

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

# Toward A (Not *The*) Political Philosophy Of Populism: Democracy, Moral Dualism And Minimalst Theory In Christopher Lasch

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## Abstract

I compare Christopher Lasch's thought to specific features that research in political science attributes to contemporary populism. Lasch openly favoured a historical form of populism but is rarely considered when current forms of populism are discussed. The research literature characterizes populism as superficially tied to democracy while undermining it, as committed to the moral binary of people and elites, and as intellectually "thin" because it does not engage with the complex theories that ground other ideologies. These characters make populism incoherent and inimical to democracy. Lasch manifests all three characters while connecting them to a sustained worldview. Humans' awareness of death is the core feature that makes them rational, ethical and equal. Attempts to dilute that awareness are inimical to the equality at democracy's basis. Experts and professionals encourage this dilution by promising remedies and progress. Democracy depends on ordinary people who resist elites and their complex phraseologies.

## Résumé

Je compare la pensée de Christopher Lasch aux caractéristiques spécifiques que la recherche en sciences politiques attribue au populisme contemporain. Lasch a ouvertement favorisé une forme historique de populisme, mais il est rarement pris en compte lorsque l'on discute des formes actuelles de populisme. La littérature caractérise le populisme comme étant superficiellement lié à la démocratie tout en la minant, comme étant engagé dans la binaire morale du peuple et des élites, et comme étant intellectuellement « mince » parce qu'il ne s'engage pas dans les théories complexes qui fondent d'autres idéologies. Ces personnages rendent le populisme incohérent et hostile à la démocratie. Lasch manifeste ces trois caractères tout en les reliant à une vision du monde durable. La conscience de la mort chez les humains est la caractéristique essentielle qui les rend rationnels, éthiques et égaux. Les tentatives de dilution de cette conscience vont à l'encontre de l'égalité qui est à la base de la démocratie. Les experts et les professionnels

encouragent cette dilution en promettant des remèdes et des progrès. La démocratie dépend des gens ordinaires qui résistent aux élites et à leurs phraséologies complexes.

**Keywords:** democracy (20th century); tragedy; civic virtue; elites; liberalism

**Mots-clés:** démocratie (XXe siècle); tragédie; civisme; élites; libéralisme

The fast-expanding scholarship on populism pays scant attention to Christopher Lasch, the public intellectual who wrote that “[p]opulism is the authentic voice of democracy” (Lasch 1995: 106). This oversight is understandable. Lasch is primarily known for commenting on the particularities of American society and culture in the 1970s and 1980s. By contrast, in the various contexts where populism currently appears, it attaches to themes that Lasch does not emphasize, such as defending a perceived national identity or revering the symbols of its past. Moreover, exhorting moral discipline and truthfulness, Lasch can come across as a stern and high-minded educator who bears no similarity to the crowd-pleasing agitators prevalently associated with populism.

However, I suggest that Lasch’s perspective may lend the current phenomenon of populism a rudimentary coherence and possibly clarify some of the contradictions that observers find in it. I compare elements of Lasch’s work to the characters detected in populism by the political research literature and trace the ways in which Lasch grants an intellectual basis to these characters. I argue that Lasch may show how populist thought can fundamentally rather than just partially attach to democracy. He may account for the particular virtue ascribed to the people in populist rhetoric and ground the matching condemnation of the elites. Lasch’s work may similarly shed light on the conceptual thinness that scholars attribute to populism.

Two disclaimers are required. First, I do not argue that Lasch holds the key to understanding the thinking behind all populist manifestations. Instead, I propose that when examined as an effort toward formulating populist thought, Lasch’s work can give substance to positions that are blurred by the several differing settings in which populism is now researched. Second, Lasch’s views developed throughout his life and therefore include variations and contradictions. Here, however, I read the works Lasch published from the mid-1970s down to his death in 1994 as a single document. I assume that a roughly unified rationale lies behind most of what Lasch wrote and that changes within this oeuvre reflect nuances of that rationale. This assumption is obviously open to disproof.

The section immediately below outlines the current research on populism and isolates three themes within it: populism’s association with a notion of democracy that stresses the electorate relative to other institutional components, populism’s moral contrast of elites and people and populism’s minimal engagement with comprehensive social and economic theory. The subsequent sections then address Lasch’s ideas when considered alongside each of these three themes, as well as gauge the gap still left between the overall bent of Lasch’s thought and populist conduct as currently described by researchers.

## Populism at the Millennium

Populist movements present themselves as standing for the people's will while questioning institutions that function as democracy's gatekeepers (Rummens 2017). Populist trends are seen as significant to such events as the secession of Britain from the European Union, the upheavals of the Trump presidency, the breakup of veteran parties in apparently stable democracies such as France, the corresponding persistence of mass protests in these countries and the democratic backsliding detected in several regions of the world (Abts and Rummens 2007; Bernhard 2020; Caiani and Graziano 2019; Guilluy 2019; Mair 2013; Pappas 2019; Revelli 2019; Urbinati 2019a; Urbinati 2019b; Wilkin 2020; Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018; and Zaslove et al 2021). Populist motivations are associated with reluctance to collude with measures enacted to combat COVID-19 and limit the speed and effects of climate change (Chapelan 2021; Eberl et al 2021). Alerted by these developments, political scholarship works to describe and understand populism. Three main observations arise from this effort.

First, late-modern populism is a concomitant of constitutional democracy, feeding off its endemic tensions and emphasizing some of its elements at the expense of others (Arditi 2007; Mavrozacharakis 2018; Taguieff 1997). Unlike the comparable phenomenon that nineteenth-century Europe called Caesarism, late-modern populism does not overly aim to install a single ruler. While cherishing certain leaders as authentically representing the people, populism remains at least verbally attached to democratic tenets. In office, populist leaders continue to seek popular legitimacy (Urbinati 2019b). At the same time, populism disrupts democracy's internal balances. While post-World War democracy upheld the principle of majority rule, that polity was also increasingly equated with an order governed by procedures and institutions regardless of who is in power and was concomitantly understood as geared to delivering prosperity and welfare. Social segments that felt bested within this order responded by stressing democracy's other component, that of the citizen body's authority (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). These segments flocked to populist movements that elevate civic decision to the extent of compromising constitutional balances, individual rights and the safety of vulnerable groups (Urbinati 2019a).

Second, populism speaks in the morally binary terms of a virtuous people and a corrupt elite. It is in the name of the wronged people that populists advocate majoritarian decision as democracy's substantial feature. The people manifests itself through electing leaders, while the elites embattle themselves in the interconnected strongholds of media, academia, finance, the judiciary and the so-called deep state, all of which confine the scope of elected institutions. In populist rhetoric, the people are endowed with the attributes of being authentic and sincere while the elites are seen as posturing and deceiving (Canovan 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The binary thought habit involved in this attitude to elites and people infuses populism's entire vocabulary with a propensity to draw sharp contrasts: anything is either good or corrupt, a trait that tends to undermine the practices of negotiation and compromise entailed by the democratic process (Webber 2023).

Third, populism is short on logical and philosophical coherence. The familiar ideological clusters that have long vied for influence in Western democracies

enjoy solid backgrounds in social and economic theory, as in the complex arguments made for retaining the open market, in those advanced for nationalizing the economy and in those made for harnessing the market to the welfare state. Populism does not share this sophistication, offering no integrated explanation of how economy, society or history operate. Canovan (1999) notes the ineloquence of populist presentation. Dialectical thinkers describe populism as an antithesis of late-modern liberal democracy: the only language in which perceptions can be couched belongs to the thesis, leaving populism with few means of coherent expression (Laclau 2007). Other authors interpret populism as a performative stance that has no ideational core (Aslanidis 2016). Without a structured worldview to rely on, populists ransack left and right notions opportunistically, drawing no obliging conclusions from them (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Stanley 2008; Vittori 2017). This lack of cognitive depth fuels populism's tortured relationship with democracy, as populism compensates for its verbal and logical weakness by cultivating an emotional, visceral register when addressing the public. The never-exactly-defined people takes on a mythical quality that lends itself to nationalist and racist exclusion. The nature of the threats populism mobilizes against remains similarly dim, as it is not anchored in solid definitions (Brubaker 2020). Without such definitions, the generalized dislike of elites contributes to an atmosphere in which anyone can be scapegoated (Gagnon et al 2018).

These characterizations impact the methodological lenses that scholars apply to populism. If populism has little cognitive content while being parasitical on democracy, then it should be approached as a disturbance that calls for an inquiry into its circumstances. Populism is accordingly examined as a communicative channel through which politicians mobilize the masses or analyzed in the terms of individual and mass psychology (Acemoglu et al 2013; Richards 2019). Searching for causal accounts, several authors focus on the market's role in creating the dislocation that nourishes populism, while others centre on analyses of infrastructural development patterns (Moffitt 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018; Rancière 2014; Rodrik 2018). Research in political theory, meanwhile, tasks itself with providing the intellectual resources needed to assuage populism's harm as one would do with an environmental force (Alston 2017; Müller 2016, 2018; Wolkenstein 2015).

Consequently, the internal workings of populist thought remain underexplored. In particular, the above characterizations of populism call for an explanation of how they can make sense together as parts of the same perspective. If populism is synergistic with modern democracy, how can this square with the seemingly disproportionate significance it attributes to civic choice at the expenses of rights and constitutional balances, or coexist with the prevalence of a moral binary that might aid exclusion and closure of free discussion? If this can be put down by referring to populism's intellectual thinness and its avoidance of a comprehensive philosophy with which to ground stable priorities, then where does populism find the normative scale that convincingly establishes the elite's toxicity and the people's virtue? In the next section, I begin to discuss Lasch's work as a basis for insights into these issues.

## Lasch: An Overview

Born in 1932, Lasch was a historian of American social movements who initially adopted the modified Marxism of the Frankfurt School. Critical theory's trademark combination of materialist analysis and psychoanalytical insights manifests in most of Lasch's work, as he sought to explore the conditioning of culture and mind by class. However, Lasch became skeptical about the left-leaning, progressive and liberal stances held by the American intelligentsia whose background he shared. According to his biographer, Lasch developed a sense of distance from established intellectuals, criticizing them for perpetuating their respective guilds while congratulating themselves for fostering what they presented as critical thinking (Miller 2010: 47). This unease was aggravated by the evolution of Lasch's research pursuits. Prompted by what he thought was educated Western observers' failure to thoroughly understand Soviet conduct, Lasch began to look into these observers' ideas and social grounding as a preliminary for analyzing their perceptual rigidity (Lasch 1965). The ensuing investigation led Lasch in the late 1960s to positions described as culturally conservative. As he questioned the prevalent beliefs of the educated middle class, he became more positive on the role of tradition, while commending the integrity of the family and castigating feminism alongside other advanced viewpoints for subverting that integrity (Menand 1997; Scialabba 2015).

The coexistence in Lasch's work of such positions with the enduring presence of Marxist notions makes him difficult to locate ideologically, causing his inputs to be recruited by actors who are politically wide apart (Bender 2012: 739; Kahan 2018). A fruitful approach to understanding Lasch's place on the opinion spectrum consists in viewing him as an internal critic of the late-modern liberalism associated with the centre-left in the United States and beyond. Mattson (2017) writes that Lasch desires to remedy liberalism's shortfalls by strengthening some of its neglected principles. The issue is further explored by Barndt (2019), who deploys Lasch's position to reflect back on the critical-theory-related readings of concurrent politics. Lasch apparently shared this assessment of his role as a friendly examiner of progressive and liberal perceptions, warning that an intellectual tradition that cannot criticize itself has probably become moribund (Lasch 1995: 81). "If I seem to spend a lot of time attacking liberalism and the Left," he wrote, "that should be taken more as a mark of respect than one of dismissal" (Blake and Phelps 1994: 1311).

This characterization is coloured by Lasch's approving attitude to the nineteenth-century American radicalism credited as the first movement to identify as populist (Chapelan 2020). As scholars have noted, Lasch uses history as a means to a programmatic end within the present (Lauck 2012, Kilminster 2008, Romani 2014). Lasch finds the older radicalism both intellectually coherent overall and close enough to liberalism's foundations to provide a platform from which to criticize the directions taken by liberal democracy. Far from being a temperamental rejection of liberalism, nineteenth-century populism embodied ideas derived from thought schools within which liberal notions played a crucial role. Earlier in modernity, a republican tradition for which full political participation was the preserve of the morally select debated a liberalism that unmoored basic entitlements from dependence on merit. But with the growth of densely populated cities and the

stratification of classes, it became possible to associate virtue with the moral discipline that supposedly simple, mainly rural people were believed to exercise, distinguishing them from the effete urban rich (Lasch 1995: 8–9). Republican moralism was joined to liberalism's individualist and formally egalitarian pull. The ensuing synthesis was populism, the creed that associated democracy and political freedom with the ethical codes of everyday people (Lasch 1991: 223–5).

In the nineteenth century, populism stood for independent holders of middling and small agricultural properties who grouped together to counter the effects of the turn toward wage labour and the corresponding growing reach of strong metropolitan actors. The position held by these agrarian proprietors was subsequently inherited by the suburban working and middle classes of the twentieth century, alongside the alignment of concepts involved in it (Beer 2005). Encountering the expanding meritocracies, they sense as disruptive to their way of life and their beliefs, these classes' outlook centres on the value of individual self-reliance and sense of responsibility (Lasch 1995: 83). It is tied to democracy's egalitarian feature and resists authority if it looks down on people's mundane choices and opinions, even when such condescension is phrased as deriving from a wish to aid these people: populism, Lasch (1995: 106) writes, "is unimpressed by...exalted social rank, but it is equally unimpressed by claims of moral superiority."

Lasch then discusses populist tenets as related to democracy's philosophical basis and as retaining their relevance throughout the decades. It is, therefore, possible to study the resulting perspective in the light of the research literature's characterization of populism. The next section proceeds with this exploration by considering Lasch's understanding of the relationship between democracy and the independence of the civic sphere.

### The Particularity of the Civic Sphere

As detailed above, political research describes populism as imputing special value to the people when their will is expressed collectively as citizens and voters. This allows populists to depict majority decision as standing for something that bureaucratic and juridical bodies, the rule of law and the orderly functioning of individual rights do not deliver. Lasch, to be clear, does not unambiguously endorse such claims. He is wary of emotional appeals to collective identities and vehement divisions (Lasch 1991: 446; 1995: 47–9). However, he views the space where civic decision is arrived at through majority vote as expressing a crucial aspect of democracy that its other features do not similarly convey. Lasch places this idea within a justificatory framework that also confines that notion's significance by linking it to other ideas. His framework relies on a perception of humans as distinguished by their common awareness of their own limits as embodied in mortality. While differing by circumstances and tastes, we all share the realization that we inhabit a universe that is not configured to indefinitely accommodate us. We have to live with scarcity, competition and failure. Not all goods can be had. We are forced to choose among equally valued ends and pay high prices for these choices. We are marked from other species by our sense of tragedy (Beiner 1997; Deneen 2005: 260–9; Elshtain 1999).

This dwelling on limits might be understood as precipitating a reactionary approach that is inimical to sustaining an aspiration toward liberty. Lasch acknowledges the possibility of such a reading, commenting that gloom is not very well regarded by educated opinion (Lasch 1991: 23). However, the characterization of humans as particularly aware of their limits echoes known formulations of liberal philosophy, such as Kant's account, in which reason is attained through the separation of wish and fact while the fundamentals of morality are gained from understanding that there is an entire universe beyond our needs and desires. If Lasch criticizes Kant's decoupling of morality from social institutions, his own position is still one that bases rationality and ethics on the distinction of facts and values (Lasch 1991: 125–6). Death makes the mismatch between desire and the objective world concrete to us, teaching us that reality does not bow to our will. However, awareness of facts grants us some command over them, permitting us to shape reality in our effort to thrive. The “fear of death,” Lasch writes, acquires us with the realization that humanity “belongs to the natural world, but has the capacity to transcend it” (Lasch 1984: 180). The same reflectivity encourages each of us to acknowledge that everyone else is likewise vulnerable and reflective, as much of the difficulty that educates us into accepting objectivity comes from the resistance of other wills. While the essential scarcity can cause us to fight for resources, it also grounds appreciation for the effort, skill and determination that others call upon when facing the same predicament as we (Lasch 1991: 531). Whatever differences divide us, none of us is immune to death, and all of us have some potentiality of controlling our lives. Reason and equality are alike rooted in our knowledge of existential adversity (Lasch 1984: 253–9).

Constitutional democracy, as envisioned by Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Paine, processes these insights into a regime geared to secure liberties as spaces where responsibilities can be sustained. As all people are mortal and all are potentially rational, each person is equally entitled to apply their own discretion when tackling necessity (Lasch 1991: 177–80). The political bodies empowered to guarantee these entitlements are similarly grounded in the tragic premise. As they recognize the inevitable risks and pains of private life, citizens also accept the uncertainties and responsibilities of shared existence. The outcome is a polity where people can be their best possible selves, as they can freely choose to draw on their emotional and intellectual strengths while simultaneously considering others and collaborating with them. Echoing Carlyle and Whitman, Lasch characterizes democracy as a “world of heroes” (Lasch 1995: 89).

Private and civic existence enrich each other, as when individuals educated toward respectful independence through the experiences of private life apply these virtues in the service of the collectivity. However, private choice should be shielded from the authority of the collective, lest personal discretion, the dignity of shouldering responsibility and the sense of agency are distorted by fear of institutional power or by the expectation of power's favours. Lasch's insistence on the autonomy of privacy grounds some of his more acrimonious public statements, such as those directed against policy agendas meant to encourage a more egalitarian home life. Lasch endorses gender equality as an ethical end (Lasch 1984: 170). He, nonetheless, criticizes calls to restructure the household for encroaching, as he sees it, on people's everyday discretion and assumption of responsibility. These

positions have triggered a volatile exchange between Lasch and major feminist authors (Benjamin 1988: 136–41, 156–9; Gerson 2023; Lasch 1978: 159–61; 1984: 242–44; Miller 2010: 213–15).

If Lasch expects collective bodies to hold back from the private realm, he thinks that these bodies, too, should in their own way be regarded as autonomous. Tracing the populism, he favours to a synthesis of the liberal and republican traditions, he notes the moral role that citizenship played for republican authors such as Machiavelli and Rousseau: when required to decide together where no assurance of results can be had, citizens can manifest their fullest capabilities (Lasch 1991: 172–4). To these insights, Lasch adds that citizenship redresses a discrepancy caused by the autonomy of the private sphere. The prospects of death make people equal, but life differentiates them, as individuals stratify according to circumstances and abilities. If equality is to retain the place granted to it by the awareness of mortality and the potentiality of reason, we should tenaciously preserve the artifice of an identical and universally distributed stake in the body politic. Citizenship stands out among our affiliations as it “equalizes people who are otherwise unequal” (Lasch 1995: 88). The collective authority of the civic sphere merits respect for this unique egalitarianism and should therefore be committing. Lasch is critical of attempts to overrule democratic choice by juridical intervention. Even when undertaken in the name of democratic values, such intervention might sap people’s sense of agency, undermining liberalism’s own commitment to equal liberty (Lasch 1991: 409–10).

In an Aristotelian vein, Lasch upholds the incomparable role of the arena where equals assemble to rule and be ruled through collective decision, giving it gravity when having to contend with the claims of other institutions (Deneen 2005: 264). This does not mean that the aggregate of citizens is always right, that the policies it pursues channel a pristine authenticity or that it has a collective destiny to fulfill. Our expectations from democracy’s politics do not include any exemption from failure and error. As our private actions should neither be excessively limited by authority nor assured of favourable outcomes, we should accept that our shared public action is marked by uncertainty and involves a laborious, friction-saturated process. The specific emphasis that populism places on civic decision is thus justified from the same grounds as democracy itself, along with the functions that rights and law play within it.

## Ethical Poles

These ideas invest Lasch’s presentation with a moral hierarchy. The prevalence of difficulty, danger and failure renders everyday challenges worthy ethical guides. They teach limits and the distance of wish and fact, allowing us to become rational and act ethically. By contrast, promises of delivery from adversity through the application of knowledge and expertise should be suspected, as should the meritocracies that offer them. Such promises tempt us to trade away our ability to act under perpetual uncertainty for a magical world in which we have more entitlements but less responsibility or agency.

When translated into sociological terms, this moral compass places the working and lower-middle classes composed of skilled labourers and local business owners



in a superior position when facing the tertiary-educated higher-middle classes. The working and lower-middle classes carry the remnants of the ethos espoused by the proprietors of earlier modernity. Central to that ethos is the notion of taking responsibility for one's own life by accepting the discipline of work and family. Lacking the assurance of moneyed inheritance or an institutional position, the working and lower-middle classes realize that pleasure and success are not default conditions which we categorically deserve: "they understand, as their betters do not, that there are inherent limits on human control over the course of social development, our nature and the body, over the tragic elements in human life and history" (Lasch 1995: 28). But as harsh as the world is, we may still improve our lot and show our worth by drawing applicable conclusions from the distinction of fact and desire. The groups that directly witness the connection of sustained effort and tangible result gain from it pride in their own competence, of whose vulnerability they are made conscious by that same experience (Lasch 1995: 7–8). Setbacks and deprivations are normal occurrences that call for fortitude, a value transmitted to the young through parental example and through the parent-child hierarchy itself, as that hierarchy manifests the link between authority and responsibility (Lasch 1995: 108–9).

These are Lasch's benevolent players. His antagonists are similarly grounded in the specifics of history and economy. In the nineteenth century, they had been the robber barons, the railway companies and their allies in banking and the legal profession. In the next century, these have been supplemented by the social segments that benefit from technological advances, the expansion of communication means and the dynamics of globalization (Lasch 1995: 33–5). Across different lifelines, salaried executives and professionals have displaced owners, a development that distances authority and income from responsibility while rendering acquired knowledge, rather than initiative and risk-taking, the condition of power and status. Professional elites interact with similar classes elsewhere and gradually separate themselves from their local hinterland in act and symbol, framing their relationships with that hinterland in the top-down vocabularies of human-resource management and of providing services for the needy (Lasch 1991: 466–8; 1995: 44–9).

The emergence of an urban professional elite, Lasch notes, has been accounted for by authors such as C. Wright Mills, Daniel Bell, Barbara Ehrenreich and Robert Reich (Lasch 1991: 509–12; 523–6; 1995: 35–8). However, Lasch thinks that most descriptions tend to isolate specific aspects of this development in ways that aid ideological agendas. Left-leaning accounts analyze the impacts of the rising, success-oriented, hedonistic group as concomitants of a capitalist dynamic in which selfishness spreads from the privately conceived considerations of the market to the civic world, thus extinguishing any hope of solidarity it may harbour. For Lasch, this analysis overlooks the corresponding change effected in the contents of the private world itself through, among the rest, the work of the expanding governmental agencies whose role socialists and progressive liberals favour (Lasch 1978: 25–7). Right-wing tracts, by contrast, emphasize media and academia as the sites around which the emerging elites crystallize and through which they strengthen their authority. Such analyses, Lasch alleges, omit the role that business executives and commercial interests play in structuring the workplace, the home and public exchanges, and consequently, allow these sectors to be cast as potential

allies of “the people” (Lasch 1991: 512–4). As distinct from such views, Lasch perceives the various meritocracies’ impact as combined, regardless of whether their members are employed by private or the public sector, and of whether they align left or right. Through marketing, finance, education, medicine and psychology, these elites’ inputs converge to encroach on popular virtue.

This occurs in both the private and the civic spheres. Professionals exert increasing leverage over personal lives, circulating notions of how to raise children, maintain one’s finances, improve health and assure conjugal happiness. Their counsel can be backed by institutional authority, as when urban planners and social workers decide on the placement of pupils in schools (Lasch 1991: 496–504). Whatever ordinary people do in their private lives is expected to be improved if an external instance is given access to it, granting that instance legitimacy in requesting such access. People’s confidence is constantly undermined while their choices are made open for surveillance. At the same time, the home’s individual members are exposed to the allure of advertising that promises immediate outlets to forms of desire (Lasch 1995: 93–8). As desire is further stalked rather than gratified by consumption, those affected by the ensuing frustration and emptiness seek counsel in professional advice, thus furthering the hold of the meritocracies (Lasch 1978: 169–80). The private world is populated by individuals whose self-reliance is impinged upon while dependence on a knowledgeable source is constantly encouraged.

The same dynamic erodes the sphere common to all citizens. The skills that grant the new elites their role cluster around catering to other people’s difficulties. They consequently become invested in what Lasch calls the therapeutic sensibility: the assumption that all problems may be resolved through professional consultation (Lasch 1978: 7–12). Distributed as a public service or sold as a commodity, the notion of a solution implies that difficulty, loss and pain are pathologies that await remedies (Lasch 1977: 97–100). This applies collectively as well as individually. Social discrepancies can be reduced through venues such as the market, science, law and therapy. As tensions are expected to recede following the implementation of inputs based on superior knowledge, the need for agonizing over collective ends can be expected to recede as well, rendering public deliberation less urgent and diminishing the significance of equal participation. Those with acquired proficiency in the vicissitudes of economy and society may be given broader public scope. Mid-century progressives, Lasch (1991: 365–6) writes, occasionally made this eventuality explicit, envisioning democracy’s redefinition as a managerial system in which citizens’ needs are met by a skilled administration. The concept of social participation is recast to reflect this perception. If difficulties may be resolved by expert advice, then accessibility to such advice is the fundamental right that makes one a full member of society. Citizenship equates with being a supplicant (Lasch 1978: 25–7).

Consequently, the landscape Lasch paints splits between two constituencies. The first stands for the egalitarian respect that follows on emphasizing humans’ ability to discern their own limits. The second stands for the superiority of acquired and structured knowledge. The second corrupts the first by chewing into the legitimacy of the tragic sense. Promoting the idea of available solutions, the therapeutic mindset infiltrates the private and civic realms alike, narrowing down both the space for

people to individually exercise responsible agency and the space for them to collectively share obliging choices. While judgmental, this description neither involves imputing bad intentions to the elites nor accusing them of defiling the supposed purity of a holistic collective. Instead, the meritocracies fail society through their position as knowledgeable counsellors who, safe from direct accountability, meet its members as clients (Lasch 1995: 41). The combination of their thought-habits acclimatizes us to the notion of a life geared toward hedonistic reward alone, thus weakening our rational agency and our institutions. The populist duality of elites and people is established from the same grounds as Lasch's commitment to democracy.

### Thin Theory and Apparent Opportunism

The third element that scholarship attributes to populism is a dearth of intellectual content and a matching propensity for eclectically exploiting different standpoints. While Lasch relies on a broad corpus of historical, sociological and psychological studies and holds that nineteenth-century populism was grounded in established philosophical traditions, his outlook does hint at that "thin" quality and may seem to exhibit its circumstantial alignment with disparate creeds. Lasch can laud the institution of private property for granting concrete form to individual independence, and he can endorse distributive measures that entail taxing property as a step against the inequalities that undermine equal citizenship (Lasch 1995: 20–2, 88–9). He criticizes elites in their therapeutic, managerial and financial guises alike. Straddling left and right, Lasch's work may occasionally seem like a collection of rants without an organizing core.

However, this wariness of comprehensive theory and the ideologies it sustains is moored to Lasch's basic outlook. The tragic sense he upholds is not easily reconcilable with abiding by a systemic model that binds society's different aspects into an explanatory and predictive framework. As limited mortals, we constantly err. None of us entirely grasps the world around us. For Lasch, this is exemplified in the perception of time that held in early Christian modernity. Our history shows the struggles of different civilizations and the sufferings of their members. When we acknowledge our frailty, we recognize that we are part of that history: like our predecessors, we decide between incompatible ends and are subject to failure and ruin (Lasch 1991: 47–52). This realization enables us to be moral. Where ends align, there is no need to choose among them. One may simply follow the course of action determined by knowing the correct relationships between these ends. But as our ends cannot align, we have to decide to do what we judge correct while being aware of the risk involved in the discrepancy among our wishes. The space for such choices is registered politically as liberty, democracy's normative core. The populist tradition that guards democracy avoids ready-made answers and overall generalizations, an attitude that links to that tradition's visible lack of a combined economic and social theory (Lasch 1991: 532).

By contrast, a systematic understanding of society that ties together fact and value, past conduct and future prediction places those offering it above the universal predicament and promises society a way beyond it. These theories analyze our motivations within frameworks that trace them to causes, forecast the consequences

of acting on them and relegate relative significance to each will. Rather than perceiving confusion and frustration as part of our condition, such visions cast people as modular packages of desires and needs that can be reasonably satisfied by applying a structured form of knowledge. Underpinning the conventional ideologies of the political left and right, such perspectives “exempt modern society...from the judgment of time” (Lasch 1991: 54).

Capitalist philosophers like Adam Smith studied society as if it had calculable physical properties, like other natural objects. Following Mandeville in intentionally ignoring ethical motivations, Smith looked for a formula for all wills to concur. He found an (admittedly imperfect) approximation for such a formula in the market. Where it operates, scarcity diminishes alongside the conflict it generates. The prospects of peace follow knowledge and prosperity. To ground this model, people were simplified into reward-maximizing agents whose priorities show chiefly through the price mechanism (Lasch 1991: 52–4). Their relationships consist of mutual exploitation. The politics justified by such knowledge creates the world it assumes as manifest in late modernity. Privatization and constant marketing cultivate a consumerist environment that focuses our attention on promised pleasure. Other people become instruments instead of ends. We turn into the one-dimensional choosers that the theory implied at the outset.

A similar pattern is discernible in the other ideological camp. Grounding socialism in what he presented as a scientific inquiry into the relationship of production and history, Marx foresaw a classless future where economy and justice would match. This was to follow society’s polarization into crisply defined antagonists, one with no stake in the system. To achieve this elegant division, Marx had to discount existing forms of working-class solidarity as archaic remnants. Hence, a worldview concerned with delivering human agency from the clutches of economic stratification dismissed actual agency where it resisted its systematizing effort (Lasch 1991: 150–2). Among the social democrats who incorporated socialist elements into a renovated liberalism, Marx’s legacy lingered primarily as confidence about progress and the role of science and theory within it. Social democrats advocated gradualist policies based on applying the insights of such disciplines as sociology and medicine. These disciplines were expected to methodically locate people’s basic requirements and determine the resources for delivering them. Citizens were positioned as the aggregates of the needs researched by these disciplines, an outcome that echoes capitalism’s perception of people as reward-seeking consumers while its premises echo the capitalist reduction of complex humans to theoretical constructs.

The pull of systematization and the corresponding diminishment of legitimate uncertainty shape the contents of the disciplines that nourish late modernity’s conceptual worlds, driving competing versions of the same professional fields toward similar formulations. Psychodynamic psychologists have reworked Freud’s assumption of inescapable conflict between desire, social imperative and individual survival, into a perspective in which these factors cohere. Freud thought that the quest for physical satisfaction conditions the mind. By contrast, the revised, relations-based psychoanalysis defines the core drive as the need for recognition. Unlike the possession of a material resource, receiving another person’s validation does not have to detract from its availability to others. Deficits of recognition are

remediable so that individual fulfillment can be squared with social ends. Frustration becomes an incidental malfunction that can be mediated by knowledge and its purveyors (Lasch 1995: 202–12). On the other side of the line that separates them from the psychodynamic therapists, behaviourists similarly offer to measure and coordinate motivations through a theory that assigns a correct relative place to each of them, culminating, Lasch writes, “in the monopolization of knowledge and power by experts” (Lasch 1984: 215). Whether they support capitalism, socialism or the welfare state, integrated knowledge systems connect *is* to *ought*, envisaging a condition in which agonizing ethical choice will become redundant as individual and social demands harmonize, and roughly friction-free management becomes possible.

Consequent to these insights, Lasch avoids the familiar left and right ideologies based on comprehensive social, psychological and economic theories and assesses the policies associated with them separately from their justifying philosophies. This minimalist trait relates to his concept of democracy. Freedom entails that our decisions cannot be foretold. Within the limits of constitutional law, private choices should not be determined from a knowledgeable position external to them. When free citizens congregate, their shared resolutions, too, should not be heavily patterned by anything but the stipulations of the constitution itself: theirs is “a politics rooted in popular common sense instead of the ideologies that appeal to elites” (Lasch 1995: 112). As it evades structuring by preset philosophies, such politics might look opportunistic. It involves concrete wills rather than abstract principles and, therefore, justifies actors in utilizing arguments according to their situational relevance. This intellectual minimalism does not make those who adhere to it less perceptive. The historical populists, Lasch argues, escaped the cognitive rigidity of those committed to comprehensive social theory. The agrarian and aligned radicals of nineteenth-century America could understand, as Marxists could not, that rather than simply providing a front for an existing economic hegemon, government actively created its own ruling class as a means of tackling industrial life’s growing intricacies (Lasch 1991: 195–6). Such lucidity, as Lasch sees it, does not originate in a greater intellect but in accepting limits and relativity. We do not have a chart that accounts for everything and cannot be extricated by such a chart from the need to decide under uncertainty.

### Reflection and Reality

If the above outline of Lasch’s vision holds, then a certain degree of consistency can be allowed to the outlook described in the research literature as riven by the traits of exaggerating democracy’s majoritarian aspect, favouring a dualistic mode of argument and lacking a solid foundation in a stated theory. Lasch connects these traits by basing equality and reason on humans’ acknowledgement of death. This perception grounds the value Lasch attaches to democracy’s body politic as the space where equality and the sense of tragedy are both respected by granting everyone an identical share in collective choice, risk and responsibility. The dualist ingredient of Lasch’s position is informed by comparable considerations. The people take their moral distinction from their dignified endorsement of existential limits. The elites derive their corrosive character from their dilution of that endorsement. This does

not grant the people an unassailable sanctity that excludes diversity: their position stems from accepting imperfection. Lasch's reservations about familiar ideologies and their grounding in comprehensive social theory match with his other arguments. We can be moral and rational and deserve liberty because we admit that our wishes neither reconcile internally nor adjust to the world externally. We should, therefore, doubt models of society, history, economy and the mind that hold out the prospects of such adjustment. Lasch's critique of educated elites relates to this point and is accordingly compatible with a distinct scale of normative priorities, albeit one that is not based on any of the integrated social theories that dominate the political spectrum. Populism's proximity to constitutional democracy and the liberal mindset behind it, alongside its claim to have an argument worthy of consideration, can be to some degree substantiated.

However, if Lasch's account can grant populist thought a measure of internal structuring, what happens in the interface between that account and the external reality that political scholars describe? Lasch's analysis enables him to absolve populism—the authentic voice of democracy, as he sees it—from the charges of totalizing collective identities, attributing inherent wickedness to political competitors and grounding exclusion and persecution. But these features still perceptibly crop up where populist actors are involved. Populist movements do tend toward nationalism and racism. They manifest a propensity for diminishing individual and minority rights by playing up majoritarian decision. They demonize rivals to an extent that undercuts public reasoning (Hamilton 2023). This incongruence between Lasch's perception of populism and how populism functions may indicate that Lasch forgets that political actors often base shrill rhetoric on originally subtle ideas. Lasch's nuanced perception of popular virtue, after all, is clearly vulnerable to being exploited by a demagogic appeal that panders to one community by dehumanizing others.

But two further insights on that incongruence can be gleaned from Lasch's work itself, perhaps mitigating the impression of inadequacy on Lasch's part. Both relate to Lasch's constant, if reserved, reference to Marxist dialectic. The first insight is descriptive. Ideas and values are shaped by social setting. Class structure generates ideologies that change when the structure changes, the process showing as the reformulation of values. The words that stand for these values take on meanings that would have sounded strange in their previous context. The combination of the republican emphasis on the ethics of personal responsibility and the liberal stress on born equality was a product of an environment where agricultural holdings were common while a commitment to a religion that founded morality on humanity's inherent limits was widespread. The concurrence of economic reality and the outlooks that were possible within it granted historical populism its viability. However, with industrialization and secularization, the Christian awareness of sin was gradually supplanted by the promise of progress. The attribution of merit to the people, alongside its accompanying opposite in decrying the corruption of the elites, forfeited its connection to the consciousness of boundaries and constraints. The decline of the tragic sense allowed the concept of popular virtue to take on a note of grandiosity and aggression, feeding collective arrogance. Late nineteenth-century public ideologues "conscripted the heroic ideal into the service of militarism, jingoism, imperialism and racial purification" (Lasch 1991: 296). In

the succeeding decades, populist notions were further distorted by the alteration of context. By the second half of the twentieth century, the originally populist ideal of demotic virtue strayed so far from its origins, that in some places it could be recruited for populism's nemesis, the emerging managerial and narcissist culture. Presented as the key to collective greatness, meritocracies were entitled to a position that others were required to acknowledge if they were truly committed to such greatness (Lasch 1978: 78–81).

In a world of consumers that normalizes the wish for instant gratification, limits, boundaries and humility about individual and collective self all diminish. Public outlooks that were compatible with liberty and equality when recognizing such limits move away from that compatibility when that recognition is gone. The crawl from the belief in ordinary people's rational potential and ethical steadfastness to the bigoted stances currently associated with populism can be perceived as generated by diachronic change rather than by any inherent character of that belief. This does not necessitate that beliefs are so tightly determined that no role is left for critical exposition. Precisely because we are all enmeshed in context, nobody can provide a foolproof explanation of the present. And as we can all be creative; nobody can furnish an accurate prediction of the future. Both revolutionary enthusiasm and deterministic gloom are misplaced. If Lasch rejects a systematic optimism that regards all problems as soluble, he thinks that our realization that we can have some agency enables us to retain hope (Deneen 2005: 264). Space is thus created for the second normative insight that can narrow the gap between Lasch's view of populism and how populism visibly operates. As noted above, Lasch sees himself as sharing liberalism's main concerns, among which individual autonomy is crucial. He wants liberals and like-minded thinkers to become conscious of the ways in which they, too, are impacted by their setting so as to become able to challenge it.

The narcissist culture plies equality, liberty and virtue draws away from each other. With its emphasis on technological progress, that culture equates liberty, not with choosing under uncertainty, but with the ability to maximally realize one's aspirations through the means of education, expertise and mobility. Freedom edges close to synonymy with success. Liberals largely acquiesce with these values, advocating wider channels for co-optation into the meritocracy as instruments for delivering freedom. Correspondingly, they screen out the premonitions occasionally aired about the implications that broadcasting such values holds for the meaning of liberty. Instead of engaging with these doubts on their own terms, liberals interpret them away through the various theoretical and professional frameworks they endorse. Particularly, liberals process the widespread resentment about the highlighting of success and the charms of metropolitan life as mainly aesthetic nostalgia. But that resentment is in essence a political apprehension about the channels that, by infesting us with a feeling of inadequacy, subvert our agency and cultivate our dependency on the professionally accomplished social segments that operate these channels. "Careful attention to popular complaints about the media," Lasch (1991: 523) writes,

...would suggest that people are troubled by something more elusive than "liberal bias" or sexual licence. What people find disturbing about the media...is

their obsession with the young and affluent, with glamour, celebrity, money, and power; their indifference to working people and the poor, except as objects of satire and “compassion.”

By neglecting such anxieties, liberals abandon the field to what Lasch (1991: 523) calls “right-wing populism”: those strands of opinion that associate the pernicious elite exclusively with the cluster of information technology experts, professional administrators, media outlets and college educators while ignoring its bases in finance and business. The right—with the attendant baggage it sometimes carries of cornering minorities and tolerating, if not actively fostering, economic inequalities—can present itself as genuinely catering to people’s most persistent wishes and fears. It stands for liberty as the self-sustaining, responsible autonomy that liberals have discarded. The outcome is the crude contrast of us and them that the research literature attributes to populism. If populism shows a propensity to polarize, demonize, shut down conversation and create more enmities and exclusions, then this does not exclusively emanate from historical populism’s attention to ordinary people’s judgment and morals. It also emanates from contemporary liberals’ inattention to them.

The disparity one may sense between the democratic and humanistic bent Lasch attributes to populism and what populist actors really do may accordingly be accounted for from within Lasch’s own interpretative framework: it is the product of a historical development that severed populist notions from their anchor in the recognition of human limits. This process enabled notions like popular virtue to collude with the valorization of collective selfishness, as in racism and nationalism. The same background development affected liberals, too, as they have become less likely to accept the recognition of limits as the basis of the personal freedom they uphold. Like popular virtue, individual liberty has become narcissistic. Focusing on securing everyone’s autonomy by distributing the means of what they see as self-realization, liberals miss the warning signals that the wider society sends about the hierarchic, elitist and suffocating implications of this approach. The liberals’ failure here is exploited by elements of the right that foster antagonisms and exclusion by cashing on populist watchwords that had been cut away from their basis. Lasch is invested in countering this dynamic by showing liberals and their allies how they have been perpetuating it.

## Conclusion

Citing a historical form of populism as an inspiration, Lasch’s work displays some of the recurring traits that the research literature detects in contemporary populist movements: an association with democracy that dwells on the significance of the citizen body, a moral dualism that contrasts elites to people and a conceptual minimalism that can manifest in shifts between different recognizable ideologies. According to the research literature, these traits cause a general inconsistency in populism, adding to its drift toward the politics of volatile emotions, exclusion and persecution. If Lasch illustrates what a populist political theory can look like, then some of the inconsistency may be avoided, alongside its association with a slide away from democracy.



Lasch holds that awareness of the tragic limit that permeates human life grounds both egalitarianism and an opening for rational agency. The polity that expresses people's equality, their capacity for agency and their ability to shoulder risk and loss is a roughly constitutional and liberal one. Private lives should be respected as a field for individuals to exercise agency, autonomy and responsibility, while civic deliberation should be allowed a distinct role as it enables people to face collective uncertainty in the one arena where all are flatly equal. Majoritarian decision complements the protection of private rights. But in late modernity, the political freedom thus attained faces new threats. Private and civic life are exposed to the dangers of an educated managerialism that presents every problem as soluble, if only the correct skill is applied. The shared human basis in tragedy is obscured, while individual discretion and collective choice alike are made objects of professional counsel. Lasch thereby draws a contrast between the people and the elite: the rational and ethical bulk of society should be cautious about a meritocracy that can corrupt it through its very existence as a meritocracy. Similarly, Lasch links a reluctance to endorse comprehensive theory to the special role of civic decision and to the duality of elites and people, warning that comprehensive theory might obviate ethical choice for both individuals and the collective while placing those propagating the theory above others.

All the while, Lasch stays within the bounds of a worldview that he understands as compatible with liberalism. Stressing that humans are essentially flawed, that worldview casts no group as perfect and correspondingly demonizes no actor beyond the possibility of dialogue. Actual populist movements do not always match this account, as they rely on the people as a holistic group to which they oppose elites, minorities and immigrants. From Lasch's own position, this skirting of democracy's edges can be explained by reference to a double movement. Populist notions were detached from the context in which they originally appeared, acquiring from the narcissistic culture a propensity for oversimplification and totalization. Correspondingly, liberals and their allies were also affected by the historical trajectory. Their perception of liberty aligned with progress, the rewards it holds out and its reliance on education and expertise. Hence, liberals sideline the worries voiced by ordinary people, often casting them as conveying outdated perceptions while overlooking their underlying preoccupation with liberty and equality. As a result, these concerns are catered to by reactionary actors that capitalize on the note of collective self-congratulation enabled by the surrounding culture so that reservations about the meritocratic elite's impact on personal agency are associated with regressive agendas.

Lasch wishes to salvage democracy by alerting liberalism to these phenomena. He wants liberals to reflect on their habit of disproportionately tying liberty to expanding education, knowledge and science. He asks liberals to examine their assumption that this expansion will allow each person's choices to be accommodated with those of others. Such anticipation, Lasch warns, conditions liberty on the promise of delivery from angst, which entails exemption from the need to choose that is the essence of liberty itself. For Lasch, resisting this reformulation of democracy's core value requires emphasizing everyday experiences, questioning expert opinion where it makes extensive claims on individual choices and public life, and retaining the significance of civic participation alongside the

autonomy of private life. The populist actors that currently occupy scholarly attention may not adhere to Lasch's ideas and may indeed be largely opportunistic. However, their discernible appeal may indicate that, at least to a certain extent, a potentially cohesive perception tries to work its way to the surface. Its underlying concern may be, not that popular sovereignty is encroached upon in practice by judiciaries, business interests or media outlets, but that the founding rationale of democracy itself is at stake, as its denotation is made to subtly shed its egalitarian component and its mooring in the universally shared human condition.

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