 when he made the “curious choice” to “enroll in William Leuchtenburg’s seminar instead of Hofstadter’s,” in order to study the other man’s specialty, the New Deal. His formal ties established elsewhere, Lasch had limited contact with the busy Hofstadter—working one summer writing introductions to a collection of documents, *Great Issues in American History*—and yet their limited time together was enough. From the dint of the relationship Lasch forged with Hofstadter, one that was often real and occasionally imagined, he rose to a position approximating Hofstadter’s. During the last third of the twentieth century, Lasch assumed the role that Hofstadter had held in its middle decades: a major figure in the field whose influence extended beyond the profession. In

the prime of his career, Lasch developed an authoritative voice, publishing widely, on a myriad of subjects. He expounded most famously on a “culture of narcissism” gripping the country in the late 1970s (writings that inspired Jimmy Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech, for which Lasch personally, albeit awkwardly, briefed the President in 1979), warned of the false promises yoked to the dogma of progress, and reflected on the deleterious effects of elites in American life.[3]

In the wake of their brief time together in the summer of 1955, Hofstadter would single out Lasch for his natural talents. The scholar who coolly distanced himself from the packs of eager advisees displayed a passionate interest in the student who voluntarily stood outside the circles of enthusiastic admirers. Hofstadter gradually came to favor Lasch above all others, signaling the latter’s unrequested but greatly appreciated status of Hofstadter heir-apparent. And for nearly a decade, until the mid 1960s, Lasch played the role well: he defended his mentor from academic assaults and engaged in a style of historical writing that emulated Hofstadter’s own. He modeled his ascent into the role of historian as social critic on Hofstadter’s example. When Hofstadter died at the age of 54, his widow, Beatrice, tapped Lasch to be his official interpreter. Yet like so many of fiction’s classic apprentices, Lasch, already beset by growing doubts, broke ranks and turned on the master. After a long period of gestation and soul-searching during the seventies, he emerged in the 1980s as professional history’s anti-Hofstadter. Lasch conceived his last works, *The True and Only Heaven* (1991) and *Revolt of the Elites* (1995), in large part, as an effective counter-narrative of American history to Hofstadter’s *Age of Reform* and *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963).

Lasch’s transformation has much to tell us about American intellectual history, especially regarding the perils and promise, the cost and consequences, of engaging in politically-motivated scholarship. Dissidence, unorthodoxy, and political outspokenness have long posed risks for their would-be practitioners. From the Progressive historians of the early twentieth century, who ran afoul of the objectivity standards dominant in the profession, down to the scrutiny William Cronon has faced in our own time, intellectuals willing to drop the mask of neutrality and detachment to take firm stands on contemporary issues have faced

serious consequences for their actions. Within the historical profession (which has often proven adept at policing itself) and without (the university setting is nothing if not prone to external political and economic pressure), historians attempting to serve as social critics have faced an intimidating mass of hurdles: evisceration in peer review, ostracism, denial of tenure or promotion, unemployment, and, in Cronon's case, invasion of privacy and harassment not unlike the treatment received by his McCarthy-era predecessors.^[4]

Additionally, as Russell Jacoby has argued, the tendency toward “academic professionalization ... leads to privatization or depoliticization, a withdrawal of intellectual energy from a larger domain to a narrower discipline.” The driving force in academe over the last century, he continues, has been toward centralization of standards, methods, and practice. Jacoby notes that this professionalism has led scholars to increasingly specialize in small subfields, and to publish their esoteric findings only for their fellow experts. The penalties for doing otherwise, according to Jacoby, can be dire. “For the young intellectual to write for a general audience or periodical was ‘to risk being thought insufficiently serious,’” he observes, “[aspiring] junior faculty gained greater stature—and more likely access to tenure—for publishing articles in either their area or their disciplinary journals.” If Jacoby is to be believed, the very fact that Hofstadter and Lasch resisted this trend makes them the rarest of specimens in what Hofstadter referred to as “the genus *historicus*.”^[5]

Remarkably, however, while a good number of scholars have given Hofstadter and Lasch their respective dues, and though a handful make mention of the Hofstadter-Lasch relationship, none have offered an in-depth analysis of its significance. The making and breaking of Lasch's apprenticeship provides an illuminating lens through which to view his career, his milieu, and some of the most important ideas in circulation throughout the twentieth century.^[6]

Foremost of all, Lasch's relationship with Hofstadter set him down a path seldom taken by historians of his or any generation: that of using written history as an act of social criticism. Hofstadter stood out from his Columbia colleagues, and within his very generation of historians, as an exemplar of the possibilities of wedding history and social criticism

together. For him, these were not separate categories at all; they were one and the same. His books blended scholarship—a recounting of the past—in highly charged terms complete with clear implications for the present. From Hofstadter’s groundbreaking *American Political Tradition*, a scorching indictment of American democratic capitalism, to his *Age of Reform*, an assault on the dangers of mass movements, to his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), a withering history of popular resentment, and incursions, against the life of the mind, he animated his work with his beliefs and values. The same was true of his opinionated essays and articles, published in the very journals in which a young Lasch longed to write, and which dissected such contemporary issues as the rise of a “paranoid style” and “pseudo-conservative revolt” in the rise of the New Right. As one of his graduate students put it, Hofstadter embodied the “engaged intellectual, reflecting on his society, trying by the force of ideas and their expression to change it for the better.”^[7]

Hofstadter also reached a mass audience. His books won prizes and landed on bestseller lists, earning him a modest fortune in the offing. According to David Brown, “the rare combination of analytic genius and clever, even playful, prose made the release of a Hofstadter book a major literary event ... his star rising far above the firmament occupied by most historians, he became something of a public commodity— a historian engagé.” When Lasch first encountered him in the middle 1950s he found in Hofstadter an exciting figure, a model worthy of emulation for a career spent writing history that mattered and resonated deeply. In short, it was exactly what the young Lasch wanted to do with his life.^[8]

In the decades following his eventual apprenticeship, Lasch made a career out of appropriating Hofstadter’s style of history. Lasch’s range, evident in such books as his *The World of Nations* (1973), was considerable. He took part in almost every major cultural debate from the 1960s through the early 1990s, from feminism to foreign policy, religion to race, sports to sex. Little escaped the scope of his social criticism. As Lasch himself described the role he adopted: “It is less concerned with public policy, strictly speaking, or with day-to-day commentary on party politics or administrative detail. A social critic tries to catch the general drift of the times, to show how a particular incident or policy or a distinctive configuration of sentiments holds up a mirror to society, revealing patterns that otherwise might go undetected.”^[9]

Social criticism also made Lasch, like Hofstadter before him, that most uncommon of things: a professionally-trained historian who attracts a large public audience. He was read on a wide scale, far beyond the pale of specialized academic journals and university presses where most scholars dwell. “What I really wanted,” Lasch recalled of his early intellectual period

was to get into print and not just in academic journals either... [I had] a feeling that if this business was worth doing it was worth doing in part because you could enter into some larger conversations... it meant a redoubling of my efforts to write in such a way that somebody would hear it, that it might have some, however small, influence on the course of events that otherwise just seemed to be inexorably rolling along.

He succeeded to a remarkable degree. His literary output was not only published in an assortment of popular journals and by trade presses, but eventually landed him on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Lasch became a public intellectual and a household name. And, in the nearly two decades since his death, Lasch’s work continues to resonate with a modern readership still very much concerned with his main lines of social criticism: “elites,” “progress,” and “narcissism.” Lasch’s legacy and his corpus of books have remained very much alive amid the unsettling backdrop of the new century. As the historian Casey Blake noted recently, “With the euphoria over Barack Obama’s election giving way to the dreary old debates ... there is palpable excitement once again about Lasch’s work.”[\[10\]](#)

Although Lasch never wrote at length about his historiographical lineage in the way that Hofstadter did in such works as *The Progressive Historians* (1968), Lasch appreciated the gravity of his actions. Toward the end of his life, Lasch waxed often about his tangled struggle with the legacy of Hofstadter. Asked by one interviewer whether it was a fair point to describe “a good deal of your own work [as] a critical engagement with Hofstadter’s work,” Lasch replied “Absolutely.” Lasch continued by stating that “In many ways he was and remained the dominant figure on my intellectual horizon.” In another interview, Lasch confessed that “It took me a whole lifetime to come to terms with this guy’s work.” His own career cut tragically short, Lasch indeed spent much of it wrestling the specter of Hofstadter. The dialogue with his old mentor shaped the contours of the sort of historian he would become.[\[11\]](#)

The act of breaking the apprentice's bonds has germane precedent in the annals of the historical profession. Hofstadter himself committed what Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called "symbolic acts of parricide." In his case, the master figure was Charles Beard, the prolific Progressive historian whose hard-biting economic determinism cast a large shadow over Hofstadter's 1930s student years. So sweeping was his influence then, Hofstadter remembered, that "all American history seemed to dance to Beard's tune." The tune happened to be seductively easy to move in step with: American history as a series of conflicts, charged by economic interests, between the ruling elite and the ruled masses. Venerable groups like the Founding Fathers turned out to be a creditor minority pushing the Constitution to shore up its financial interests against a debtor majority. The true legacy of democracy lay in the hands of "the people," the farmers, debtors, and workers willing to fight this injustice.[\[12\]](#)

Hofstadter sympathized with the Beardian vision during his youth. Although Beard had vacated the academic world in 1917 after a bitter civil liberties feud with the administration of Columbia, Hofstadter enrolled there as a graduate student in 1936 to apply himself as a vicarious apprentice. He did not have to do it alone. The Beardian apostle (and Columbia professor) Merle Curti embraced Hofstadter as a pupil and encouraged him to apply Beard's constructs in his own historical writing. Curti grounded his course readings in Beard and Vernon Parrington, another Progressive scholar who divided history into two halves: Jeffersonian liberals (and "the people") and Hamiltonian conservatives (and "the interests"). Hofstadter cut his historian's teeth on these sources, reveling both in their accusatory language and their championing of liberal mass movements. "For those of us who were young in the 1930s and who responded to the democratic idealism of the Progressive tradition," Hofstadter noted years later, "this enthusiasm is easy to recall." In one burst of excitement, Hofstadter sought out the advice of Progressive history's guiding light directly. He wrote a letter to Beard's Connecticut home asking the dairy-farmer sage about the antebellum political economy. Hofstadter kept the lengthy reply he received, no doubt treasuring it.[\[13\]](#)

Nearly from the beginning, however, Hofstadter also nursed his share of doubt about Beard's perspective. By the early 1940s he began his

withdrawal. True, his 1942 dissertation and his next book, the career-launching *American Political Tradition*, still bore traces of the Beardian influence. Like Beard, Hofstadter held that “politics could be explained primarily in terms of rational self-interest”; like Beard, he portrayed the Founding Fathers “as economic realists trying to protect their financial interests from the depredations of ‘aggressive dirt farmers’ and ‘the propertyless masses of the towns.’” Nonetheless, the first stress lines of the Beard-Hofstadter split were showing. Hofstadter’s *American Political Tradition*, a scathing indictment of a “democracy in cupidity” was bereft of the themes of conflict so prominent in Beard’s work. Greed and opportunism were ubiquitous in American political history, passed on from generation to generation of iconic leaders, and never seriously challenged. In essence, while Hofstadter agreed with Beard that men like the Framers were driven by basic economic opportunism, he found no evidence that an oppositional group of farmers or debtors stood against an uninterrupted tradition of capitalism, exploitation, and the rhetoric of individualism. There were no white hats and black hats, in other words, only Americans. Hofstadter the apprentice was moving out of the master’s workshop.^[14]

The separation was complete by the start of the next decade. Hired as a professor at Columbia, Hofstadter spent the 1950s and 1960s in constant conversation with Beard’s works in order to refute them. *Age of Reform* and *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* were stripped of any remaining semblances of Progressive historiography. Rather than objects of scorn, the ruling liberal elites in postwar America, as well as the intellectuals supporting them, were vaulted to preeminent status. Hofstadter reserved his invective for potential sources of conflict or disruption, especially any portent of mass democratic movements. He defended the status quo, and, in effect, became the anti-Beard.

Hofstadter’s decision to turn on Beard was a momentous and fully-conscious one. It occasioned a considerable amount of his energies for open reflection. *Progressive Historians* justified his decision for posterity, and for himself. In prefacing the work, Hofstadter memorably framed the mission of the rebellious apprentice:

A good deal of what has gone into this book is then a reprise of that perennial battle we wage with our elders, particularly with our adopted intellectual fathers. If we are to have any new thoughts of our own, we

must make the effort to distinguish ourselves from those who preceded us, and perhaps pre-eminently from those to whom we once had the greatest indebtedness.

Hofstadter waged a perennial battle with Beard (who received the lion's share of attention in the book). Through his efforts, the beat of American history came to follow a different maestro. From mid-century onward, historians swayed to Hofstadter's tune.[\[15\]](#)

Such was the world Christopher Lasch entered in 1954. He arrived in New York City by way of Harvard University and a Midwestern upbringing (he called Omaha, and then Chicago his childhood homes) in a household governed by progressive-intellectual parents. The road to the historical vocation had been full of detours: Lasch first flirted with the idea of becoming a novelist or journalist before settling on the historian's craft. "When I was a [college] senior I still didn't know what I wanted to do," he recounted, "The only thing that I knew at that point was that I wanted to be a writer ... I went to graduate school at the last minute." Initially, it was a disappointing choice. He left the tutorials of Harvard expecting to embark on an exciting journey of the mind only to land in a bog of tedious professionalization. Referring to his graduate education as "those dark years," he begrudgingly wrapped himself in the task of learning the discipline's ropes and studying for oral examinations.[\[16\]](#)

Despite his personal frustrations, these years were hardly a wash. Lasch married Nell Commager, the daughter of Columbia historian Henry Steele Commager, successfully earned his M.A. within two years of residence, and found teaching work to supplement his income while he labored on his dissertation. He also struck up a close friendship with his adviser, Leuchtenburg, who became one of his key supporters. As if these accomplishments were not enough to draw the envy of his peers, Lasch achieved the impossible: he cracked through the thick armor of Richard Hofstadter.

This achievement was no small feat. While he was a charming writer and a generous colleague, Hofstadter had a notorious reputation for detachment among Columbia graduate students: he could be prickly, standoffish, and indifferent to his throngs of student dependents. Seen as

“an aloof figure who worked behind a secretary and closed door,” he regularly “called students by their last names and read his mail while conducting mentoring sessions.” Few of his devotees, in other words, garnered the closeness or affection they coveted. The bitterness of the excluded was palpable, a reoccurring muttering noise echoed throughout the corridors of Hamilton Hall.[17]

But Lasch was different. Seemingly without effort, he won the favor of the taciturn giant. Oddly, through the twists of the department’s course scheduling, Lasch never so much as audited a lecture course from Hofstadter. Instead, he first genuinely encountered the man in 1955 when he applied for, and was accepted, as his summer research assistant.

Lasch was not oblivious to the senior scholar beforehand. Much like Hofstadter’s emergence in the Beard-dominated 1930s, Lasch matured as a historian in a 1950s climate shaped by what has been called “the Hofstadter aegis.” The historiographical scene shifted due to the collective efforts of a generation of historians following Hofstadter’s charge against Beard. Their assault on the Progressive model is well-chronicled, traced in great detail by historians like John Higham and Peter Novick. In sum, the rise of the “consensus” school was the product of the Second World War and early Cold War, a time fraught with nuclear tension when scholars downplayed the old themes of conflict. Horrified by the atrocities revealed in totalitarian systems after World War Two, many former radicals and communists clammed up and entered the fold of the Democratic Party’s post New Deal liberalism. They eschewed utopian dreams for discourses on “the end of ideology” and the “vital center.” Their American history of choice told the story of safe, stable continuity.[18]

For most intellectuals of the period, Hofstadter recorded, “The Cold War brought a certain closing of the ranks, a disposition to stress common objectives, a revulsion from Marxism.” An age of general consensus, caused in part by the return of economic prosperity as well as by national recoil from statism in the face of European totalitarianism, settled over the land after World War Two. While many Democrats moved to fortify the legacy of the New Deal, few leaders advocated building any massive new programs along the lines of Social Security. A new mood of cautionary withdrawal—espoused even by those who counted themselves radicals and communists during the 1930s—

replaced the liberal experimentalism of the New Deal. “Even the bomb,” Hofstadter added, “the most disquieting reality of the era, set in motion a current of conservatism, insofar as it made men think of political change with a new wariness and cling to what they had.” The opposite was true of foreign policy. Democrats and Republicans alike joined forces to construct a national security state and to rally behind an aggressive foreign policy containment strategy. They also teamed up to repress dissidents at home. American communists, relatively plentiful and reasonably tolerated in the thirties, were harassed and prosecuted during the ensuing decades. The entire country, or so it seemed at times, was experiencing what historian Alan Brinkley called “the end of reform.”^[19]

For his part, Hofstadter never embraced the full consensus zeitgeist. He called his *American Political Tradition* “a young man’s book” for its critical edginess. In its pages he fumed against the way that corporate capitalism continued to mask itself in an obsolete rhetoric of individualism and competition. The biographical profiles of political elites like Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, Hoover, and the two Roosevelts were laced with disgust and felicitous turns-of-phrase: Jefferson is “The Aristocrat as Democrat,” Teddy Roosevelt, “the master therapist of the middle class,” and so on. Adding to the effect, Hofstadter’s vignettes delved into the seamy personalities of his tradition-makers. He demystified them by painting unflattering portraits of their idiosyncratic flaws. (Lincoln turns out to be a shifty backwoodsman who uses the law and politics to escape his low station, while Teddy Roosevelt’s muscular nationalism compensates for a childhood of being bullied). The tabloid-esque, exposé style generated unimaginable success for its author.^[20]

Undeniably, however, Hofstadter did scale back his critique in the ensuing years, transplanting his scorn. Deeply disturbed by McCarthyism in the early 1950s, he increasingly gave political elites a pass while ridiculing the sources of this “reactionary” impulse. The release of his next major book, *Age of Reform*, targeted a new source of danger—the populism of mass movements. Its publication date in 1955 coincided with the appearance of his new summer research assistant.

For all of his repositioning, Hofstadter could not undo the style of social criticism unleashed in *American Political Tradition*. Lasch was one of countless young men and women ensnared by its witty, ruthless prose.

He first read it as an undergraduate and seized upon the work “as a wonderful model ... of what historical writing was and what standards you ought to aspire to.” If Lasch joined a full chorus of admiration for the authorial Hofstadter, he was part of a select few granted access to the man behind the books. Indeed, had any of his peers overheard him complain about his “dark years,” Lasch would have incited nothing less than pure indignation.[21]

During their summer session together, Hofstadter pushed Lasch’s writing abilities to the limit. Tasked with the ostensibly straightforward assignment of composing short introductions to sections of documents, Lasch found all of his assumptions about good prose challenged. Since the project would ultimately bear his name, Hofstadter treated the writing to especially heavy-handed scrutiny. Or at least Lasch certainly thought so. When Hofstadter received a draft, “He proceeded in a gentle but devastating way, making you see how evasive what you’d written was, how much it depended on rhetoric to patch over weaknesses in your argument. He made me see that I’d failed even to convey in a descriptive way the issues at stake, how utterly I’d failed in any proper sense to introduce these documents.” His pride’s cost proved his style’s gain. The personal attention that Hofstadter gave his writing *almost* made graduate school worthwhile after all. Thinking back, Lasch confessed that “I learned more from his dissection of my drafts than I learned from most of my courses.”[22]

Hofstadter enjoyed working with Lasch too. He bridged the formal boundaries separating student from teacher in the second letter he wrote to him, inviting Lasch to join the exclusive club of historians. Dropping the stuffy “Mr. Lasch” in his salutation, Hofstadter switched to the historian’s favorite device for expressing familiarity in the bygone age of letter-writing. He began his future letters “Dear Lasch,” and eventually, “Dear Kit.” The letters themselves were brimming with support and encouragement for Lasch, an uncharacteristic move for Richard “Closed Door” Hofstadter. As Lasch geared up for a second try on his oral exams, Hofstadter sent him a note of endorsement. “Good luck with your orals,” he winked, “The important thing is to remember that your committee is dying to pass you and will only want to be given some small excuse.”[23]

Lasch appreciated Hofstadter’s interest and began openly to embrace the role of understudy. He solicited Hofstadter for dissertation advice in 1957

and received a supportive reply— “I am inclined to be very high on the idea.” And whenever he applied for grants or teaching jobs, Hofstadter always came through with a strong letter of recommendation. On his end, Hofstadter seemed pleased to be investing in such a promising talent. He saw in Lasch a bright star on the rise, an ideal candidate to mold into an apprentice. After finishing one glowing letter on Lasch’s behalf, he clued the younger man in to his high opinion of him. “I just wrote the SSRC, told them I haven’t seen a better PhD prospect in a dozen yrs at Columbia,” he beamed, “which is true.” The fellowship came through to boot.[24]

Whether Lasch was comfortable as Hofstadter’s clear favorite mattered little at the time. For all of Hofstadter’s whisperings about his great potential, he was still a Leuchtenburg student with a dissertation to write. The final product, *American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (1962) never satisfied him. Though it stands as an important first step in Lasch’s career-long engagement with the failed promise of the American Left, its arguments, according to one observer, were “sunk (if not lost) in a work that was dense with archival references.” Decades later, Lasch attributed the flatness of the dissertation to Columbia’s unwavering mandate for professionalism. The department, Lasch felt, required him to put documentation before argument. His own advisor insisted on the standard. “*American Liberals* reflects my training under Leuchtenburg,” he explained in 1993, “And in a way the inappropriateness of the training.” Lasch needed a different kind of training, and, fortunately, he knew just where to look.[25]

Free from Columbia and the department’s standards, Lasch cemented his affinity with Hofstadter. As he searched for a teaching job in the early 1960s, Lasch cast off the confining impositions of his professional education. He rejected the professional creeds of “objective, neutral” research and swore off conducting fact-finding missions altogether. In their stead, he rebuilt himself in Hofstadter’s image. He became a determined historian-social critic. And, as Kevin Mattson notes, despite the differences that eventually divided them, “there was always something they had in common: the idea that critics needed a strong command over the past but also the capacity to explain its relevance to a wider public.” Lasch spent the rest of his life using history both to alert a

public audience about pressing modern problems and (less frequently) to persuade his readers to consider alternative courses of action.[26]

Hofstadter was the obvious model to follow, and Lasch resumed his apprenticeship from afar at the University of Iowa. He was thirty years old when he published *American Liberals* in 1962, and, though he had a jumble of ideas for future projects, Lasch had no sure direction other than social criticism. The haziest of general outlines for another work on the Left loomed before him, but the vision refused to materialize clearly. In part, this was because Lasch's own politics were confused. He had misgivings about Cold War liberalism, especially after Eisenhower admitted flying U-2 spy planes over the Soviet Union, but he saw no alternative. "Like others of the day," a biographer notes, "he had little to offer by way of a counter-vision; in its place he could only deliver a relentless debunking and complicating of the received progressive story line." Even if not personally satisfying, that kind of work helped connect with Hofstadter.[27]

Indeed, Lasch's relationship with Hofstadter was rekindled by a shared sense of purpose. For a short time in the early and mid sixties, their worldviews aligned. As Lasch mulled over a series of aborted projects, his politics were just under-developed enough to place him in league with a mentor who was just barely liberal enough. Residual loyalty picked up the slack. When Norman Pollack attacked Hofstadter's interpretation of agrarian radicalism, Lasch rose to his aid. He used one of his first published book reviews to denounce Pollack's incendiary book, *Populist Response* (1962) and protect *Age of Reform*. Ironically, in light of his own later work, Lasch criticized Pollack for "trying merely to rehabilitate Populism" along useful modern lines instead of making any effort to explain it. Hofstadter, he implied, also crafted a useable past but was more scrupulous in his methods whereas "Pollack is almost endlessly willing to manipulate historical evidence to suit his own convenience." This was a fine line of distinction to draw— scholarly honesty— especially for an aspiring social critic but one that Lasch insisted upon nonetheless. [28]

In private exchanges Lasch defended Hofstadter more adamantly. He took considerable umbrage when careless historians lumped Hofstadter into the school of "consensus history." Lasch doubted the very utility of the term, especially when applied to his former mentor. "[I] object to the

reference to ‘the great celebration’ of the vital center,’ if that is meant to extend to Hofstadter,” he chided in one 1963 letter. “Surely nobody could have been further from celebrating the vital center.” Far from it, Lasch countered, Hofstadter’s critical books “put him in a quite old and honored American tradition of dissent.” Revisionists like Pollack did Hofstadter a grave injustice when they sought to supplant his work for no better reason than their distaste for his conclusions. Worse, Lasch charged, historians like Pollack deliberately misread Hofstadter, falsely fastening “the ‘consensus’ idea” into ideological “dogma” and then launching an assault at the straw man they created. It sickened him to behold; “all the abuse of Hofstadter strikes me as leaving us historians absolutely nowhere,” he argued. What was needed was better history, not angrier, partisan history: social criticism with a conscience.[29]

The defense did not go unnoticed, either by Hofstadter or Lasch’s younger colleagues. His friend Staughton Lynd openly feared “that Lasch was joining forces with Hofstadter,” and the perception became widespread. Hofstadter, too, recognized the symbolic import of Lasch’s action. Perhaps he held this gesture close in mind as he pondered how best to advise the apprentice who wanted to be a social critic.[30]

For Hofstadter, Lasch was always an exceptional case. As a rule, the Columbia scholar actively discouraged his students from donning the mantle of critic. While he thrived and survived on the power of his prose, he had witnessed too many of his students struggle to survive in the profession when they attempted to replicate his approach. He forced them, therefore, to conduct primary archival research, while he avoided it; he steered students toward “safe” dissertation topics while he wrote provocative books. In the few instances in which he had done otherwise—for example, in the case of Stanley Elkins—his PhDs had suffered. It might be tolerable for Hofstadter to skim through secondary sources and conjure up a bold, critical synthesis, but he permitted his students no such luxury. When Elkins attempted social criticism with *Slavery* (1959), critics panned the book for “the impressionistic and lightly researched quality of his work.” He had even been dismissed from his teaching position. So, the question arose, what to do with Lasch? Was it worth letting one of his best pupils take the risk?[31]

In the end, Hofstadter gave Lasch his blessing. He also provided that other essential commodity: opportunity. Fortuitously, in 1962 the

prestigious Alfred Knopf publishing house hired Hofstadter as a recruiter. He immediately set his sights on Lasch. Once again, Hofstadter plied his former assistant with kind words. Praising the prose quality of *American Liberals*, he lauded that “you write so well that one cannot pick up so much as a paragraph at random of the book without seeing something distinctive and remarkable just in the way of style.” These were high marks from the tough stylistic taskmaster. Lasch wrote back immediately, practically blushing as he affirmed his interest in signing on with Knopf.[32]

The difficulty, for Lasch, remained his lack of focus. He had a multitude of writing ideas in the pipeline: a short manuscript on Jane Addams, a book on “the women’s problem,” and a textbook survey of 1877-1913. But none of them seemed quite right. Subsequently, just as he did when fishing for dissertation topics, Lasch looked to Hofstadter as a sounding board. “What would you say to a book on Progressivism by me,” he asked, “I have in mind a series of biographical essays.” The prosopographic work would be open-ended, based on secondary reading (and light manuscript research he had already done), and socially critical. In short, it sounded very much like *American Political Tradition*. The idea scared Lasch. “I’m an unknown author,” he fretted, and, before embarking on a project sure to draw fire, he wanted the approval of the senior scholar. Hofstadter, who had already assured Lasch that “anything you turned your hand to would be worth having a look at,” was happy to oblige. He deemed the proposed collection of biographical essays “A splendid idea!” Before Lasch had so much as written the first word, in fact, Hofstadter went ahead and “enthusiastically” sold the project to Alfred Knopf himself. Thanks to Hofstadter’s praise and pressure, the wheels were in motion. Lasch finally had a stage on which to perform as a social critic.[33]

Not wanting to disappoint his mentor-sponsor, Lasch capitalized on the moment and threw himself into writing. In a frenzy of productivity, he completed a full draft in nine months. The book, *New Radicalism* (1965), ignited Lasch’s career. It also marked the apogee of his apprenticeship to Hofstadter. The period in which he wrote the book—the middle of 1963 through early 1964—coincided with their most intense phase of friendship. Lasch wrote to Hofstadter regularly, often several times a month, as he typed away in a secluded English cottage where he spent a

year on leave. He was usually rewarded with replies brimming with positive feedback. When he approached the point of finishing, Lasch asked for one more favor: “I would like very much for you to read the whole manuscript.” Hofstadter’s response was characteristically gracious — he “would be glad” to offer his touches.[34]

As it happened, *New Radicalism* did not need Hofstadter’s editorial touch, for it already had his fingerprints all over it. Or at least it bore the imprimatur of the 1948 Hofstadter. While Lasch called it a generally “very imitative book,” *New Radicalism* resembled *American Political Tradition* to a far greater extent than Hofstadter’s more recent work. Indeed, it would be apt to call it, as historian Richard Fox suggests, the next generation’s “young man’s book.”[35]

Lasch picked up where the young Hofstadter left off, pithily exposing the dark side of revered figures through a series of short biographies. Using Hofstadter as a stylistic model, he indulged his penchant for “novel-esque” writing and gave himself a free hand in a “psychoanalytic” dissection of personalities. (And, taking Hofstadter as a model, he combined bold arguments with thin research and notation). If Hofstadter’s Roosevelt was the bullied boy grown into a jingoist, Lasch’s Randolph Bourne personified the sad story of perpetual adolescence. Bourne is the man who refuses to stop living like a college boy, clinging to old friendships and student patterns of life with a pathetic dependency. Mustering little sympathy for Bourne (or anyone else), Lasch’s voice as a narrator sounded every bit as harsh as Hofstadter’s. Neither redeemed much from their assorted casts of characters.[36]

The argument and purpose behind *New Radicalism* complimented the main thrust of *American Political Tradition*. Although both books lined up a number of characters, their true target was corporate capitalism. The pair of historian social critics traced modern inequalities back to this source and indicted the individuals who allowed it to prosper.

For his part, Hofstadter savaged a political tradition of unremitting greed from Jefferson to F.D.R. While none were spared his withering gaze (save the abolitionist agitator Wendell Phillips), he held Lincoln and the post-Lincoln elites particularly culpable for perpetuating the ethos of self-made men in the age of corporate ascendancy. The worst villains, then, were the men who propped up the old mores of individualism and

competition in the face of business consolidation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They blew the last chance for democratic resistance before corporate, consumer capitalism grafted itself on the very fabric of the country. Sensing the rampant changes transforming their society, elites were complicit in ushering in its final manifestation by refusing to change course. Instead, men like Theodore Roosevelt, “the Conservative as Progressive,” offered only the illusion of action. The master of sham reform, his presidency helped “‘save’ the masters of capital from their own stupid obstinacy ... there was a hundred times more noise than accomplishment.” When the curtain went down on his noisy, distracting show, corporate capitalism, redressed in cheap costume jewelry, took a triumphant bow.[37]

Lasch centered on this same crucial period, offering an intellectual and cultural narrative to accompany the political story. The “new radicals” who populate his pages are, at various points, both the unwitting dupes and the willing partners of the new industrial order. Though defined only vaguely, they are essentially prototypes of the modern intellectual. A relatively new breed of people, they took shape as a class when the older bonds of society broke down “into its component parts” during the late nineteenth century, that is, when the political economy changed into its corporate form. The men and women who constituted this new “social type” played into the hands of phony reformers. They accepted artifice and show as legitimate modes of radicalism, effectively ceding the game to corporate capitalism. Worse, the “new radicals” confused cultural and political reform. They defined reform “as the improvement of the quality of American culture as a whole, rather than simply a way of equalizing the opportunity for economic self-advancement.” It was an effort just as misguided and harmful as the politics of individualism in Hofstadter’s political tradition.[38]

Lasch’s earliest “new radicals” were a rather hapless lot. Jane Addams, Randolph Bourne, Mabel Luhan, and their ilk come of age in the thick of a changing culture. Unable to live in their parents’ lost patriarchal worlds, they have no bearings on life and complain constantly about the unreality of existence and “the sense of living at second hand.” Yet, lacking the will to work for substantial change, they coped as individuals by tapping into a “cult of experience.” The “new radicals” clamored after anything and everything that promised to deliver “real life.” Searching

for cultural liberation, they attacked Victorian mores of decorum and left capitalism alone. For Lasch in 1964, as for Hofstadter in 1948, this kind of “noise” was a cheap substitution for direct political action.[39]

As the “new radicals” matured, they also developed a nasty streak. A long line of intellectuals from John Dewey to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. discovered power to be a rich source of “real life” experience. At their worst, they longed to dominate others. Dewey’s education programs and Addams’ Hull House activities took on an eerie glow as twisted strategies of indoctrination bordering on “a technique of totalitarian control.” Closer to Lasch’s own time, the intellectuals—now Cold War liberals and no longer radical—traded in their autonomy for a part of the action. The intellectuals of the 1950s and the 1960s, risen “to the status of the privileged class,” sold out completely to businesses and politicians. Serving as advisors near the seats of power, they became elites themselves. If the “new radicals” were guilty of wrongheaded cultural reform, modern intellectuals committed a greater sin. They looked an unjust corporate capitalist regime in the eyes and smiled as they shook its hand.[40]

Lasch worried that—more than any other part of *New Radicalism*—his assault on modern intellectuals (his sharpest point of social criticism) might strike a nerve with Hofstadter. Tucked away in the last chapter of the volume, Lasch drafted “The Anti-Intellectualism of the Intellectuals” shortly after the release of Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. The latter, a Pulitzer Prize winning book, showed a clear retreat from its author’s 1948 position. Indeed, Hofstadter’s latest work accelerated the trends begun in the closing pages of *Age of Reform*: a defense of the New Deal order as a “drastic departure” from the despised political tradition that ran from Jefferson to Hoover. The key difference between the two traditions, Hofstadter came to argue, was the faith the newer one invested in managerial, intellectual experts like Thurman Arnold to run the government. Rather than the parasites that Lasch suggested they were, Hofstadter believed privileged intellectuals held the solution to a better democracy. He never attacked elites again. Instead, works like *Age of Reform* and *Anti-Intellectualism* defended the modern intellectual class from the resentful, ill-informed masses. “[T]he unstable nature of popular power concerned Hofstadter,” according to David Brown, “and he cleaved to the idea that a metropolitan led democracy

operating under the useful constraints of a traditional two-party system, offered talented thinkers their best chance to deflect public passions.” Lasch agreed that this was exactly what intellectuals since Jane Addams had been doing, but he was much less sanguine about their intentions. Rather than deflecting public passions, Lasch accused new radical intellectuals of strangling them.^[41]

Lasch tailored his devastating critique of intellectuals to be as courteous as possible toward Hofstadter. While similar Cold War liberals like Schlesinger Jr. were taken behind the woodshed, his mentor was spared. Hofstadter’s name was conspicuously absent from the scathing chapter. Still, Lasch went into full damage control mode before *New Radicalism* hit the presses. Bracing his mentor, he confessed to worrying openly that “you would not like this book very much.” With the last chapter weighing heavily on his mind, Lasch reaffirmed his loyalty to Hofstadter: “The whole subject 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 *Age of Reform*. I have tried to acknowledge very explicitly, in what I have written, how much I owe to these books.” The apprentice wanted to remain in the master’s good graces.^[42]

No blowback ever came. Hofstadter took his implicit lumps in *New Radicalism* magnanimously. More than that, he sang its praises. At just the moment that the first rumblings of book reviews (many of them hostile) started rolling in, Hofstadter sent Lasch his reassurances. It was “a remarkable book and a delight to read,” he congratulated. He admired the crisp narrative prose, which, he confessed, “strengthens my belief, based on your first book, that you write better than most of the top-ranking historians in the country today, whether of your generation or any other.” Hofstadter had no doubt that the book was destined for greatness. “The book can be read with great pleasure and profit by someone who happens not to agree with your central point, and ... I think you will still find people reading it when you are an old man.” As if Hofstadter’s flattery were not enough, he went a step farther in his fondness toward Lasch. He reached out to Lasch’s parents, telling them that he and his wife “call themselves Kit’s god-parents.” Lasch’s mother reported back to her son that she was especially touched by Hofstadter’s

words. “Certainly,” she wrote him, “no real god-parents could be [more] devoted to a god-son.”[\[43\]](#)

As *New Radicalism* wound its way through the editorial process during the summer of 1964, Lasch and Hofstadter sent it out in grand style. Almost ten years after their original meeting, the allegiance between the two of them had never been stronger. Lasch accepted the invitation to stay with the Hofstadter family in their Cape Cod summer home, an exceptional offer not easily extended by the man who placed a premium on his privacy. Hofstadter broke another of his self-imposed rules for Lasch when he offered to write a promotional blurb for the cover of *New Radicalism*, an act he performed only twice in his entire career. It was a gesture of supreme friendship, perhaps decided upon as Hofstadter drove the young man around the New England beach roads. As they headed back to their respective campuses for the coming academic year, their future together looked incredibly bright. But though they did not know it, this moment marked their partnership at high tide.[\[44\]](#)

Before Lasch’s return to America in May 1964, a colleague wrote to warn him to prepare for “a different country from the one you left.” The national trauma of John Kennedy’s death was just the tip of the iceberg. As one historian has observed “Kennedy’s assassination symbolically ushered in a new era of restlessness into the lives of the American people ... a new age in the nation’s history was unfolding. The national mood was undergoing rapid transformations, as witnessed by the popular Bob Dylan tune, “The Times They Are A-Changin.” The long calm of the Cold War consensus—or the “long fifties”—a historical phase, scholars remind us, generally traced from the immediate postwar years through the early sixties, was cracking along several fault lines. A confluence of causal events wrought the dramatic sea changes: the escalation of American troop commitment in Vietnam; the rising momentum and publicity of the Civil Rights movements, which in 1963 saw the March on Washington, the jailing of Martin Luther King as well as his “I have a dream speech,” and the integration of the University of Alabama over George Wallace’s vehement objections; a new wave of feminism catalyzed by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (1963); competing cross-currents of New Left and New Right political groups, each gaining in numbers; a cultural revolution sparked by boisterous rock-and-roll

music. Where once the nation seemed united in a midcentury, consensus-driven “quest for uniformity,” it now appeared rent with fractiousness and division.[45]

Lasch noticed these changes right away as he resettled in the United States during the summer and fall of 1964. Along with most of his contemporary intellectuals, he was struck by the rapid dissolution of consensus liberalism, the school of thought which had dominated the American zeitgeist for so long. The consensus as a general persuasion—supportive of global anti-communism, respectful of reformed (by the New Deal) democratic capitalism, and informed, as Lasch put it, by a chastened “end of ideology” realism—had monopolized the American intellectual landscape for a generation. Bound to the abstract logic and rhetoric of an anti-communist crusading foreign policy, of domino theory and containment, it faltered in the tangled realities of Vietnam. As Lasch noted in the mid-1960s, “the war in Vietnam shattered the Cold War coalition, and introduced a new phase in American politics.” What exactly the new phase would look like was as yet unclear. The fall of consensus created a vacuum in intellectual and political life, inaugurating a scrambling competition between new visions—New Left, New Right, countercultural, neoconservative etc.—to fill it.[46]

If the middle and late 1960s were trying times for Cold War liberalism, it was an especially tough period for the Hofstadter-Lasch relationship, which only years before had given the impression of stability and permanence. In their parallel heydays, both the postwar “vital center” and the social criticism apprenticeship appeared insurmountably rock-solid. Neither survived the crucible of the cracked consensus. In retrospect, one can see visible seams in the Hofstadter-Lasch apprenticeship even at its zenith. It began to unravel, slowly but steadily, as the “vital center” collapsed. Their correspondence dropped off almost entirely after the publication of *New Radicalism*. In fact, Lasch contacted Hofstadter only once between the year of the book’s release and the latter’s death in 1970. (The occasion: another request for a letters of recommendation for fellowships. Hofstadter’s generosity never flagged —“But of course!” he replied). The two, apparently, preferred to let their friendship fade out quietly rather than risk snapping apart in open conflict.[47]

An explanation for their abrupt parting of ways can be found in the social forces that disrupted the long calm of the Cold War consensus. At the release of *New Radicalism* in 1965, the national reverberations were already beginning. Anti-Vietnam sentiment exploded into a genuine protest movement; the first sit-ins on lush, green college campuses previewed the greater student aggression to come; political radicalism—on the Left and Right—sprung into serious action for the first time since the dawn of the Cold War; the rumblings of the counterculture grew ever louder. The whole explosion appeared to tear the country into generational camps. Youth rebelled against their elders, rejecting, however ambivalently, the costs and sacrifices asked of a consumer's republic and containment foreign policy, which they had known since birth. The Cold War sensibilities of moderation and national unity of the middle-aged were rejected by the children raised in comfortable suburbs.

Hofstadter and Lasch were not immune to these generation-splitting impulses. The former responded by moving ever farther from the anti-establishment tone of *American Political Tradition*. Instead, Hofstadter continued down the path of *Anti-Intellectualism*, defending the Cold War liberal order as the best of all possible worlds. He saw the barbarians at the gates not as spoiled complainers from the suburbs but as the masses whipped into an uncontrollable frenzy (just as they had been in the days of Populism, Prohibition and Scopes, and McCarthy). He maintained that the only way to tame the beast “required democracy's ready deferral to intellect.” That is, he focused his energy on the area where he and Lasch had always differed most: the argument that intellectuals were democracy's last best hope, that it took an elite army of educated experts and professionals to save the people from their own self-destructive tendencies. Hofstadter contrasted real “political intelligence,” usually congregated in multi-ethnic cities, with the suspicious “fundamentalist mind” of the anti-intellectual masses from the provinces. And, he became something of a symbol for his brand of liberalism. When Columbia convulsed with student radicals in 1968, he faced them down on behalf of the older faculty. He gave the 1968 commencement address to the university graduates, urging them to temper their combativeness and come back to the table—where the old Left would compromise with them—before they destroyed everything

liberals had worked for since the New Deal. They would reject his proposal.^[48]

Lasch headed in the opposite direction, also pushing hard at the one chink in the armor of his apprenticeship that he and Hofstadter had always managed to patch over. While Hofstadter made his stand with the Cold War Left, *New Radicalism* turned Lasch into a darling of the still-forming radical New Left. Teach-in organizers and student groups flooded him with requests for guest lectures and speaking appearances. He participated as much as his schedule allowed, encouraged that these activities planted the seeds from which “an effective left can take shape.” As convinced as ever that the Cold War liberalism defended by the intellectuals was in bed with big business and a swollen military bureaucracy, Lasch wanted to regenerate leftist politics, not compromise with the sell-outs. He continued to attack the guilty intellectuals, condemning them for destroying democracy by going along for the disastrous ride with their State Department funders and corporate sponsors. In numerous journal essays, some of them collected in *Agony of the American Left* (1969) and *World of Nations* (1973), he raked them over the coals. “The Cold War intellectuals,” he fumed, “revealed themselves to be the servants of bureaucratic power.” It was an unforgiveable sin; they had to be stopped.^[49]

Despite the rapidity of their separation, however, Hofstadter and Lasch never pitted themselves against each other directly. They had no ultimate showdown or relationship-ending confrontation. Quite the contrary, they left each other out of their various diatribes. Just as he had in *New Radicalism*, Lasch took delicate steps not to implicate Hofstadter in *Agony*. His long railing chapter against the Cold War intellectuals again left Hofstadter’s name out; no coincidence in an attack aimed at virtually every other major player in the camp.

Old affection and gratitude still ran strong, whatever sense of personal disappointment either man felt for the other’s intransigence. Hofstadter would never return to his 1948 mode of criticism, and Lasch intended to sprint out in that direction at full throttle. Although the apprenticeship effectively ended here—Lasch was not to be Hofstadter’s great protégé—they had not lost all common ground. As the 1960s drew to a close, the pair found themselves united in disapproval of student radicalism. Campus protests spiraled seemingly out of control by the late sixties,

moving away from teach-ins and colloquia and into a phase of militant destruction. Neither could brook the violent turn of ransacked offices, brutal building occupation tactics, or threats to the personal safety of professors and administrators. Both men sternly criticized the student Left for defiling the nation's only true sanctum for free thought.

It was comforting to know that they still shared an important position. Lasch embraced it as an opportunity to restart their friendship, sending Hofstadter a letter in October 1970 to congratulate him on a recent publication which had chastised student violence. He also filled his former mentor in on the last five years of his life, including his move, "with many misgivings," to the "provinces" (the University of Rochester), a number of journal articles, and a disturbingly "increasing inability to get anything written." Ominously, he closed with concern over some rumors that had reached him with regard to his mentor's health. Hesitating to approach the topic, Lasch inquired "I will not ask what you are doing in a hospital ... but I hope nevertheless that you will soon be back to work."[\[50\]](#)

To his great shock, the letter was returned unopened. It had arrived on the day Hofstadter succumbed to his battle with leukemia. The blow was devastating. Lasch removed the unread letter from its envelope, and, in his own hand, penned a somber note to himself: "probably received on Saturday, the day of Hofstadter's death." Given pause to think about the enormity of the passing, he regretted putting off contact for so long, assuming they had more time together. "There had been so many things I had counted on discussing with him," he lamented, "whenever the opportunity presented itself; and of course I assumed that it would be sooner or later forthcoming." His model for the historian as social critic was gone. He faced a new decade haunted by the prospect that the nation had lost its premier social critic, the man who replaced Beard in setting the tune of history. It was a daunting vacuum but one that needed desperately to be filled. Lasch needed to overcome his "inability to get anything written" as quickly as possible.[\[51\]](#)

For the moment, however, returning to social criticism would have to wait. A first order of business came via a request from Hofstadter's widow, Beatrice. Her time with Lasch from summers back apparently not forgotten, she wanted him to serve as something like an official Hofstadter interpreter. The twenty-fifth anniversary of *American*

Political Tradition was approaching and she thought of him as “the person” to write a commemorative foreword. He could do nothing less than accept the charge.^[52]

The foreword marked the first and last time that Lasch wrote about Hofstadter at length, a lacuna he regarded as his “painful silence, initiated by my inability to make any sense of Dick’s early death.” There could hardly have been a more fortuitous assignment, though, than reconsidering *American Political Tradition*, a book that meant so much in defining his career. Lasch could hardly have been expected to write anything remotely as positive about *Anti-Intellectualism*, a work he mentioned briefly as “more vulnerable to criticism than *The American Political Tradition*.” The 1948 classic presented no such problem. It “brilliantly revised” conventional romanticisms of past political leaders, foisting them on the petard of their own cupidity. While he admitted, directly for the first time, that elements of the book bore “implicit” stamps of the arguments to come, he separated Hofstadter from the ranks of the consensus. Held above their petty world, “Hofstadter had nothing in common with the celebration of American ‘pragmatism,’” the mushy centrism which he saw “as a form of intellectual bankruptcy.”^[53]

Lasch also used the foreword to come to terms with Hofstadter’s eventual intellectual elitism by looking at the world through his mentor’s eyes. His fear of mass movements stemmed, forgivably it now seemed, “out of the traumas of the McCarthy period” (an experience Lasch never endured). Spurred on by this source, in addition to his “undivided devotion to the craft,” Hofstadter wrote with “superabundant energy.” The corpus of books he and the consensus scholars produced made Lasch’s generation look pale by comparison. He closed with an admonition to his rising peers among historians:

For whatever reasons, we have written much less history than they did; nor can we console ourselves that at least we have reformed the university and the political system of which it is a part. More than a decade has passed since the first peremptory challenges to the consensus historians were bravely thrown down; the university and the political system remain essentially unreformed ... while the new history—the history that was to have represented so striking an advance over the work of the forties and fifties—remains largely unwritten. Our generation has seen too many brave beginnings, too many claims that came to nothing,

too many books unfinished and even unbegun, too many broken and truncated careers. As activists, we have achieved far less than we hoped; as scholars, our record is undistinguished on the whole. It is not too late to achieve something better.

Intended to spur his generation into action, the admonition was lined with personal urgency as well. Lasch himself pledged to produce better history.[\[54\]](#)

Lasch authored his foreword for *American Political Tradition* in 1973. Eleven years older than when he had washed his hands of his dissertation and become a Hofstadter understudy, he had hardly been idle. Not counting *American Liberals*, he had three books and countless articles under his belt at the time. But all of his books, beginning with *New Radicalism*, were essentially collections of often loosely-connected essays. And each, though they possessed flashes of condensed, brilliant insight, seemed to suffer more and more from their lack of cohesion. The literary spirit which had animated *New Radicalism* ebbed out of the later two books. “Sadly,” his biographer notes, “this vision of and for his subjects largely disappeared from Lasch’s work, not to reappear until the mid-1980s.”[\[55\]](#)

He hit bottom in 1973. *World of Nations*, an “uneven” assemblage of previously published writings on a potpourri of topics had little of the resonance of *New Radicalism*. It signaled the end of the relationship between Lasch and Knopf that Hofstadter had arranged a decade earlier. Before the publishing house parted company with him, however, they delivered one last blow—a negative review of a Watergate novel Lasch sent in to his editor.[\[56\]](#)

Lasch’s personal situation offered little relief. His “misgivings” about transferring to Rochester had been portentous. The history department, held under the control of chairman Eugene Genovese, sank, in Lasch’s opinion, into a morass of “fratricidal animosities.” Two years after his arrival, the backbiting drove out four professors and a group of graduate students. Eschewing the campus turmoil, Lasch “stayed away from that lamentable scene as much as possible,” setting up shop in his home office. It seemed only a matter of time before he would have to relocate his family again (yet he stayed on). At the same time, the Left was beginning

its long process of eclipse. The world looked bleak; perhaps it had been a mistake to pursue social criticism in the first place.[57]

Losing Hofstadter did not improve matters either. Nevertheless, Lasch's foreword for *American Political Tradition* augured a crucial shift in his fortunes. His retrospective epiphany on Hofstadter signaled an end and a beginning—an end because the apprenticeship was fully over. The divergences which spread over their positions on intellectuals during the last half of the 1960s inaugurated what Hofstadter's death sealed off. There could be no going back. The introductory essay also promised a new beginning. His posthumous communication with his mentor rejuvenated his flagging spirits. Forced to consider Hofstadter at length, he reaffirmed his own calling to social criticism. Further, he gave up on the activism (with its demand for organization), which had consumed so much of his creative capacities, in order to commit to full-time scholarship. And, most importantly, the engagement with Hofstadter pointed him toward a new direction. He would pick up the gauntlet for his generation, carrying through to completion “the first peremptory challenges to the consensus historians” that his age group threw down a decade before.

Finishing an entire generation's work was an immense undertaking. Lasch openly admitted that much in his foreword. In one of his few lines of criticism, he summed up the major interpretive difference separating the younger scholars from their Cold War elders: “The defense of the intellectuals' tradition against popular anti-intellectualism ignores the anti-intellectualism of the intellectuals themselves and confuses intellect with the interests of the intellectuals as a class.” The statement was both a mouthful and a dividing line drawn in the sand. Expressing the sentiment in full-bodied works of critical history required a life's dedication to match Hofstadter synthesis-for-synthesis. He grasped the hard road ahead in the very next line of the foreword: “Even as I write these reservations, however, I am struck by their inadequacy in the face of the richness and the complexity of Hofstadter's work and the difficulty of arriving at an assessment of it.”[58]

Countering Hofstadter took over a decade and three more books before Lasch hit his stride. It happened in the mid 1980s. During these, the last years of his life, Lasch emerged as American historiography's anti-Hofstadter. Turning on his teacher, the apprentice became a master in

his own right. He constructed a grand narrative of U.S. history in opposition to Hofstadter. And Lasch recognized the tremendous scope of his efforts. Prior to his counter-narratives (which he hoped would correct an imbalance): “The argument has gone to him [Hofstadter] by default. People say ‘Well, it’s no longer possible to write the kind of synthetic history that Hofstadter did. The genre has played itself out. We know too much. There’s too much specialized knowledge.’ There’s some truth in that, but it’s still a cop-out, which reflects a refusal or failure of academic historians to write for the general reader.” It remained possible to write synthetic history, but the enterprise needed the right person.[59]

As time passed and Hofstadter’s death faded further into the recesses of Lasch’s mind, the former pupil hardened his stance. Breaking from his previous pattern of respectful reticence toward Hofstadter, Lasch grew increasingly more aggressive. He could no longer contain his frustration for the scorn Hofstadter rained down upon “the hopelessly muddled thinking of ordinary Americans.” Lasch now found the sneer Hofstadter wore for “ordinary” people too offensive to ignore. “I’ve come to see Hofstadter as a latter-day version of H.L. Mencken,” he told an interviewer, “endlessly belaboring the ‘booboisie.’” His one-time mentor was out of line, and he was wrong. Reversing Hofstadter’s course, Lasch articulated a “populist” vision that shielded the “ordinary”—or what he took to calling “middle”—American from the snobberies of the ruling elite.[60]

Lasch’s populism evolved slowly. The remainder of the 1970s until the mid 1980s served as its incubation phase. Lasch came into his own as a historian-social critic during this time, issuing a spate of books which ruthlessly dissected a country famously suffering from “malaise.” *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), and *The Minimal Self* (1984) demonstrated Lasch’s renewed critical energy. Each reflected its author’s conscientious efforts to “produce an integrated book ... [that] wasn’t just a collection of occasional pieces, but that... added up to one coherent argument.” They certainly did just that. In concert, the three works demonstrated the detrimental consequences of industrial modernity and consumer-driven corporate capitalism. Regular people—cogs in the automated market machines of production and consumption—lost the basic skills that once made them independent thinkers. Managers reduced them to serviceable parts while a vapid culture of

consumerism promoted spending as life's highest calling. Not only that, but the expert "helping professions" eroded the authority of the family, controlling child-raising and the transmission of values. The intellectuals, an intricate part of this apparatus of elites, racked their brains to maintain mass submission. Then, after helping design the oppressive system, they had the nerve to mock the intelligence of those they ensnared.[61]

The anti-Hofstadter message of the three books was clear: intellectuals, as they had been since the "new radical" days of Addams and Dewey, threatened democracy far more than they saved it. But what was the alternative? Hofstadter had clearly invested his hopes in a liberal democracy "managed" by intellectuals and experts. What was Lasch suggesting as a viable political vision? His books offered mostly an assortment of questions without answers, criticism without alternatives, and a diagnosis of intellectual-induced malaise with only the vaguest of cures.

Between the publication of *Narcissism* and *Minimal Self*, Lasch began to think more "architectonically." As the eighties began, he joined the editorial staff of the short-lived journal *Democracy*. His time in the company of such sympathetic scholars as Lawrence Goodwyn prompted another revelation. Lasch became a modern day populist. He described his new worldview to the journal's coeditor:

My own [cosmology] is defined by two premises: that the creation of a just and decent society is incompatible with the preservation of corporate capitalism, and that a broad popular movement (as opposed to reform from the top down) is our only hope that a decent society will emerge from the present protracted crisis of Western civilization.

Lasch now subscribed to a faith of decentralization, localism, and participatory democracy. Armed with these tenets, he finally took the stage for his showdown with the ghost of Hofstadter.[62]

Lasch could not have chosen a more meaningful anti-Hofstadter label if he had tried. The Populist was the great nemesis of Hofstadter's intellectuals, the menacing face of mass society pressed angrily against the windows of the enlightened. For him, the spirit of the nineteenth-century agrarian protester continually cropped up like a weed in the garden of civilized democracy. One of his classic lines from *Age of*

Reform held that the Populist impulse “has turned sour, become illiberal, and ill-tempered ... this process of deconversion from reform to reaction did not require the introduction of anything wholly new ... but only a development of certain tendencies that had existed all along, particularly in the South and Midwest.” Lasch spun this portrayal on its head. Had he reworded the lines, his rendition would have substituted “Intellectual” for “Populist” and “Northern Cities” for “the South and the Midwest.” But Lasch had done plenty of intellectual bashing in other works. Now he would vindicate the Populists and transform them from nemesis to champions of democracy.[63]

His *True and Only Heaven* and *Revolt of the Elites* restored the legacy of popular democracy. The first, Lasch’s magnum opus, spanned all of American history. Reaching as far back as the classical republican theorists and as far forward as Martin Luther King Jr., Lasch uncovered a populist counter-tradition deeply rooted in the national fabric. Although the tradition had its share of leaders and thinkers, it had (and has) a wide popular following at its core. A petit bourgeois population of landowners and petty proprietors, invested in their families and communities, represent the true heart of populism. Historically, for Lasch, this “Middle American” subset consistently provided invaluable services to the country. Guided by “its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, [and] its skepticism about progress,” the petit bourgeois communities formed a natural bulwark against the vast forces of change. The populist common sense inveighed against viewing all change as “progress,” as inherently good, and therefore resisted the effects of sweeping social currents like corporatization, industrialization, and wanton consumerism. The petit bourgeois, in other words, struggled valiantly against a banal future that he did not want while the intellectual advocates of “progress” nestled sweetly into the new order.[64]

The very qualities that Hofstadter loathed about “middle America,” then, were exactly the ones Lasch revered. The stigma of “backwardness” intellectuals attached to the provinces for their slow, reluctant responses to outside stimuli looked like a badge of honor to Lasch. What Hofstadter considered Populism’s most glaring deficiency, its retrograde stubbornness, Lasch admired as a wonderful strength. “According to Hofstadter and to a whole generation of historians who followed in his footsteps,” Lasch recapped, “reform movements were usually not led by

men and women confident about the future, but by dispossessed patricians suffering from ‘status anxiety’ and eager to recapture their former social standing.” Although Lasch’s petite bourgeoisie are not quite “dispossessed patricians,” they shared a similar, understandable sentiment. For them, status anxiety really seems more like common sense. Who, after all, wanted to willingly give up artisanal independence and strong, supportive communities for deskilled factory labor and a cheap apartment? Intellectuals called that “progress”?[65]

Lasch returned for one last round of intellectual/elite criticism. His *Revolt of the Elites*, a revisiting of the collected essay form, was laced with vitriol for the privileged class of elite decision-makers who carried the banner of “progress” into the 1990s. Little had changed since *True and Only Heaven*, except that the ruling elites had entered the worlds of globalism and technology. Busy and self satisfied (but still looking for that intense experience in places like the gym), “The new elites are at home only in transit, en route to a high level conference, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort. Theirs is essentially tourist’s view of the world—not a perspective likely to encourage a passionate devotion to democracy.” At least Hofstadter’s generation had had the good graces to plant roots.[66]

Christopher Lasch ended his career at the University of Rochester, becoming as much as a fixture there in the seventies, eighties, and early nineties as Hofstadter was for Columbia at midcentury. As his star arced dramatically, Lasch found himself in his old mentor’s awkward position. The fine style of his social criticism drew graduate students in droves, many of them wanting to be Lasch’s next protégé. More so than Hofstadter, Lasch was tempted by the idea of building a department around his vision of historical social criticism. The construction of such an outpost might counteract the difficulties Hofstadter’s students encountered in the job market as individuals. At the same time, graduate students realized they were taking a risk if they emulated Lasch. One such risk-taker, Casey Blake, reported back on the experiment warily. The social criticism emphasis, he warned, “may leave its graduates in a difficult position on the job market. Some of my senior colleagues here [at Reed College], for example, are all too eager to inform me that they

consider what Richard [Fox] and I do to be a ‘sophisticated form of journalism,’ as opposed to ‘real’ history.”[67]

Lasch heeded the advice responsibly. Like Hofstadter, he insisted above all on grooming well-rounded historians capable of clearing professional hurdles. He never forced his graduate advisees to become social critics. Lasch read “safe” dissertations with the same intensity he provided the more risky ones. While he debated the appropriateness of social criticism at the graduate level, he moved decisively in other areas. Named department chair in 1985, he tried to use his hiring prerogatives to bring the faculty further in line with this vision. Lasch offered jobs to Richard Fox, Jackson Lears, and Robert Westbrook, landing the latter to anchor his project.

The question of whether Lasch ever tapped a successor is difficult to answer. Certainly, like Hofstadter, Lasch produced a considerable number of influential historians. Where the Columbia scholar had a hand in training Eric Foner, Lawrence Levine, Linda Kerber, and Dorothy Ross, Lasch’s Rochester could boast of Leon Fink, William Leach, Casey Blake, and Kevin Mattson. Outside of his institution, Lasch inspired such historians as Fox, Lears, and Westbrook. But is there an equivalent successor figure akin to the position he had held under Hofstadter?

The outlook is not bright. No historian seems currently at work on a magisterial synthesis on par with *American Political Tradition* or *True and Only Heaven*. Maybe the process has stalled and a new critic will still emerge. Yet the chain that began with Beard, and passed through Hofstadter, may end with Lasch. No doubt he inspired a generation, but did he pass the torch? His own student, Russell Jacoby, thinks not. His *The Last Intellectuals*(1987) sounds the death knell of great intellectual traditions. For him, the corrupting culture of academe—already hostile to writers like Hofstadter and Lasch—successfully used the tenure system to draw the noose around sweeping social criticism. Just as Blake feared, Jacoby argues, the drive of “professionals” to jealously enforce a code of specialization snuffed out the spark of boldness. Lasch was the last of a doomed and dying breed.[68]

Overall, Jacoby’s hard-hitting warnings hold up fairly well, some quarter of a century later. His criticisms about professionalization and its

concomitant “depoliticization” and “withdrawal of intellectual energy from a larger domain to a narrower discipline,” something akin to a great academic turn inward, remain adroit. On the other hand, especially in light of the recent directions of intellectual and cultural history, there is reason for cautious hope. Take, for example, the very sharp social criticism disseminated by the intellectuals in the periodical, *Dissent*. Then again, as Kevin Mattson notes in the pages of that same journal, due to underfunding— what he calls an “unpaid piper syndrome”— cultural production of such work faces a spate of new challenges in the twenty-first century. In an age of “free” online information, where journalism, book-publishing, and even teaching are devalued by the marketplace of the internet (in which few people are willing to pay for content), fewer and fewer intellectuals can find the support to develop and articulate their ideas. Coupled with the online revolution, the current climate of austerity, of shrinking endowments for the arts, slashed budgets for humanities, and belt-tightening on college campuses across the country, the current climate approaches the point of severe crisis.^[69]

Returning to Lasch and Hofstadter, there is a different way to view the situation. One might think of Lasch’s journey from prized pupil to anti-Hofstadter as bringing a sort of balance. His works in support of populism and the promise of “middle America” challenge, point-for-point, Hofstadter’s faith in intellectual elites. With these two historians covering so much ground from opposite positions, it is possible that there is nowhere left to go except in between them. Like the yin and yang symbol, bound forever by an inscribing circle, Hofstadter and Lasch may well be rotating around each other indefinitely into the future.

† This essay was originally written as a seminar paper for my adviser, Robert Westbrook. He has since read countless drafts of it, and improved the work immeasurably, for which, among other reasons, I owe him great thanks.

[1] Casey Blake, “Interview with Christopher Lasch,” 10. This interview is an extended version of Casey Blake and Christopher Phelps, “History as Social Criticism: Conversations with Christopher Lasch,” *Journal of American History* 80:4 (1994): 1310-1332, which was actually formed from two interviews that the coauthors conducted separately with Lasch in the summer of 1993. The transcript is available in the Christopher

Lasch Papers (hereafter CLP), Box 68, Folders 15-16, University of Rochester, Rush Rhees Library, Department of Rare Books.

[2] On Columbia and the “Cold War consensus” see John Higham, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 212-246; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 301-360; Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), esp. chapters 1 and 2; Robert R. Tomes, *Apocalypse Then: American Intellectuals and the Vietnam War, 1954-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 9-84. David Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 66.

[3] Richard Fox, “An Interview with Christopher Lasch,” September 25, 1993. The typed transcript of the recorded interview is available in the CLP, b68, f5. In May 1979, Lasch received an invitation to dine at the White House. Kept in the dark about the entire arrangement beforehand, Lasch dutifully reported to Washington equipped only with the information that the President had read his book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), and wanted to discuss its policy implications. He arrived only to find himself in the White House lobby with Daniel Bell, Jesse Jackson, Bill Moyers, and Haynes Johnson. They had all been asked to dinner and to help guide the floundering President out of the crisis brought on by rising energy prices, stagflation, and perceptions of national decline following the Vietnam War. Lasch was mostly silent, an inactivity which did not escape the notice of Bell who later floated a long memo, chiding the renowned social critic for his lack of constructive participation. While many of the gathered thinkers and politicians were invited for a second session at Camp David (the result of which was the “Crisis of Confidence” speech), Lasch failed even to receive a response back on a long letter he sent summing up his position on the country’s social and economic ailments. See Fox, “Interview,” 12-13 and Eric Miller, “American Sojourn: a Life of Christopher Lasch” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2002), 417-426.

[4] On the long history of the objectivity debate within the historical profession, see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, *op. cit.* Some scholars might argue that it was the opinions, often controversial, that Lasch drew, rather than his opinionatedness, which made him such an objectionable

figure. Indeed, Lasch was something of a pariah in his own time. His later work earned him heavy criticism from the left and, more heavily, from feminist circles. Having implicated nearly the full political spectrum in contributing to the country's ailments, he found friends everywhere to be in short supply. Still, it was liberals and radicals, groups which had long considered Lasch a relative ally, who were the most indignant. As Fred Siegel noted in a long review of *Culture of Narcissism*, the book "made him the white crow of the American left." While the condemnations from the left stung him, the reaction from the women's movement devastated Lasch (who spent years working on a book about women's history). Even though very little escaped his critical scope in *Culture of Narcissism*, feminists took acute personal umbrage from his conclusions. As a group, they upbraided him for what they perceived to be his lament for the lost patriarch and the besiegement of family values. The validity of these charges notwithstanding (a treatment of them would require an entirely separate essay), I hope to use Lasch's career to demonstrate the consequences for historians engaged in social criticism. See Fred Siegel, "The Agony of Christopher Lasch," *Reviews in American History* 8:3 (1980): 285.

[5] Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 147, 153; Steven Weiland, "The Academic Attitude: Richard Hofstadter and the American Intellectuals," *The Antioch Review* 46 (1988): 472.

[6] Among the scholars who introduce the Hofstadter-Lasch connection are David Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Kevin Mattson, "The Historian as a Social Critic: Christopher Lasch and the Uses of History," *The History Teacher* 36:3 (2003): 375-396; Miller, "American Sojourn," *passim*; Robert Westbrook, "In Retrospect: Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism*, and the Vocation of Intellectuals," *Reviews in American History* 23 (1995): 176-191. In each case, however, these authors suggest the dimensions of Lasch's apprenticeship to Hofstadter rather than making it the primary focus of their work. Lasch himself has garnered a great deal of scholarly attention over the past decade. In addition to the works already listed, see Jeremy Beer, "On Christopher Lasch," *Modern Age* 47:4 (2005): 330-343; Eric Miller, "Pilgrim to an Unknown Land: Christopher Lasch's Journey"

in *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past*, ed. Wilfred McClay (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007); Andrew Hartman, "Christopher Lasch: Critic of Liberalism, Historian of its Discontents," *Rethinking History* 13:4 (2009): 499-519.

[7] Quoted in Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 167.

[8] *Ibid.*, 167.

[9] Consider, for instance, the appraisal of Lasch's breadth given by Jean Bethke Elshtain in "The Life and Work of Christopher Lasch: An American Story" *Salmagundi* 106-07 (1995), 146: "So much lay within his purview: revisionist history about the origins of the Cold War; American foreign policy in light of America's self-understanding; the generous beginnings and fateful turnings of the student movement; the contrast between a statist liberalism and a robust, because more local and community based, democratic politics; the fateful alliances forged between feminist reformers and 'social hygienists,' whether doctors or Calvinist ministers; psychoanalysis and feminism; the American character, and so on." For Lasch's definition of social criticism, see Blake and Phelps, "History as Social Criticism," 1313.

[10] See Casey Blake, "Interview with Christopher Lasch," 18-19; Casey Blake, "Historian, Critic, Prophet: Christopher Lasch and the American Predicament," *Commonweal*, October 22, 2010, 21-28.

[11] Blake and Phelps, "History as Social Criticism," 1316-1317; Fox, "Interview," 5.

[12] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Richard Hofstadter" in *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks (New York, 1969), 280; Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York, 1968), 299.

[13] Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 16, 23. Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 350.

[14] Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 89:4 (1984), 979, 983.

[15] Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, xiv.

[16] Fox, “Interview,” 4; Miller, “American Sojourn,” 82; Blake and Phelps, “History as Social Criticism,” 1315.

[17] Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 66. Of course, there were exceptions. In addition to Lasch, Hofstadter took a liking to, among others, Dorothy Ross, Lawrence Levine, Robert Dallek, and Eric McKittrick.

[18] Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York: Knopf, 1974). On the limitations of post New Deal liberalism and its capitulation to the basic structure of capitalism, see Alan Brinkley, “The New Deal and the Idea of the State” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 85-121. The Cold War Consensus, famously termed “the vital center” by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. is a loaded term, overused to the point of simplification. In essence, Schlesinger meant a defense of New Deal politics at home and stalwart anti-communism abroad (and, to be fair, domestically as well).

[19] Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 439; Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

[20] Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948), xxv, 124, 271, 298.

[21] Fox, “Interview,” 4, 5.

[22] Blake and Phelps, “History as Social Criticism,” 1316.

[23] Historians on friendly terms have addressed each other “Dear Last Name” since the earliest days of the profession— J. Franklin Jameson, Henry Adams, and Frederick Jackson Turner all used this system. For their students, like Turner’s prize pupil Carl Becker, the first time a letter read “Dear Becker” instead of “Dear Mr. Becker” was a sign of having made it. Historians seemed to use first names only rarely. Lasch and Hofstadter took to doing so in the middle sixties, at which point the practice had become pervasive. Lasch dropped the obsolete form altogether roughly by the end of the decade. For examples of these trends, see Wilbur R. Jacobs, ed., *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); Michael Kammen, ed., “*What is the Good of History?*” *Selected Letters of Carl L.*

Becker, 1900-1945 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973). Richard Hofstadter to Christopher Lasch, 21 January 1959, CLP, b1, f4.

[24] Hofstadter to Lasch, March 19, 1957, CLP, b1, f4; Hofstadter to Lasch, undated internal evidence suggests January 1960, CLP, b1, f4, SIC. Hofstadter's positive appraisal helped. In the spring of 1960, Lasch received a fellowship from the Social Science Research Council.

[25] Kevin Mattson, "Historian as a Social Critic," 378; Fox, "Interview," 7.

[26] He began on the surface level. Lasch first abandoned his previous specialization— intellectual and political history—like an old set of clothes; he changed his identity to "social historian." Miller, "American Sojourn," 149; Mattson, "Historian as Social Critic," 376.

[27] Mattson, "Historian as Social Critic," 379; Miller, "American Sojourn," 158.

[28] Lasch to Gordon Levin, January 26, 1963, CLP, b1, f12; Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 116; Lasch, Review of *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* by Norman Pollack and *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* by Walter T.K. Nugent. *Pacific Historical Review* 33 (1964), 72.

[29] Lasch to Gordon Levin, January 19, 1963, CLP, b1, f12; Lasch to Gordon Levin, January 26, 1963, CLP, b1, f12. Lasch blamed John Higham, one of the first historians of American historiography for popularizing the concept of consensus as a useful category in intellectual history. As he wrote Levin in the 19 January letter: "All of this discussion of the consensus has had the incidental bad effect of doing a very deep injustice to one of the finest American historians. It has also had the bad effect, not at all incidental, of leading the whole debate onto a false tack by taking the consensus business seriously in the first place."

[30] Westbrook, "In Retrospect," 184. Eric Miller contends that this brief alliance was very real. "In the early 1960s," he argues, "he seized on Hofstadter's historiographical vision, and as Hofstadter increasingly became a target for his generation of historians, Lasch became his young defender." Miller, "American Sojourn," (160).

[31] Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 69.

[32] Hofstadter to Lasch, July 20, 1963, CLP, b1, f12.

[33] Westbrook, “In Retrospect,” 181; Lasch to Hofstadter July 24, 1963, CLP, b1, f12; Hofstadter to Lasch, September 20, 1962, CLP, b1, f 10.

[34] Westbrook, “In Retrospect,” 181; Hofstadter to Lasch, January 7, 1964, CLP, b1, f14; Lasch to Hofstadter, January 10, 1964, CLP, b1, f14; Hofstadter to Lasch, January 14, 1964, CLP, b1, f 14.

[35] Fox, “Interview,” 7. Lasch’s book walked a fine line with *Age of Reform*. Since he focused on Progressivism instead of Populism, Lasch was able to avoid the most explosive section of Hofstadter’s work. Lasch gives Hofstadter’s interpretation of Progressives a tacit nod in his chapter on Jane Addams, and he defends him as a man “writing within the liberal tradition—a fact which most of his critics ignored.” He made no similar gesture toward *Anti-Intellectualism*, applying instead the coy strategy of implying a critique of that book in his last chapter without doing so directly. Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 31; Westbrook, “In Retrospect,” 176-177. Neatly filling the next link in a long historiographical chain, Lasch’s *New Radicalism* inspired the generation of Fox and Westbrook in much the same way that *American Political Tradition* shaped Lasch and that Beard’s work influenced Hofstadter. Miller, “American Sojourn,” 184; Fox, “Interview,” 7.

[36] Lasch, *New Radicalism*, 96-103. Interestingly, Lasch originally intended to include Theodore Roosevelt in *New Radicalism* but ultimately decided to leave him out. One wonders if Lasch’s Roosevelt could possibly look as bad as the “Mussolini lite” who appears in *American Political Tradition*. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, xvi.

[37] Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 286, 294.

[38] Lasch, *New Radicalism*, xiv.

[39] *Ibid.*, 60

[40] *Ibid.*, 146, 316.

[41] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 303; Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 122.

[42] Decades later Lasch remembered the incident differently. In a 1993 interview he boldly stated that his last chapter “was in some ways a deliberate provocation [directed at him].” His behavior in 1964 reveals quite another story. Possibly afraid of the damage it would inflict, Lasch stopped sending Hofstadter the last few drafted sections of *New Radicalism*, leading up to “Anti-Intellectualism of the Intellectuals,” despite promising to do so. Hofstadter called him on it. “You never left your ms, as promised,” he chided, “this makes it all the more imperative that I read it, so you must send it to me.” The admonitions went to no avail. Months later Hofstadter was still badgering Lasch for a manuscript copy: “I think you would rather have my comments before the book is published than after, as I am sure to read it!” In the end, it was one of the editors at Knopf, instead of Lasch, who supplied Hofstadter with a final draft of the manuscript. Hofstadter to Lasch, July 10, 1964, CLP, b1, f14; Hofstadter to Lasch, September 16, 1964, CLP, b1, f14; Lasch to Hofstadter, July 6, 1964, CLP, b1, f14.

[43] Quoted in Miller, “American Sojourn,” 209 and Westbrook, “In Retrospect,” 184; Zora Lasch to Christopher Lasch, May 13, 1966, CLP, b2, f4.

[44] Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 66, n. 248. The only other instance in which Hofstadter performed this service was on behalf of Marvin Meyers’s *The Jacksonian Persuasion*(1957).

[45] Charles Gibson to CL, December 5, 1963, CLP, b1, f11b; Tomes, *Apocalypse Then*, 85; See also Maurise Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 83-102, 127-145; Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, 106-107; Alan Brinkley, “The Illusion of Unity in Cold War Culture” in *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, ed. Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 61-73.

[46] Lasch, “The Cultural Cold War,” *Nation*, September 11, 1967, 198-212, reprinted in Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 75; Tomes, *Apocalypse Then*.

[47] Hofstadter to Lasch, October 1967, CLP, b2, f7.

[48] Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 125; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 3-20, and Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf,

1963), 134.

[49] Miller, "American Sojourn," 233-237, 243, 261-265. Lasch also involved himself with a very different crowd than those who might have made the guest list at Hofstadter's Cape home. He moved with University of Wisconsin, Madison-inspired radicals like William Appleman Williams and James Weinstein, as well as with Marxist upstarts like Eugene Genovese. This was a decidedly anti-Hofstadter crew. If Columbia was the leading magnet for orthodox Cold Warrior intellectualism (supportive of an aggressive containment foreign policy and free of its older communist leanings), Madison was its counterpoint. The Midwestern university drew a cluster of dissident minds, critical of Cold War policy and still sympathetic to the radical left. As David Brown describes it, "Below the surface of this political struggle lay a deeper cultural clash that split American reformers between an older progressivism and an emergent postwar liberalism." The former, stored in places like Madison, "resisted conflating Populism with McCarthyism," questioned the wisdom of containment, and "believed that when historians read conflict out of the past they served a conservative clientele." For their part, postwar liberals, or New York Intellectuals, "drew from McCarthy a deep suspicion of mass behavior, believed that American history embodied the amiable virtues of consensus and compromise, [and] favored liberal internationalism. Madison also had its anti-Hofstadter champion, the illustrious historian William Appleman Williams, whose works on diplomatic history drew graduate students in numbers to rival Hofstadter. A constant critic of Hofstadter's work, he publically doubted the merit of bestowing the Pulitzer Prize on *Age of Reform*, deriding it as "a volume which is not history." Paul Buhle, ed., *History and the New Left: Madison Wisconsin, 1950-1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 6-9; Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 120-124; Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, 147-180; William Appleman Williams, *History as a Way of Learning* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973), 161-168.

[50] Lasch to Hofstadter, October 22, 1970, CLP, b2, f20.

[51] Lasch to Beatrice Hofstadter, October 19, 1971, CLP, b3, f3.

[52] Beatrice Hofstadter to Lasch, November 23, 1971, CLP, b3, f3. .

[53] Lasch to Beatrice Hofstadter, October 19, 1971, CLP, b3, f3; see Lasch's foreword to Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, vii, xxi-xxii.

[54] Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xxiii.

[55] Miller, "American Sojourn," 224.

[56] *Ibid.*, 282.

[57] This is how Lasch described the campus to Hofstadter as early as 1970, the first semester he was on the scene. Lasch to Hofstadter, October 22, 1970, CLP, b2, f20; Miller, "American Sojourn," 289.

[58] Lasch's foreword to Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xxi.

[59] Blake and Phelps, "History as Social Criticism," 1318.

[60] *Ibid.*, 1317.

[61] Fox, "Interview," 11.

[62] Miller, "American Sojourn," 425; Lasch to Sheldon Wolin, December 8, 1979, CLP, b7d, f 14.

[63] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 20; The intellectual impulse "has turned sour, become illiberal, and ill-tempered... this process of deconversion from reform to reaction did not require the introduction of anything wholly new ... but only the development of certain tendencies which had existed all along, particularly in Northern Cities."

[64] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1991), 17.

[65] *Ibid.*, 115.

[66] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995), 6.

[67] Lasch tried to be ambitious in department-building. According to Miller, he committed himself to the view that "Social criticism and history should be tied together ... and he wanted Rochester to show the way." Miller, "American Sojourn," 497, 502.

[68] Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*, 112-190.

[69] Kevin Mattson, “Paying the Piper: Is Culture Ever Free?,” *Dissent* 58:2 (2011): 69-73.



Published by



[View all posts by](#)

Articles

20th century, Intellectual History

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑