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CHRISTOPHER LASCH AND PRAIRIE POPULISM

JON K. LAUCK

Christopher Lasch was born in Omaha in 1932. By the end of his life, cut short at age sixty-one, he had become one of the most famous intellectuals in the world.\(^1\) During his life of active writing from the time of the early Cold War until the fall of the Soviet Union, Lasch’s distinctive voice pierced through the din of the nation’s noisy political and cultural debates. The historian Jackson Lears recalled, in particular, the “spell that Lasch cast over a generation of historians and cultural critics who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s.”\(^2\) A product and one-time devotee of the American Left, Lasch later solidified his standing as a commanding figure in American letters as a trenchant and at times brutal critic of American liberalism.

Throughout his life, both when he was firmly planted in the traditions of the Left and after his dissent began, Lasch embodied a prairie skepticism about the vision and drift of his fellow intellectuals, the allegedly liberating aspects of modern life, and the coercive inclinations of technocratic planners. His midwestern roots, Lasch said, were a “reference point to which I was always in one way or another returning.”\(^3\) Lasch’s work, with its multitude of insights, his later skepticism of the narrative constraints of recent historiography, his attentiveness to regionalist sensibilities, his concern about the erosion of historical knowledge and the health of democracy, and his general rediscovery of older cultural traditions in the American past, can provide much-needed perspective to historical interpretation. More specifically, Lasch’s origins in, identification with, and understanding of the Midwest can help

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Lasch's most striking qualities were his intense honesty and his willingness to speak and write openly, despite the personal costs. In his recent biography of Lasch, which helps link Lasch to his prairie roots, Eric Miller cites Kathleen Norris, who won fame with her meditation on returning to the Dakota prairie, on the social role of prophetic voices such as Lasch: “A prophet’s task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day.” Lasch’s pursuit of the truth, his fear of the “tremendous void” left by the decline of “historical awareness,” his aversion to the suffocating fog of ideology, and his commitment to making democracy workable ultimately led him back to the prairie’s most famous political movement, Populism.

Lasch’s explicit turn to the Populist movement and to broader forms of populism late in life helps explain his early works and elucidates his doubts about elite opinion and his resistance to the derisive treatment of the common man and traditional culture. His treatment of populism was not based on in-depth archival research or close attention to late nineteenth-century Populist institutions, platforms, or party activities, but was part of a more general search for relief from elite condescension, growing bureaucratic controls, and developments in the politics of the American Left that he thought threatened American democracy. This search included attention to historical precedent and belief in the proposition, as he wrote in 1980, “that the only way to understand the contemporary crisis is to understand it historically.” Lasch’s turn to populism was, most fundamentally, driven by his commitment to bolstering American democracy. Greatly inspired by the publication of Lawrence Goodwyn’s history of Populism in 1976—which, Lasch thought, made “earlier work on [Populism] look like child’s play”—Lasch helped draw attention to Populist history as a method, as Goodwyn said, of determining “how democratic culture might be achieved.”

NEBRASKA ROOTS

Lasch’s intellectual odyssey began on the Nebraska prairie, a biographical fact that contributed to his later interest in the history of Populism and his broader embrace of populist sentiments. Lasch’s father, Robert, was born in a small house near 27th and N Streets in Lincoln in 1907, at the same time and in the same city that witnessed the creation of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, and Robert’s family bounced around the Midwest for several years, including stints in Chicago, Springfield, Illinois, and Kansas City. The Lasch family, Robert recalled, “had always been hard up.” In 1924 Robert enrolled at the University of Nebraska in part because his father “always felt a sentimental attachment to the university at Lincoln, following its football team with pride.” He enrolled as a philosophy major, wrote for the college newspaper, the Daily Nebraskan, and became a reporter down on M Street for the Lincoln Star. A budding writer, Robert paid homage to Willa Cather, who, he said, “had risen from the Nebraska plains to become a leader in American letters. If she could do it, why not we?” In 1928 Robert was selected as the University of Nebraska’s lone Rhodes Scholar. After three years in England, Robert returned to Nebraska and became an editor at the Omaha World-Herald.

Christopher Lasch’s mother, Zora Schaupp, was born in Rockville, Nebraska, in 1896. Zora’s father was a Lutheran schoolteacher from Indiana who had lost his faith, and her mother’s family ran a successful cattle-ranching operation. After a short stint on the Southern Plains, Zora’s family returned to Nebraska in 1904, and her father took a job managing a grain elevator in Virginia, Nebraska. He became active in politics and eventually won a seat, as a Democrat, in the state legislature in 1912. Zora enrolled at the University of Nebraska in 1916, and her feminism and politi-
cal engagement impressed some of her professors, who urged her to attend graduate school. After earning a master's degree from Nebraska, Zora earned a PhD in philosophy from Bryn Mawr and returned to the University of Nebraska to teach. Her roommate in Lincoln was Willa Cather's sister, Elsie, who taught high school in Lincoln.¹⁵

One of Zora's best students at Nebraska was the young Robert Lasch. When Zora studied in England during the 1929–30 academic year, she connected on several occasions with Robert, who was there on his Rhodes Scholarship. Before she returned to Nebraska, they were engaged. They married during the summer of 1931, and the following June Christopher was born at the Methodist Hospital in Omaha.¹⁶

Robert remembered that the "dates occasioned a good deal of finger counting among friends. An interval of nine months and ten days, plus the fact that we were separated throughout the summer prior to marriage, put us in the clear."¹⁷ They lived in houses in North Omaha, on Davenport Street, west of downtown, and in the western subdivision of Rockbrook.¹⁸ Unable to have more children, the Lasches also adopted a baby girl from Kansas City.¹⁹

Lasch's parents did not embrace the conservative Republicanism that one might associate with contemporary Nebraska. Both Robert and Zora were hostile to religion, and Lasch remembered them as "militant secularists."²⁰ They came of age along with a budding group of American intellectuals who were generally critical of American middle-class life, who saw religion as repressive, and who reviled capitalism. At the Omaha World-Herald, for which William Jennings Bryan had once served as editor, Robert embraced its "tradition of populist-radicalism."²¹ Bryan gave his "Cross of Gold" speech while at the same time serving as a correspondent for the World-Herald.²² Robert covered farmers' protests in Nebraska and Iowa during the Great Depression and "applauded their courage, and advocated other forms of direct action to challenge the system which had brought the agricultural economy to such a low estate."²³ Robert was soon promoted to the position of editor for Nebraska and western Iowa news.²⁴ Robert supported the progressivism of Nebraska Senator George Norris and through his news reporting at the World-Herald "gave him as much favorable coverage as [he] could."²⁵ He voted for the Socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas in 1932 (Robert remembers taking Christopher to the polls that year because Christopher had fallen "out of bed on his head" and he feared "some deep trauma which never developed"), and Zora joined others on the Left by working for the presidential campaign of Henry Wallace in 1948.²⁶ During the sixties, Robert won a Pulitzer Prize for his columns criticizing the Vietnam War.²⁷ All the Lasches came to despise Nixon and Reagan.
Lasch ultimately graduated from high school in Chicago because his father had “pulled up [the family’s] Nebraska roots” in order to accept an editorial position at the Chicago Sun.\(^{28}\) The Lasches rented a house in the Republican suburbs of the North Shore and Christopher matriculated at Barrington High School, where the precocious young Lasch embraced art, music, and, above all, writing, and attacked what he then saw as the narrowness and provincialism of his peers.\(^{29}\) Lasch said he was always “flaunting my athe­
ism” and making “fun of their religiosity.”\(^{30}\) At age sixteen, he trumpeted his support of the Iowa-born Henry Wallace and his Progressive Party presidential ticket in school assemblies. Lasch graduated in 1950 and left for Harvard, where he was surrounded by similarly brilliant students. He described to his parents the “insecurity” that is “often found in people who are from the Midwest but seem ashamed to admit it.”\(^{31}\) Although not a part of the Eastern elite, Lasch found many like-minded liberals at Harvard. As one professor recalled about these years, at Harvard there was a “mutual reassurance that everybody shared the same liberal beliefs about everything.”\(^{32}\) Lasch’s original political path followed the course set by his parents, who remained anticapitalist, irreligious, and staunchly supportive of liberal and radical causes. “I grew up in the tradition of Middle Western progressivism,” Lasch later recalled, “overlaid by the liberalism of the New Deal. I believed in the Tennessee Valley Authority, the CIO, and the United Nations.”\(^{33}\) At Harvard, when the university president mentioned the possibility of chapel attendance, Lasch called him “a Midwestern puritan of the worst kind.”\(^{34}\) Lasch remained an atheist at Harvard who opposed the “smug bigotry” and the “narrow-mindedness of organ­ized religion.”\(^{35}\) When he visited a friend’s family for Thanksgiving, he denounced them as “typical Indiana reactionaries.”\(^{36}\) He saw Whittaker Chambers as a “degenerate.”\(^{37}\) For the young Lasch, the United States in the 1950s, as he wrote to his girlfriend, was a country that “claims to be a democracy and yet has this hideous fascist monster in its insiders.”\(^{38}\)

After Harvard, Lasch entered the graduate program in history at Columbia, where he was exposed to Richard Hofstadter, whose sweeping judgments on American history he would ultimately come to reject. In a sign of his interest in agrarian activism Lasch considered writing his dissertation about the Minnesota Populist Ignatius Donnelly, but ended up writing on liberals’ reaction to the Russian Revolution.\(^{39}\) After a few short-term teaching stints and a research fellowship, Lasch joined the University of Iowa history department.\(^{40}\) The Prairie Historian Allan Bogue, who was serving as departmental chairman at Iowa at the time (before his departure for Wisconsin), told Lasch that his credentials were impressive and that “a number of historians have suggested your name to us.”\(^{41}\) After a round of interviews, Bogue informed Lasch that he was the “outstanding man in our field of candidates.”\(^{42}\) In early January 1961, the Iowa history department voted to extend Lasch an offer to serve as a professor of recent American history, a field pioneered by the Prairie Historians of the Midwest.\(^{43}\) Ten days later, Lasch accepted Iowa’s offer, and that spring he completed his doctoral work at Columbia.\(^{44}\) At the University of Iowa Lasch occupied a messy office in Schaeffer Hall piled high with books, papers, and ashtrays and made light of Schaeffer Hall’s designation as a Cold War nuclear war shelter by the university’s Committee on Radioactive Fall-Out (he thought the drinking fountains were not up to the challenge).\(^{45}\) Lasch generally found that Iowa City was a “wonderful place” and said that he was “terribly pleased with Iowa.” Eric Miller notes that “much to his surprise, Lasch discovered at Iowa a certain amount of interest, even sup­port, for his increasingly radical views.”\(^{46}\) He wrote to his parents that “we find ourselves more attached to Iowa City . . . than either of us suspected.”\(^{47}\) That first spring, Christopher planted tomatoes and his wife planted trees at their new home. While Lasch enjoyed Iowa
City, he resented the fact that Ann Arbor and Madison received more attention for resisting the nation’s Cold War foreign policy. “[W]e thought we had staged the first teach-in,” Lasch recalled. John Wunder, a young Iowan who attended a Lasch teach-in at the University of Iowa student union, remembered him as a “compelling, brilliant lecturer” who “was kind of a ‘cause’ at that moment.” While at Iowa, Lasch was such an active writer that he literally wore out his typewriter.

During his years at Columbia and Iowa, which roughly corresponded to the apex of the postwar liberal consensus, Lasch slowly became critical of the liberalism he had inherited from his parents. In his dissertation, which was published as a book by Columbia University Press in 1962, Lasch lamented the limited vision that encumbered liberals’ response to the Russian Revolution and how the failure to accurately comprehend events distorted the American reaction to the creation of the Soviet Union and helped precipitate the Cold War. Following on this study, Lasch soon went to work on a broader book about the growing prominence of liberal intellectuals during the first decades of the twentieth century. Soon after arriving in Iowa City, Lasch wrote to his Columbia advisor, William Leuchtenburg, and informed him of his plans for “a short book, a mere interpretative essay, on the American intellectual from 1900 to c. 1930.”

The result was the publication, in 1965, of Lasch’s book *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type*, in which Lasch described the emergence of intellectuals as a “status group” in the United States. Lasch argued that this new breed of social critic had failed at the essential task of closely analyzing and intelligently critiquing...
the nation in a manner that would pave the way for social improvement. The intellectuals he examined suffered from limited perception, had forfeited the detachment necessary to accurately interpret events, and had replaced thought with “feeling” and “experience.”

Lasch also believed that the new intellectuals were too focused on promoting sexual freedom, and as Eric Miller explains, he criticized the “new radicals’ desire to make what he considered to be cultural matters the object of politics.” Moreover, as Miller notes, these intellectuals sought social reform through the use of “strokes of coercive power,” which Lasch saw as “morally repugnant” and an “arrogant assault on fellow citizens.” In a preview of themes that emerge in his later work, Lasch criticized these intellectuals’ efforts to transform American mores and traditions, especially as they related to childhood, education, and sex. Lasch’s attacks on intellectuals for abusing their power and undermining popular traditions, which would continue throughout his life, always struck a populist chord. As Lasch saw it, the “liberal myth of an enlightened tute­lary elite” needed to “give way before evidence that allegedly backward, ‘nostalgic,’ and ‘petty bourgeois’ movements like populism actually had a much stronger commitment to democracy than more ‘progressive’ forces.” Elites, Lasch later told the editor of the quarterly newsletter The Populist, needed to begin “firmly committing” themselves to “the ’homespun’ values of middle-class America.”

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Lasch increasingly blamed liberals for the spreading consumerism, deepening self-absorption, and rising individualism that undermined the possibility of substantive social reform. Lasch turned to the hard Left, the cultural Marxism of German émigrés, and English Marxism to understand American history, to explain why the Left could not advance its cause, and to rethink the “whole progressive tradition itself.” In his search for “a humane and democratic socialism,” Miller explains, Lasch conducted a “highly analytic search for ways to alter both the economic and psychic conditions of society, and thus make possible the long-anticipated revolution.” In contrast to liberals and radical individualists, Lasch thought that the “Marxists in the West took the long view and preached patience: the gradual preparation of a new culture.”

LEAVING THE LEFT

Lasch’s stinging critiques of American life and his skillful application of Leftist thought won him many radical allies, but he was uneasy with the tactics of the Left. The absurd behavior of student radicals and the general “lunacy of the New Left,” Lasch thought, would only undermine the effort to transform the nation. Lasch criticized radical activists for cavorting with Communists in North Vietnam and denounced their uncritical and unthinking embrace of any radical tradition or cause. Lasch thought that “hedonism, self-expression, doing your own thing, dancing in the streets, drugs, and sex [were] a formula for political impotence and a new despotism” and that the student radicals had “traded self-government for self-expression.” The history profession, Lasch said, had also failed by embracing the “revolutionary mystique” and “such absurdities as ‘street history,’ ‘guerilla history,’ etc., [and] the whole notion of ‘radical history’ itself, of scholarship enlisted in the service of the revolution.” Lasch denounced the politicized history of academics such as Howard Zinn for promoting the view that the “historian should write only the kind of history that will further radical causes, prepare the ground for the revolution, etc.” While still at Iowa, Lasch began criticizing the Left’s “fashionable cult of alienation” and its “symbolic gestures of withdrawal and rejection,” the decision of “prominent beatniks and civil-rights activists” to “play symbolic parts, to pretend to be poor people or to pretend to be Negroes,” and the general rejection of the “Western tradition of rational discourse” in favor of the “obscurantist jargon of ‘the movement.’” Upon returning to Iowa City for a visit after he had joined the history department at Northwestern, Lasch thought
the “whole atmosphere had changed” and had “become very ugly, full of recriminations, full of conspiracy theories of the wildest kind.” The once “sensible people” he knew at Iowa had embraced the “conspiratorial view of history.”71 The era of Benjamin Shambaugh and Louis Pelzer at Iowa and the Prairie Historian tradition of embracing and studying midwestern history had long since passed.72

Lasch argued that the Left needed to persuade people that its program of reform was necessary, to support Leftist political candidates, to organize, and to generally build popular support for their goals instead of engaging in embarrassing and futile political theater. To that end, Lasch worked to organize socialist organizations and hoped that some day “a socialism appropriate to the American conditions” would emerge.73 In 1968 Lasch said he wanted a “revolution,” but he realistically confessed, “I don’t see any possibility of a revolution in this country right now.”74 All the radical energy of the 1960s, Lasch thought, had been wasted. If he had at times blunted his criticism of the student radicals—the socialist James Weinstein asked Lasch to refrain from “all public criticism of the nihilists”—in the ensuing years he would abandon his reticence.75

In great frustration, Lasch turned away from sixties radicalism and from political activism.76 He joined the history department at the University of Rochester to be part of what he hoped would be a cooperative intellectual effort to seriously examine American history and to realistically promote social reform.77 He began to focus his study on the form of culture that would make social change possible, to draw upon the lessons, as Eric Miller explains, of “his parents’ early-twentieth-century Midwestern world,” and to weigh the consequences of self-absorption, consumerism, and family decay.78 In Iowa City, Lasch had started to worry about his children’s social development and his Nebraska mother had begun to worry about her grandchildren’s proclivity toward consumption and their interest in “buying things.”79 Those who studied the family, Lasch thought, did not take seriously the erosion of family life. When auditing a class on the family at the University of Iowa in 1962, Lasch noted that scholars of the family “are simply propagandists for a more permissive attitude toward sex” and were treating sexual liberation as “a kind of panacea.”80 Instead of embracing a culture that undermined families, Lasch sought a culture that respected “order and authority,” which were essential to implementing any kind of lasting social reform.81

**Populism**

During these years, Lasch began his explicit turn toward forms of populism. He drew upon his midwestern heritage in his search for groups who had resisted the changes in American culture and had doubted the march of progress and he turned to the Populist movement, regionalists, agrarians, naturalists, and authors who embodied all these movements, such as Wendell Berry.82 Lasch made clear that the old argument that Communism and socialism “represented a big improvement over ‘petty bourgeois’ movements like Populism and the Knights of Labor can no longer be sustained.”83 Lasch became more sympathetic to the conservative opponents of cultural radicalism and embraced what he called the “generalized, ill-defined revolution against ‘permissiveness.””84 Lasch denounced what he called the “currently fashionable outcry against the repressive nuclear family.”85 Lasch began defending the American social mores that cultural radicals had been attempting to transform with the “wholehearted cooperation of liberals.”86 The liberal intellectuals of the early twentieth century and their radical descendents, Lasch thought, were directly contributing to the desiccation of family life and local culture. Lasch said the efforts of liberal elites to “deparochialize people” resulted in a nation of people “with no roots.”87 Because of the role of progressive intellectuals and liberals in this effort, Lasch said he “no longer felt comfortable with the traditions I’d inherited.”88

This discomfort included his parents’ hostility to religion, a hostility shared by the
emergent class of intellectuals that Lasch studied early in his career. As early as his years as a Harvard undergraduate, Lasch began to wonder, only tentatively, if he had been too dismissive of religion. When Lasch showed this early sign of interest in the history of religion, his mother considered arranging psychiatric help for her wayward son and thought the dean's office should be monitoring such problems.96 But Lasch thought that progressives, as Lewis Mumford argued, had been living off the "unearned increment of religion" for too long.90 He began to recognize the "presence of persistent spiritual needs that cannot be fulfilled by a secular culture."91 By the 1980s Lasch had more fully considered the Christian tradition and began to see hope in "a more deeply rooted, local way of life, one that invariably had been bound up in and constituted by religious structures, beliefs, and practice."92 Leftist ideologies, in contrast to religion, had "never been able to strike deep popular roots."93 Only religion, Lasch thought, supplied the "ethical solidarity" necessary for an "assault on injustice."94 Lasch came to see the Puritan tradition, which he was first exposed to at Harvard, as "perhaps our strongest reservoir of moral idealism."95 Of his interest in Calvinism, he quipped in a letter to Barbara Ehrenreich, "I kept it under wraps for years but it was bound to come out in the end."96

More generally, Lasch thought that the Western tradition, including Christianity, deserved to be understood and preserved, and as Eric Miller describes it, not pitched "onto the bonfire of cultural radicalism."97 The history of the United States, its experiment in republican government, and its cultural and social traditions, deserved respect. Lasch protested against the erasure of American social and cultural history through the unthinking embrace of theories of "modernization," academic equivocation in the form of multiculturalism, and the practice of radical history that focused on American historical sins and ignored American accomplishments and the nation's cultural endowment. The teaching of the Western tradition in the United States, he thought, should not be dismissed "as just another form of cultural hegemony or imperialism."98 Lasch thought a "kind of deculturation" had set in motion a "process of unlearning without historical precedent."99 Lasch endorsed what Wilfred McClay deemed "neotraditionalism," or what Miller calls a "longing among Americans to restore their rapidly eroding connections to their past."100 Lasch began to actively resist the modern "eagerness to proclaim the death of the past and to deny history's hold over the present."101 He called the "ever-present sense of historical discontinuity" the "blight of our society," which was losing the "sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future."102

Lasch focused on roots. He emphasized the "particularities of place and time" in American historical development and saw workable democracy linked to "kinship ties, local and regional traditions, and attachments to the soil," which were undermined by the "deracinated, disoriented outlook that is so often confused, nowadays, with intellectual liberation."103 He echoed Simone Weil's call for rootedness and embraced what he called Lewis Mumford's "critique of the 'metropolitan mind'" with its educated contempt for roots.104 Lasch called the Left's persistent attacks on social and cultural traditions a "misguided attempt to emancipate the individual from his past, from family ties, from the sense of place, and from nature itself" and denounced the promotion of lives "conceived as endless novelty, change, and excitement, as the titillation of the senses by every available stimulant."105 Historians had also uncritically endorsed Richard Hofstadter's increasingly popular view of American history as a battle, Eric Miller explains, "between the unthinking, outmoded, village-loving, old-stock Americans and the cerebral, analytical, tolerant, city-dwelling pluralists."106 Lasch thought that the forces of rural rootedness that Hofstadter had discounted, including the "allegedly reactionary sentiments like a strong attachment to the land and to individual ownership," had "played a much more democratic
Lasch’s attempt to recover the threads of the American past—what he called the “submerged traditions in American life”—that Hofstadter and other liberal historians had denigrated was set forth in his magnum opus, The True and Only Heaven, in which his own prairie roots were evident. After discussing the artisans and intellectuals who questioned industrial capitalism, Lasch focused on the late nineteenth-century Populist movement. Although not fully articulated until The True and Only Heaven, Lasch’s populist sentiments and his familial links to Populism began to emerge early in his work. Eric Miller notes Lasch’s “personal ties” to Populism, including his maternal grandfather’s job in Nebraska as a cooperative grain elevator manager and his campaign for the state legislature during which he embraced Populist themes, and explains how these “political sensibilities certainly molded [Lasch’s] own family’s political ideals.” One of Lasch’s graduate students concluded that the “basis of [Lasch’s] morality . . . was just the populist movement in America.” M. J. Heale, noting early signs of Lasch’s populist proclivities, said Lasch’s “fellow Harvard graduates might be forgiven for suspecting that the young Nebraskan brought some prairie values with him when he came east.”

Lasch saw the Populists as devoted to small-scale farming and to protecting the tradition of decentralized production through the use of farmer-run cooperatives. Underlying these efforts was a commitment to the independent yeoman farmer and the artisan tradition of nineteenth-century America and doubts about the industrial “progress” that Tugwell and other technocratic planners would push farmers to embrace. The self-organization of the Populists into farmers’ buying and selling cooperatives contrasted sharply with extremist state intervention in socialist economies such as the Soviet Union, where “forcible collectivization,” Lasch wrote, had resulted in “vast human devastation.” Unlike many on the Left who saw large-scale production as “consistent with democracy,” Lasch thought societies “dominated by large-scale production [were] more and more hierarchical, inegalitarian and undemocratic.” Lasch subscribed to the view that the Populists and the cooperative movement were ultimately corrupted by a turn to currency issues and fusion with the Democrats. Lasch believed that historians, too willing to follow Richard Hofstadter, had missed the early Populist vision and too readily saw Populism as backward and nostalgic and only as a precursor to the milder reforms of elite-led Progressivism. Such an interpretation, Lasch thought, would only “consign the Populists to the garbage dump of history.” Lasch sought, Eric Miller explains, to reverse the “smug and narrow conceptions of populism that Hofstadter and other intellectuals had in the twentieth century done so much to plant.” Instead of seeing the family farm heritage as “outmoded” and “hopelessly reactionary,” Lasch saw great promise in the agrarian impulse in favor of “small-scale production and grass-roots political control.”

Lasch’s conception of Populism in The True and Only Heaven relied heavily on the work of historians such as Lawrence Goodwyn and Steven Hahn. In 1980, when asked by the New York Times to recommend books for “summer reading,” Lasch listed Goodwyn’s Democratic Promise, which he said “explores one of the last genuinely democratic movements in American politics, Populism, and clarifies the far-reaching consequences of its defeat.” Lasch said that Goodwyn, who he saw as “a kind of lone survivor from the almost extinguished tradition of Southern populism,” “had the effrontery to find something of value in Populism, which Marxists and liberals alike have always regarded with a mixture of contempt and horror.” Lasch was particularly active in creating platforms for Goodwyn’s work and in assisting Goodwyn’s efforts to find funding for further research. Lasch strongly supported Goodwyn’s application for a MacArthur Fellowship based on Democratic Promise and “Goodwyn’s massive demonstration of the deeply radical character...
of the late-nineteenth-century agrarian movement.”123 By focusing on the Populists and their rooted, democratic character, Lasch agreed with Goodwyn that the two scholars were “lifting the blanket of modern sophistication” and allowing the “human race a better chance to breathe.”124 Lasch was transcending the era of Hofstadter-inspired farmer-bashing and returning to the findings of the Prairie Historians, who first took the Populists seriously as a democratic force in American life.125 He was in the process of recovering a major component of the midwestern historical tradition.

Lasch was also persuaded by the evidence of anticapitalist resistance among Southern farmers in Steven Hahn’s The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890.126 Hahn’s book bore a heavy Lasch imprint, as it started as a senior honor’s thesis directed by Lasch at Rochester.127 Lasch even suggested changing the title to The Georgia Yeomanry and focusing the study on “a particular class and its way of life” instead of solely focusing on its relation to Populism.128 Similar to his attraction to Goodwyn’s Democratic Promise, Lasch was drawn to Hahn’s efforts to preserve the memory of a class of people who had used local culture and republican principles to resist modernization, industrialism, and capitalist development.129 Lasch also appreciated Hahn’s recognition of the “premodern” aspects of Southern culture chronicled by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, although he agreed with Hahn that the treatment was “very muddled.”130

Lasch’s attraction to populism before his embrace of the work of Goodwyn and Hahn, as well as evidence of his old Nebraska roots at work, could also be detected more than two decades before The True and Only Heaven. In The Agony of the American Left, Lasch briefly explored the exhaustion of the Populist and socialist movements in the early years of the twentieth century. In his treatment, Lasch emphasized that the Populists, in contrast to the socialists, were much more aligned with American traditions, less ideological, and more resistant to centralized bureaucracy and statism. The Populist vision, unlike socialism, did not require a long reeducation campaign nor a “fundamental restructuring of American society,” because it was firmly linked to American historical precedent.131 The Populists were not Marxists. Their views were grounded in the “democracy of Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln.”132 Populism persisted in various forms, including the “LaFollette wing of the progressive movement,” the brand of politics Lasch’s parents held dear and which included a strong strand of midwestern agrarianism and favored political and economic decentralization over statist central planning.133 It was the populist version of midwestern progressivism to which Lasch returned in the decades after The Agony of the American Left.134 By returning to this populism, Lasch was returning to his Nebraska roots. He had lessened his early intellectual focus on the theories of Marx and Freud—and his parents’ hostility to religion, a very un-Populist attribute—and returned to the midwestern populist tradition.

Lasch’s attempt to revitalize the tradition of American populism, and his promotion of older American political and cultural traditions in general, faced stiff opposition. For many years, Hofstadter and other historians had ridiculed the popular revival of interest in the American past as a “nostalgic” taste for “Americana.”135 “By the early sixties,” Lasch wrote, “denunciation of nostalgia had become a ritual, performed, like all rituals, with a minimum of critical reflection.”136 Lasch thought that the liberal intellectuals and cultural radicals who sought to dismiss the public appetite for history were foolishly casting away a wealth of traditions and precedents, including populism, which could revive American democracy. The attack on nostalgia, coupled with earlier depictions of a post–World War I “lost generation” and the emergence of the tendency to think in generational categories, led to a “shortening of historical attention, an inability to recall events beyond a single lifetime” and to the loss of the “connecting thread between earlier times and our own.”137 Lasch, as M. J. Heale explains, instead saw a “passionate
commitment to history as a means of understanding the present and perhaps improving the future.” Lasch placed particular hope in Americans who were products of farms and small towns because they tended to “carry the weight of a personal and collective history.”

These Americans, Lasch thought, lived day to day with historical consequences and were less susceptible to fads, “creating new identities,” and an “eclectic approach to history, appropriating whatever we need in order to piece together a ‘usable past.’” Lasch fought the attempt to construct or manipulate a “past” for ideological purposes and sought one grounded in custom and tradition.

Lasch’s devotion to preserving fading elements of the American past spurred his successful effort to rescue the Populists from years of derision at the hands of Richard Hofstadter. The triumph of Lasch, along with a number of lower-profile critics, over Hofstadter is given added texture and detail by David Brown in his exceptional biography of Hofstadter. Brown’s treatment of Hofstadter’s The Age of Reform, in which Hofstadter sets forth his critique of Populism, lends credence to Lasch’s suspicions of Hofstadter’s interpretation. Brown explains that Hofstadter’s dedication to urban cosmopolitanism and presentist fears of McCarthyism strongly colored his treatment of Populism. Brown notes how “Hofstadter’s tendency to overemphasize his insights left him vulnerable” and that, after serious doubts had been raised about his interpretation of Populism, “Hofstadter distanced himself from The Age of Reform’s most provocative claims.” Hofstadter admitted privately to Merle Curti, a native Nebraskan, that he had intentionally exaggerated Populist anti-Semitism for effect. Lasch’s celebration of Populism in The True and Only Heaven served as a coda to this long-running debate. Lasch’s book The Revolt of the Elites, published just after his death, delivered another blow to Hofstadter’s cosmopolitanism and, in a final allusion to Nebraska populism, denounced American elites for “turning their back on the heartland.” In Revolt, Lasch pointed once again to the “agrarian uprising” of the late nineteenth century as the “first round in a long, losing struggle to save the family farm” and, more generally, as a sign of the erosion of the nation’s republican and civic traditions.

Lasch’s and Hofstadter’s diverging visions of American history can tell us much about the role of the personal—in Lasch’s case, the role of the prairie—in historical interpretation. Lasch worked as Hofstadter’s research assistant at Columbia in the 1950s and they breathed the same intellectual air, shared the same generally liberal sensibilities, and disdained the politics of the Cold War. While Lasch thoroughly respected Hofstadter’s brilliance and his willingness to make bold and broad historical judgments, Lasch was not as taken with the supposed expertise of social scientists, as Hofstadter was, nor did he love New York City, which Hofstadter did. Their respective backgrounds in Nebraska and New York were unmistakable. Lasch saw a great tradition of civic-mindedness and republicanism on the prairie. Hofstadter doubted that the agrarian “golden age” defended by the Populists ever existed, but regardless of its existence, thought that “to live in that world, actually to enjoy its cherished promise and its imagined innocence, is no longer within our power.” In The True and Only Heaven, Lasch criticized H. L. Mencken and other critics of the midwestern small town and prairie life and came to “see Hofstadter as a latter-day version of H. L. Mencken, endlessly belaboring the ‘booboisie.’” In his later writings, Lasch was pointed about Hofstadter, but even as early as Lasch’s first year at the University of Iowa, Allan Bogue could detect Lasch’s aversion to Hofstadter’s treatment of the Populists and noted, as he wrote to Lasch, the young historian’s “deep sense of obligation to steep yourself in a Populist gestalt before you definitively refute Hofstadter.”

Although they viewed Populism and rural life differently, Lasch and Hofstadter also shared an important judgment. They were both disgusted by the New Left, appalled by its attacks on the university, and fearful of its
effects on democracy. The centrist liberalism that Hofstadter embodied was literally besieged by student radicals at Columbia, and he criticized their embrace of violence, the guerrilla theater performed for the benefit of television cameras, their purposeful baiting of the police as "pigs," and their mindless attacks on the "system." His student Robert Dalleck recalled that Hofstadter "was deeply disturbed by the irrationality of the Left." In 1970 Hofstadter said that if he got "around to writing a general history of the recent past, I'm going to call the chapter on the '60s 'The Age of Rubbish.'" Hofstadter died soon after this remark, but perhaps he would have joined Lasch's mid-1970s turn toward a growing respect for the traditions and mores of lower-middle-class Americans and tempered his assault on Populism. Alfred Kazin detected evidence of this potential turn, remembering Hofstadter as "a secret conservative in a radical period."

Along with finding some significance in Populism that Hofstadter, before his death, never did, perhaps Lasch's most powerful legacy—one shared at least partially with the late Hofstadter—is his searching and painful critique of the American Left. Lasch's strong credentials as a Leftist and supporter of socialism and his deep knowledge of radical theory made him an incisive critic of the Left with strong bona fides. Few others would have been listened to as closely as Lasch. Although it pained him to criticize his allies, and he was stung by the returning fire, his commitment to speaking truthfully was unwavering. And, Lasch thought, some members of the younger generation were eager to listen. Lasch sensed that students had become weary of the dogma of the cultural Left and that they wanted "to hear some plain words of truth" and be exposed to some "moral wisdom and intellectual guidance about the things that matter."

The hard truth, Lasch thought, was that the Left, in which he had put so much faith and to which he had dedicated so much energy, had led the nation astray. He thought the Left's commitment to uprooting American traditions ultimately threatened the workability of American democracy. The Left failed to understand the consequences of rootlessness and growing statism and was "impervious, as usual, to the sobering influence of events." The "left's quarrel with America," as Lasch called it, was based on its view of America as trapped in "backward, provincial habits." The Left was especially appalled at the "vast hinterland beyond the Alleghenies—the land of the Yahoo, the John Birch Society, and the Ku Klux Klan" and continually feared "being overwhelmed by America's backward culture." The postwar decades "seemed to confirm liberals in the belief that the ordinary American had never been a liberal and was unlikely to become one."

Lasch lost hope in liberal intellectuals' ability to engage in rigorous and analytical inquiries that could enlighten and renew the nation. He condemned "vaporous theorizing" and concluded that "there really isn't much room on the left for the kind of questioning that is really serious." Lasch thought that liberals were "single-mindedly obsessed with racism and ideological fanaticism" and that they consistently challenged the motives of those who dissented from this obsession. The academy was overtaken by "political correctness," he thought, and the process of serious debate had broken down, even in his department at Rochester, in which he once saw great promise: "There is a permanent sense of grievance; the whole institution is built on the politics of envy. It's a poisonous atmosphere, ruinous to any serious pursuit of learning." Lasch said the "worst people of all are in the humanities, which have been overtaken by refugees of the New Left who are opposed on principle to any form of structure, coherence, authority, or intellectual rigor—all these things being part of the cultural imperialism long visited on the world by dead white European males." Lasch saw the obsession with "race, class, and gender" as "a mess!"

Despite the resistance from academic colleagues, Lasch's arguments persuaded some younger scholars who found even more evidence of the influences of the cultural and social
traditions that Lasch emphasized. Lasch’s PhD students at Iowa included Donald Kirschner, William Powers, Glenn Smith, John Hopper, and Thomas Ryan, who all explored rural themes relating to the state’s treatment of traditional rural communities. At Rochester, Lasch oversaw the work of Charles Shindo, who sought to transcend the clichés about the Okie migration to California and to map the belief systems of rural migrants, or what he called “plain folk Americanism.” Shindo explained how liberal “reformers and artists excluded the migrants’ own voice from being heard,” purposely suppressed their embrace of religion and tradition, and “obscured the traditional and populist elements of Okie culture in favor of a liberal and progressive interpretation of the migrants’ aspirations.” Lasch similarly noted that progressives’ attacks on religion were linked to “rural reaction” and fears of a revival of religion and explained how liberals “have done their best to stamp [religion] out.” He praised Shindo for his ability to transcend “dogmatism, conformity, distrust of truly original works, [and] craven submission to the party line.” Lasch’s concern over the assault on the family, the church, the common culture, and the nation’s cultural tradition of “reticence and propriety” can also be found in the work of his student Rochelle Gurstein, who worked extensively with Lasch on her seminal research that explored these themes. Lasch’s intense interest in the culture of the petite bourgeoisie and the civic energy of small towns can also be found in Catherine McNicol Stock’s impressive history of the “old middle class” in the Dakotas, where the ownership of land and businesses was widespread, which fit with Lasch’s populist sympathies.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the supportive findings of younger scholars, Lasch’s vision, although powerful and searching, was not unobstructed. In his focus on the luminaries of the Left, Lasch missed or failed to engage some of the solid academic works produced by those who were less taken by the intellectual turn of the 1960s. Several historians working in the 1950s and 1960s had already questioned the wisdom of Hofstadter’s interpretation of American history. Lasch’s critique could be so unyielding because he did not always account for those who also dissented from the main currents of thought on the intellectual Left. Lasch’s scathing tone is what caused his critic, Louis Menand, to comment that Lasch’s writing had an “invasion-of-the-body snatchers urgency.” Lasch’s account of Populism, too, was based on a narrow reading of the movement—despite the existence of a vast, complex, and contradictory historiography of Populism—and did not include farmers who sought to work within the market system. Lasch’s criticism of capitalism was indiscriminate and failed to account for Populist-era farmers who were willingly market-oriented, for the Populist embrace of certain forms of modernity and progress, and more generally, for how capitalism could foster culture. Lasch’s writing could also be abstract and hard to understand, involve many fine and difficult distinctions, and rely on the grouping of ideas and people whose unifying characteristics were less than obvious. Even Lasch’s embrace of populism, which he saw as the basis of the cultural and social reforms he envisioned, suffered from vagueness.

For all his promotion of roots, Lasch was not overly concerned with his own. He did not dwell on the arrival of the German Lasches in the Midwest, nor on the story of German settlement in Nebraska, which Frederick Luebke studied so thoroughly. Instead of focusing on the Southern Populism of Lawrence Goodwyn and Steven Hahn, Lasch could have more thoroughly considered the characteristics of Northern Populism set forth in John D. Hicks’s treatment, The Populist Revolt, the first synthetic treatment of Populism, which dominated the field for decades, and a book Hicks wrote while a professor at the University of Nebraska. More generally, Lasch would have benefitted from a greater awareness of the Populist historiography first launched by the Prairie Historian Solon Buck and, in particular, from more recent works on Populism which...
focused on its grounding in rural republicanism. Lasch never said much about his fellow Nebraskan William Jennings Bryan either, despite Bryan’s representation of the “agrarian wing of the progressive movement whose roots were deeply embedded in Populism.” Lasch would abandon his parents’ intellectual, technocratic, and cosmopolitan progressivism in favor of Bryan’s rural, religious, and moralistic populism, but he did not directly connect this transition to his own Nebraska roots.

While Lasch’s cutting judgments were incisive and his social diagnoses exacting, an immersion in his writing can risk incapacitation. The centrifugal forces of social disintegration whirl so fast in Lasch’s work that his conception of chastened hope can at times seem pointless. Although Lasch never relented, he understood the potentially paralyzing results of extreme pronouncements, the risk that they could immobilize the public and deepen social inertia, and the danger of “the endless announcement of decadence” and the embrace of a “tone of unrelieved gloom.” Lasch’s dire warnings were surely heartfelt, but one wishes at times for more evidence to validate the doctrine of hope that Lasch set forth and for Lasch to recognize that more remnants of the old republican and religious traditions had survived than he intimated. At the moment of despair, however, when the reader’s mind approaches a saturation point about the difficulties ahead, Lasch offers a hopeful insight. The most despairing among us, Lasch told the graduating history majors at Rochester in 1993, are those who once suffered under the “big illusions” of ideology during the 1960s. The future, he wisely counseled, belonged to “a cold-eyed realism that is by no means incompatible with warm hearts.” Lasch, it might be said, was urging a form of prairie realism as a vision for overcoming the savage ideological wars of the twentieth century and the wanton attacks on the nation’s social and cultural foundations.

Regardless of its degree of intensity, the central thrust of Lasch’s critique of modern liberalism spoke some essential truths at crucial times in American letters. Lasch’s defense of American traditions against the withering attacks of cultural radicals stands as a testament to his bravery, his deep understanding of the Western canon, his honesty and independence, and his commitment to the historical past. He embraced the various strands of populism as a model for reforming and renewing American culture because populism, both the political movement connected to Lasch’s Nebraska heritage and its more general form, stood “for things most Americans still believe in and are willing to defend.” Lasch’s importance lies in his recognition of the fundamental qualities necessary for the survival of American democracy and the need to defend them, and in his attempts to repair the “devastated realm of the political.”

As Eric Miller concludes in his elegant rendering of the force of Lasch’s writing, “Democracy, like all good things, was a tenuous achievement, in need of vigilant, jealous defense.” Lasch’s vigilance, rooted in prairie populism and regionalist sentiments, still lives on in the corpus of his work and in our democratic hopes.

NOTES

6. For Lasch’s general attention to the petite bourgeoisie, the worker, and agrarian resistance to modern progress, small “p” populism is used in this article. For references to the formal political move-
ment of farmers during the late nineteenth century, capital “P” Populism is used. Lasch understood that “populism” could be a “rather slippery term.” Peggy Brawer and Sergio Benvenuto, “An Interview with Christopher Lasch,” Telos 97 (Fall 1993): 125.

7. Lasch to Leon Fink, July 7, 1980, Christopher Lasch Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester (hereinafter Lasch Papers).


10. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 4.


12. Ibid., 39, 41.

13. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 5. Robert said he “always liked Miss Cather’s story of a visit to Red Cloud, her home town, after she became famous. Finding an old friend buying her latest book at the drug store, Miss Cather offered to sign it for her. ‘Thanks, Miss Willy,’ said the farm lady, ‘but I’m buying the book for a gift, and I don’t want no writing in it.’” Lasch, “What I Remember,” 47.


20. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 17.


23. Ibid., 78.

24. Ibid., 80.


31. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 21; Lasch to Barrington Moore, April 30, 1970, Lasch Papers.


34. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 18.

35. Ibid., 30.

36. Ibid., 23.

37. Ibid., 24.

38. Ibid., 35.


40. Lasch visited Iowa in January 1961 and “was pleased and impressed. It seems a decent sort of place and the department congenial.” Lasch to William Leuchtenburg, January 30, 1961, Leuchtenburg Papers.

41. Allan Bogue to Lasch, December 9, 1960, Lasch Papers; Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 64. When Lasch was hired, William Leuchtenburg noted that “Iowa has made the most substantial canvass of any university in the country this year.” Leuchtenburg to Lasch, February 6, 1961, Leuchtenburg Papers. Bogue recently recalled that he “liked [Lasch] and tried to accommodate him more than normal” and that Lasch “was very considerate of others.” Bogue to author, August 1 and August 30, 2010. When Bogue moved to Wisconsin, he tried to hire Lasch again. Allan Bogue to Lasch, October 22, 1965, Lasch Papers. Prairie Historian, Nebraska native, and Wisconsin Professor Merle Curti regretted Lasch’s decision to remain at Iowa. Merle Curti to Lasch, November 3, 1965, Lasch Papers. On a potential move to Wisconsin, Lasch wondered if he “could really stand living quite that close to the new left.” Lasch to William Appleman Williams, January 25, 1968, Lasch Papers.

42. Allan Bogue to Lasch, January 5, 1961, Lasch Papers.

43. Allan Bogue to Lasch, January 23, 1961 and Lasch to Bogue, January 30, 1961, Lasch Papers. The Iowa history department placed a strong emphasis upon democratic decision-making and recorded the votes of major decisions in the departmental minutes. William O. Aydelotte to Allan Bogue, June 29, 1959, Aydelotte Papers, University of Iowa Libraries; Stow Persons, “History at Iowa: The Modern Era,” 2–5, University of Iowa Libraries. Professor William Aydelotte moved to hire Lasch and the motion was seconded by Professor Alan Spitzer. Minutes of the Meeting of the Department of History, January 20, 1961, Records of the Department of History, University of Iowa Libraries. Spitzer recalled the “brilliant promise of [Lasch’s] dissertation” and how the “radio broadcast of [Lasch’s] lectures stimulated widespread admiration in the Iowa City community.” Spitzer to author, May 4, 2012. Lasch’s lectures were broadcast by WSUI. Stow Persons to Lasch, July 31, 1962, and Lasch to Allan Bogue, August 21, 1962, Lasch Papers. The focus on recent American history at Iowa had been started by Arthur Schlesinger Sr., who was originally from Ohio and who advocated that the department promote meetings of historians of Iowa and Iowa history teachers to “build a feeling of regional community.” Persons, “History at Iowa,” 9, 12. Lasch took the place of Samuel Hays, who became departmental chairman at the University of Pittsburgh. Allan Bogue to Lasch, December 9, 1960, Lasch Papers; Persons, “History at Iowa,” 9.


46. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 68, 82; Lasch to William Leuchtenburg, September 30, 1961, Leuchtenburg Papers.

47. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 137 (source of quote); Lasch to William Leuchtenburg, September 30, 1961, Leuchtenburg Papers.

48. Some of Lasch’s critiques of the nation’s Cold War policies which were written while at Iowa can be found in old issues of the Iowa Defender, including Lasch, “Arthur Schlesinger and ‘Pragmatic Liberalism,’ Part I: The Cult of the Hard Boiled,” Iowa Defender (April 29, 1963), Lasch records, Staff Vertical File, University of Iowa Libraries. For a sample of Lasch’s furious opposition to American foreign policy during the Cuban missile crisis, see the draft of his unsent letter to Iowa U.S. Senator Jack Miller. Lasch to Jack Miller, October 18, 1962, Lasch Papers (unsent).

49. “History as Social Criticism,” 1321; Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 27; “A Voice of Dissent,” 20; Carey McWilliams to Lasch, May 18, 1965,

50. John Wunder to author, August 20, 2010.
53. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 65.
55. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 92–93.
56. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 95 (source of quote); Fred Siegel, “The Agony of Christopher Lasch,” Reviews in American History 8, no. 3 (September 1980): 288.
57. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 95.
59. One reviewer noted that Lasch “was born and now teaches in the Middle West,” had “not succumbed to any of the obvious forms of intellectualism now flourishing in the Eastern United States,” and that neither the “New Frontier nor the New Left appeal to him.” Ramsay Cook, review of The New Radicalism in America, International Journal 20, no. 4 (Autumn 1965): 549.
63. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 132, 113.
64. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 29.
73. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 145.
75. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 146.
76. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 25.
78. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 168.
79. Ibid., 171.
80. Ibid., 175.
81. Lasch, “Politics and Social Theory,” Salmagundi, no. 46 (Fall 1979): 199; Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 178.
84. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 190 (source of quotation); Lasch, “Politics and Social Theory: A Reply to the Critics,” Salmagundi, no. 46 (Fall 1979):

85. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 215; Lasch, The True and Only Heaven; Lasch, "The Cultural Civil War and the Crisis of Faith," Katallagete 8 (Summer 1982): 14. Lasch memorably wrote that the "cultural vanguard has become a rear guard. It attacks bastions long since surrendered: the patriarchal family, repressive sexual morality, the conventions of literary realism." Lasch, "Recovering Reality," Salmagundi, no. 42 (Summer–Fall 1978): 44. For his critique, Lasch said he was "regarded by feminists as public enemy no. 1" and also a "target of the rest of the left." Lasch to Jim Holloway, February 20, 1979, Holloway Papers.

86. Lasch, "Beyond Left and Right," review of Why Americans Hate Politics by E.J. Dionne, Dissent, Fall 1991, 588.


88. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 238.

89. Ibid., 28–29.

90. Ibid.


95. Lasch to Jim Holloway, August 22, 1980, Lasch Papers.


97. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 232 (source of quotation); Brawer and Benvenuto, "An Interview with Christopher Lasch," 125.

98. Brawer and Benvenuto, "An Interview with Christopher Lasch," 127.


105. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 265 (mis-guided quote); Lasch, "What's Wrong with the Right?" 26 (conceived quote).


109. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 259. Lasch's father wrote to him to remind him that Zora's
father's cooperative grain elevator suffered because farmers would sell to the commercial elevator when it paid higher prices for grain. Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time*, 260n30. Lasch's father also noted that when the "price of corn, hogs and wheat" increased during the 1930s "farmers returned to their natural home of political conservatism." Lasch, "What I Remember," 78. Lasch also mentions farmer cooperatives in *The Revolt of the Elites*, 81–82.


12. Lasch saw farmer cooperatives as an "alternative to the welfare state" and as part of the Populists' support for "non-bureaucratic solutions." Lasch, "Liberalism and Civic Virtue," 67.


27. Steven Hahn to Lasch, September 26, 1983, Lasch Papers; Steven Hahn to Lasch, September 18, 1979, Lasch Papers; Hahn, *The Roots of Southern
Populism, ix. Although Hahn's study began as a paper in Lasch's seminar at Rochester, it "was inspired first by the work of C. Vann Woodward, then by works of a whole variety of historians and social scientists interested in popular movements, then by labor historians like [E. P.] Thompson and [Eric] Hobsbawm, and then by social historians working on rural America who were challenging the place of capitalism in US history," Hahn to author, September 20, 2010; Hahn to Lasch, September 26, 1983, Lasch Papers; Hahn to Lasch, February 16, 1974, Lasch Papers. In graduate school at Yale, Hahn's first advisor was C. Vann Woodward, but his dissertation was completed under the supervision of Howard Lamar. On Lamar's use of Populist history, see Jon Lauck, "The Old Roots of the New West: Howard Lamar and the Intellectual Origins of Dakota Territory," Western Historical Quarterly 39 (Autumn 2008): 268–69.

128. Lasch to Steven Hahn, October 16, 1979, Lasch Papers. While teaching at the University of Iowa, Lasch also taught Southern history. Christopher Lasch Vertical File, University of Iowa Libraries; Lasch to William Leuchtenburg, June 9, 1963, Leuchtenburg Papers.


132. Lasch, The Agony of the American Left, 6. Lasch criticized Norman Pollack's The Populist Response to Industrial America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), which saw Populism as a form of socialism, for resting "almost entirely on verbal correspondences; it is arrived at by piecing together a series of quotations abstracted from their context and treated with equal weight, without regard for speaker or occasion, so as to form a wholly synthetic system which is then attributed to the Populists themselves." Lasch, The Agony of the American Left, 5–6n4. Earlier, Lasch had discussed some prominent works of Populist history and questioned the reactionary label applied to the Populists and wondered if "perhaps Populism was one of the last expressions of what once had been a flourishing provincial culture." Lasch, review of The Populist Response to Industrial America by Norman Pollack and The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism by T. K. Nugent, Pacific Historical Review 33, no. 1 (February 1964): 72. Lasch also criticizes Pollack's treatment of Populist anti-Semitism in a letter to the editor, American Historical Review 68, no. 3 (April 1963): 910–11.

133. Lasch, The Agony of the American Left, 5; Lasch, "Herbert Croly's America," New York Review, July 1, 1965, 19. Although Wisconsin "was never Populist territory," according to John D. Hicks, "it would be hard to find another American of the period more thoroughly representative of Middle Western agrarianism" than Robert LaFollette.

134. In 1972 Lasch also noted the "preindustrial" resistance of peasants and artisans to modern progress and found "highly suggestive [Barrington] Moore's remark, in Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy, that revolutions are set in motion not by emerging classes but by classes over whom the wheel of progress is about to roll." Lasch, The World of Nations, 107.


136. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 116; Brawer and Benvenuto, "An Interview with Christopher Lasch," 126.

137. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 109, 112. A more positive portrayal of small town and rural life which embraced the image of a "lost Eden" that could not be recovered similarly "diminishes the past," Lasch thought, and blinds us to "the influence of the past on the present." Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 118.


140. Ibid.

141. Lasch, "On Richard Hofstadter," New York Review, March 8, 1973, 7–13. Lasch grew frustrated with the "radical" history of Staughton Lynd because, as he wrote to Lynd, to "you the radical tradition is sacred and must not be analyzed, except
142. Lasch thought that Hofstadter’s argument was that a “sentimental agrarian myth [had] distorted political thinking and [had] prevented Americans from coming to grips with the urban, industrial civilization their country was destined to produce.” Lasch, “The Politics of Nostalgia,” 67. Goodwyn’s book Democratic Promise “tried to sideline Hofstadter, which Lasch appreciated.” Lawrence Goodwyn interview, April 20, 2012.


146. Ibid., 96.


149. Allan Bogus to Lasch, December 20 [probably 1962], Lasch Papers. While at the University of Iowa, Lasch was close to publishing a 3,000-word article about Populism in the New York Times Magazine, but the editor decided it was not focused enough on “American politics today.” Harvey Shapiro to Lasch, June 24, 1965, and Harvey Shapiro to Lasch, November 24, 1965, Lasch Papers. The draft of this article on Populism is located in the Lasch Papers.


153. Ibid., 226.

154. On Hofstadter’s alienation from the Left and Lasch’s debt to him, see Lasch to Warren Susman, October 26, 1970, Lasch Papers.


156. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 367.


158. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 35.


160. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 37.

161. Lasch to Lawrence Goodwyn, December 23, 1990, Lasch Papers (vaporous quote); Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 302 (questioning quote).


164. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 363.

165. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 363; Lasch, The Revolt of the Elites, 182.


171. While “workers” outnumbered “proprietors” by a margin of three to one in New York, for example, the opposite was true in the Dakotas. Catherine McNicol Stock, Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 42. Drawing on Lasch, Stock explains how this old order of decentralized ownership and middle-class hegemony has been “relegated to the scrap heap of politically incorrect historiography” (7). Lasch said that “Stock’s book on the old middle class manages the unusual feat of treating with sympathy and respect the kind of people who usually serve merely as the target of sophisticated ridicule.” See dust jacket of Main Street in Crisis. On the origins of this social order in South Dakota, see Jon Lauck, Prairie Republic: The Political Culture of Dakota Territory, 1979–1889 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010). For a new treatment of Populism in South Dakota, see R. Alton Lee, Principle Over Party: The Farmers’ Alliance and Populism in South Dakota, 1880–1900 (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011); and Jon Lauck review, Montana: The Magazine of Western History vol. 62, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 71–78.


175. Leon Fink to Lasch, August 1, 1980, Lasch Papers; Steven Hahn to author, September 20, 2010.

176. Frederick C. Luebke, Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880–1900 (Lincoln:


182. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 371.

183. Lasch to David Marr, December 27, 1980, Lasch Papers.

184. Miller, Hope in a Scattering Time, 369.