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"A WHOLE WORLD OF HEROES": CHRISTOPHER LASCH ON DEMOCRACY

THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES AND THE BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY, by Christopher Lasch. Norton, 1995. 276 pp., \$22.00.

"The history of modern society, from one point of view," Christopher Lasch observed in *Haven in a Heartless World*, "is the assertion of social control over activities once left to individuals and their families." This, at any rate, is the point of view from which Lasch constructed his ambitious and provocative critique of American society. From another point of view, of course, modernity is identified with, even defined by, the rise of individualism: economic, political, and ethical. The latter perspective is the once and probably still dominant ideology of progress: of history as the story of freedom, as a narrative of individual emancipation from the trammels of communal prescription and superstition.

Whether these two points of view are antagonistic or complementary is not clear, to me at least. It may be that individual freedom and social control have, in different areas or aspects of experience, simply grown up side by side; or that they are intimately and paradoxically (that is to say, dialectically) related. Typically the left has endorsed and the right opposed individualism in the progressive or Enlightenment sense, which denotes the lessened authority of traditional beliefs and practices. But what are the political implications of nontraditionalist antimodernism—Lasch's brand?

Lasch himself offered little help in answering that question; he was notoriously, exasperatingly wary of programmatic statement and ideological

self-definition. He did, for what it's worth, affirm in response to critics (albeit fifteen years before his death):

Once and for all: I have no wish to return to the past, even if I thought a return to the past was possible. The solution to our social problems lies in a completion of the democratic movement inaugurated in the eighteenth century, not in a retreat to a pre-democratic way of life. Socialism, notwithstanding the horrors committed in its name, still represents the legitimate heir of liberal democracy. Marxism and psychoanalysis still offer the best guides to an understanding of modern society and to political action designed to make it more democratic.

In his last decade, Lasch's alarm and disgust deepened, his tone soured, and his allegiance to socialism faltered. But although his complaints about contemporary society sometimes sounded like the neoconservatives', their origin and import was radically different. To see why—to reconstruct Lasch's intricate and wide-ranging cultural critique and connect it with the neopopulism of *The Revolt of the Elites*—will require a lengthy detour through the labyrinth of psychoanalytic theory.

According to Freud, a newborn infant cannot distinguish between itself and the rest of the world, and therefore between the source of its needs (its own body) and the source of its gratifications (other people, especially its mother). Hence its first mental experience is a sense of omnipotence. Inevitably, some of its needs go unmet, at which time it becomes aware, more or less traumatically, of its separation from the rest of the world. It reacts with rage against the source of its frustration (its parents), but since the source of its frustration is also the source of its gratification and the sole guarantee of its continued existence, the infant cannot tolerate its own impulses of rage and aggression, which

would, if realized, annihilate it along with its parents.

The infant's response to this dilemma is fateful—indeed, virtually defines the human condition. The infant represses its rage. But repressed emotions always return. The infant's rage is converted into a variety of fantasies: the fantasy of primal union, in which the irreversibility of separation and dependence is denied; the idealization of the parents, which denies that the parents sometimes frustrate the child and also that it wishes to punish them in return; and the splitting of parental images into all-good and all-bad, which denies the incomprehensible discovery that gratification and frustration come from the same source.

These fantasies have one crucial thing in common: they are all outsized, out of scale. The infant is pictured as either omnipotent or helplessly persecuted, the parents as either perfectly benevolent or implacably threatening. And the fundamental truth of the infant's situation—its separation from and dependence on the rest of the world—arouses alternating panic and denial.

According to psychoanalytic theory, the repression of infantile rage and the fantasies that result are universal and unavoidable. It is what happens thereafter that determines the degree of the child's—and adult's—maturity or pathology. What must occur, if emotional health is to be achieved, is a gradual scaling down of the superhuman size that the parents have assumed in the infant's fantasies, and a gradual softening and displacement ("sublimation") of the intense, overwhelming feelings they have called forth. How?

In Lasch's account, there are several ways. First, there is the child's continual experience of love and discipline from the same source, that is, its parents. The actual experience of discipline—of limited but not token punishment—slowly breaks down the archaic fantasy that the parents' displeasure means the infant's annihilation. Next, there is what Lasch called "optimal frustrations." In sharp contrast to the awkward and excessive solicitude of the contemporary over-anxious mother, the instinctive confidence of a woman immersed in a kin community or "biological stream" allows the child to experience simultaneously the lessening of its mother's attentions and

its own modest, growing mastery of its immediate environment. Then there is the child's encounter with what Lasch (following the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott) called "transitional objects": playthings, games, and other objects and activities that symbolically express unconscious attachments but at the same time provide the child with reliable links to a stable, comprehensible external world. And finally, there is everyday contact with the father, whom infants of both sexes formerly envied, hated, and feared because of his superior access to the nurturing mother. When the child is part of the father's work environment, it observes two things: first, that he is fallible; and second, that he possesses important and satisfying skills, which he is able and willing to pass on to the child, thus earning its gratitude. Both insights help reduce him to human size in the child's psyche.

To the extent that these several experiences occur, the child can overcome its terror at the discovery of its separateness from the world as well as its unconscious fear and hatred of those who forced this discovery upon it. It can abandon its chief defense against those feelings: the fantasy of overcoming separateness and regaining primal, undifferentiated union with the world. In other words, it can become a self, distinct from others and comfortable with the distinction. It can grow up.

But if these maturational experiences do not occur, no secure self emerges. The growing child's unconscious mental life is still haunted by boundless rage over infantile helplessness, by the fear of parental retaliation that this rage induces, by the simultaneous idealization and demonization of the parents, and by the infant's only available defense against these impulses and fears: the fantasy of a return to oneness and omnipotence. The result is a neurotic adult. Neurotic, Lasch asserted, in specific and predictable ways: wary of intimate, permanent relationships, which entail dependence and thus may trigger infantile rage; beset by feelings of inner emptiness and unease, and therefore ravenous for admiration and emotional and sexual conquest; preoccupied with personal "growth" and the consumption of novel sensations; prone to alternating self-images of grandiosity and abjection; liable to feel toward everyone in authority the same combination of rage and terror that the infant feels

for those it depends on; unable to identify emotionally with past and future generations and therefore unable to accept the prospect of aging, decay, and death. This constellation of symptoms is known within psychoanalytic theory as narcissism: the lack of an autonomous, well-defined self. It is currently, as Lasch claimed and the clinical literature attests, the most common form of emotional pathology—the neurotic personality of our time.

It was not always so. The neurotic personality of Freud's time was quite different—acquisitive, fanatically industrious, self-righteous, sexually repressed. Then the typical symptom was obsessional (an inexplicable compulsion, for example, incessant handwashing) or hysterical (chronic excitability or, conversely, non-somatic paralysis of a limb or faculty, for example, frigidity). These symptoms stood out in sharp relief against the background of a stable personality, something like a "bug" in an otherwise well-functioning computer program. To simplify for the sake of contrast: the Victorian/Viennese neurosis was localized and discrete; contemporary narcissism is systemic and diffuse. To simplify even more dramatically: the character of selfhood has changed, from a strong (often rigid) self, in secure possession of fundamental values but riddled (often crippled) with specific anxieties, to a weak, beleaguered self, often full of charms and wiles, and capable, but only fitfully, of flights of idealism and imagination.

Why? What can account for this subtle but immensely significant shift? Lasch formulated an answer in *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978), and *The Minimal Self* (1984). He posited a connection between two of the deepest, broadest phenomena of modern history: the change in personality described above and the change from early, developing capitalism (relatively small-scale, still permeated with pre-industrial values and work practices, and largely concerned with expanding production to satisfy basic needs) to mature capitalism (dominated by huge, bureaucratic organizations, "rationalized" by the reduction of workers' initiative, autonomy, and skills, and concerned with expanding consumption through the creation of new needs). Modernization, according to Lasch, is the introduction of new, parallel forms of domination into work life

and family life. In a sweeping but closely argued passage he makes the central link in his complex argument:

The socialization of reproduction completed the process begun by the socialization of production itself—that is, by industrialization. Having expropriated the worker's tools and concentrated production in the factory, industrialists in the opening decades of the twentieth century proceeded to expropriate the worker's technical knowledge. By means of "scientific management," they broke down production into its component parts, assigned a specific function on the assembly line to each worker, and kept to themselves the knowledge of the productive process as a whole. In order to administer this knowledge, they created a vastly enlarged managerial apparatus, an army of engineers, technicians, personnel managers, and industrial psychologists drawn from the same pool of technical experts that simultaneously staffed the "helping professions." Knowledge became an industry in its own right, while the worker, deprived of the craft knowledge by which he had retained practical control of production even after the introduction of the factory system, sank into passive dependence. Eventually, industry organized management itself along industrial lines, splitting up the production of knowledge into routinized operations carried on by semiskilled clerical labor: secretaries, typists, computer card punchers, and other lackeys. The socialization of production—under the control of private industry—proletarianized the labor force in the same way that the socialization of reproduction proletarianized parenthood, by making parents unable to provide for their own needs without the supervision of trained experts.

How does industrialization produce a culture of narcissism? Lasch argued that the evolution of capitalism has affected family structure and the socialization of children in a number of ways. In reorganizing the production process, it has removed the father from the child's everyday experience and deprived him of the skills that formerly evoked the child's emulation and gratitude. This means that the child's archaic, punitive fantasies about the father persist unchecked. In encouraging geographic mobility, it has uprooted families from kin communities and replaced intergenerationally transmitted folk wisdom about child rearing with social-scientific expertise dispensed by professionals. This undermines parental confidence and replaces face-to-face authority over the child with the impersonal, bureaucratic authority

of schools, courts, social welfare agencies, and psychiatrists. In promoting mass consumption, advertisers (like social-science professionals) have convinced parents that their children are entitled to the best of everything but that, without expert assistance, parents are helpless to determine what that might be. In generating a mass culture glutted with rapidly obsolescing commodities and transient images, it blurs the distinction between reality and illusion and renders the world of objects unstable and bewildering. This makes it difficult for the child to locate "transitional objects," which would help it find its way from infantile attachments into the external world of culture and work. And in promising an endless supply of technological marvels, it evokes grandiose fantasies of absolute self-sufficiency and unlimited mastery of the environment, even while the quasi-magical force that conjures up those marvels—that is, science—becomes ever more remote from the comprehension or control of ordinary citizens. This is a recipe for regression to psychic infancy: fantasies of omnipotence alternating with terrified helplessness.

One of the prime tenets of psychoanalysis is that pathology and normality are not sharply demarcated but continuous. So these secular developments—the sundering of love and discipline in the child's experience, the invasion of family life and work life by professional and corporate elites, the blurring of distinctions by mass culture—not only produce more narcissistic individuals than formerly, but also create a new psychic environment. A world populated by rigid selves is a world of sublimation and its derivatives: aggression, greed, cruelty, hypocrisy, unquestioning adherence to inherited values and restraints. A world of weak selves is more fluid, corruptible, blandly manipulative, sexually easygoing, uncomfortable with anger and rivalry, and leery of defining constraints, whether in the form of traditional values or of future commitments. The distinction between the early capitalist self and the late capitalist self is, roughly, the distinction between the Puritan and the swinger, the entrepreneur and the corporate gamesman, the imperial self and the minimal self, Prometheus and Narcissus. That these distinctions bespeak profound change is obvious; that they rep-

resent progress, less so.

For Lasch, then, modernization was not the solution but a new form of the problem—the problem, that is, of domination. This belief was the source of his longstanding quarrel with his fellow socialists and feminists. Much, perhaps most, of the left has always been convinced that industrialization, technological development, and the erosion of traditional forms of authority are intrinsically progressive. Modernization has had its costs, admittedly, but the answer to the problems of modernity was usually held to be more of the same, preferably under democratic auspices. In socialism's glorious youth, Marx called for "a ruthless criticism of everything existing"; few of his successors doubted that the decline of Christianity, patriarchy, possessive individualism, and everything else existing would be followed by something better. But, Lasch argued, these things have by and large declined; the result is not a radical extension of political and sexual autonomy but a bureaucratically mediated war of all against all.

Lasch's most intimate and intense disagreements were with cultural radicals: critics of education, sports, religion, sexuality, the family, and the work ethic, and proponents of a new, "liberated" ideal of expressiveness and self-realization. What these radicals ignore, Lasch charged, is that Christianity, competitive individualism, and the patriarchal family are already obsolescent, at least in those social strata where modernization is most advanced. These values and institutions have been undermined not by leftist opposition but by capitalists themselves, for their own purposes: to promote mass consumption and to regiment the work process. By espousing an ideal of personal liberation largely confined to leisure time and heavily dependent on the consumption of goods and services, cultural radicals have conceded defeat. Instead of adapting to industrialization and mass culture, Lasch contended, the left should oppose them. Only a change to human scale, to local, decentralized control in workplaces, communities, and families, can halt the spread of commodity relations and the bureaucratization of the self.

But what, if anything, can motivate so drastic a reversal of the direction of modern history? *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), Lasch's *chef d'oeuvre*, addressed this question. In that book, Lasch opposed the philosophy of "progress" to the

tradition of "virtue," a universalistic moral psychology to a particularistic one, the "ethos of abundance" to the "ethos of the producer." Progressive ideology, he argued, rests on a misunderstanding of history and human nature. According to progressivism, capitalist development created an increasingly educated, militant, unified working class, whose challenge to wage labor and private ownership of the economy became more and more radical. The Russian Revolution derailed this socialist dynamic, which is currently in historical limbo. But whatever radical opposition to capitalism there's been has come from industrial workers, together with a few professionals and intellectuals, and has been oriented to the future—to the fulfillment of capitalism's stunted potential by new, noncapitalist institutions.

Wrong, Lasch countered. The working class and its socialist or social democratic leaders have fought hard, but never over fundamentals. The only challenge to capitalism *per se*—to wage labor, the factory system, and the concentration of credit—came from movements of independent small producers threatened with extinction: farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and others usually disparaged by socialists as politically naive or reactionary "populists." Socialist struggles were about wages and working hours. Only the "reactionary" populists, rooted in a vanishing way of life, raised questions about self-management, the effect of work on the worker, or the control of investment.

Much recent historical scholarship supports this claim of Lasch's, along with another: that the political philosophy of the American Revolution was not Lockean liberalism or "possessive individualism," that is, an ideological precursor of liberal capitalism, but an older, "republican" philosophy of civic virtue. The revolution was less about property rights than about citizenship. And once again, it was small producers and proprietors who were the main bearers of this ideology and the source of the most effective and radical opposition.

These historical reinterpretations led on toward a deeper moral and psychological revisionism. The ideology of progress assumes that maturation involves moving away from narrow and particular affections toward abstract and universal ones. Fam-

ily, ethnic, regional, and religious loyalties are something we're supposed to grow out of, or at least subsume in a wider sympathy. When such loyalties are exclusive, we call them "chauvinistic" or "fanatical"; and we usually assume that the more intense one of these particularistic commitments is, the more likely it is to be dangerously exclusive.

For Lasch, this devaluation of the local and traditional was a radical error. It is not enlightenment but memory, not breadth of sympathy but intensity of identification, that makes for inner strength. What does it mean, he asked, that the democratic movement of the eighteenth century and the anticapitalist movement of the nineteenth, like the civil rights movement of the 1960s, were wrought not by the "universal class" of socialist theory, not by enlightened rationalists liberated from local attachments and beliefs, but by people very much committed to such attachments and beliefs, people loyal to "archaic" creeds, crafts, and communities under attack from the forces of "progress"? Not, that is, by people looking toward the future, but by people looking toward the past?

It means, he answered, that "the victory of the Enlightenment," with its unwillingness to accept limits on human aspiration and its promise that in a rational society the traditional virtues would be obsolete, "has almost eradicated the capacity for ardor, devotion, and joyous action." On moral even more than environmental grounds, "the basic premise of progressive thought—the assumption that economic abundance comes before everything else, which leads unavoidably to an acceptance of centralized production and administration as the only way to achieve it—needs to be rejected."

Popular initiative ... has been declining for some time—in part because the democratization of consumption is an insufficiently demanding ideal, which fails to call up the moral energy necessary to sustain popular movements in the face of adversity. The history of popular movements ... shows that only an arduous, even a tragic understanding of life can justify the sacrifices imposed on those who seek to challenge the status quo.

This "tragic understanding of life," emphasizing a sense of limits, natural piety, self-discipline, self-reliance, and self-sacrifice, Lasch found in the Greek and Roman classics; in the Judaeo-Christian prophetic tradition; in early modern Protes-

tant theology; in the thought of Carlyle, Emerson, Brownson, William James, Sorel, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others; in eighteenth-century republicanism, nineteenth-century populism, and the Southern black culture from which Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged. It is the ethos of the artisan, the small proprietor, the yeoman farmer; of civic virtue, civic equality, and a broad diffusion of wealth, culture, and competence. This is the "moral economy"—the character, worldview, and social relations—that mass production and political centralization have decisively undermined.

To this imposing edifice of argument, *The Revolt of the Elites* adds numerous elegant flourishes, though no new structural features. Lasch's death last year at sixty-one was, in the obvious sense, sadly premature; in another sense, this posthumous collection nicely rounds off his oeuvre. Forcefully written, erudite, and topical, it achieves a public voice; and those who have followed Lasch's long and complex intellectual development will be glad of a few more clues to what, in the end, his thought comes to politically.

The title essay and its companion, "Opportunity in the Promised Land," are a critique of two pillars of progressive ideology: meritocracy and social mobility. Though frequently considered essential features of a democratic society, they are best understood, Lasch argues, as an efficient method of elite recruitment and legitimation. Meritocratic elites, he points out, are in some ways even less publicly accountable than hereditary ones. The latter usually had local roots and loyalties, and their caste ideology emphasized civic responsibilities and noblesse oblige. Even more important, their superiority was obviously, savingly arbitrary. They were therefore far less prone to the pernicious delusion—which Lasch, drawing on the work of Robert Reich and Mickey Kaus, shows is alarmingly prevalent among the new managerial/cognitive elites—that they deserved their relative immunity from social ills.

A high degree of upward mobility is in fact quite compatible with sharp social stratification. Nor does it have much historical connection with democracy in the United States. That anyone with enough energy, talent, cunning, and ambition could become president, or become rich, or otherwise

escape the common lot is not at all what most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans meant by democracy. What "defined a democratic society, as Americans saw it, [was] not the chance to rise in the social scale so much as the complete absence of a scale that clearly distinguished commoners from gentlemen." The egalitarianism that so profoundly impressed generations of European visitors derived "not merely from the distribution of wealth or economic opportunity but, above all, from the distribution of intelligence and competence."

Citizenship appeared to have given even the humbler members of society access to the knowledge and cultivation elsewhere reserved for the privileged classes. Opportunity, as many Americans understood it, was a matter more of intellectual than of material enrichment. It was their restless curiosity, their skeptical and iconoclastic turn of mind, their resourcefulness and self-reliance, their capacity for invention and improvisation that most dramatically seemed to differentiate the laboring classes in America from their European counterparts.

Readers who are not professional historians may wonder whether this is an idealized portrait, though enough evidence is included in *The True and Only Heaven* and *The Revolt of the Elites* to place the burden of proof on those who would reject it. If it is even approximately accurate, it argues powerfully for Lasch's contention that we can aim at maximum economic efficiency (conventionally defined) or robust democracy, but not both.

Lasch's dissatisfaction with present-day political culture is intense and comprehensive. It extends to the supplanting of neighborhoods by networks and "lifestyle enclaves"; of public parks, cafes, taverns, general stores, community centers, and other informal gathering places that "promote general conversation across class lines" by shopping malls, health clubs, and fast-food chains; of schooling based on patriotic myths and stories of heroic virtue by a sanitized, ideologically innocuous curriculum "so bland that it puts children to sleep instead of awakening feelings of awe and wonder"; of the torchlight parades and oratorical eloquence, the impassioned debates before vast audiences, the scrappy, partisan newspapers and high voter turnout associated with nineteenth-century politics by the apathy and gullibility of the contemporary electorate and the intellectual and

moral poverty of contemporary political speech. Of course, lots of people complain about such things. But without a plausible account of their origins, this sort of complaint merely exasperates and demoralizes. It is just because Lasch convincingly connects these phenomena with the rationalizing imperatives of the market and the state that, even though the latter seem all but irresistible, his criticism energizes.

Lots of people talk about "virtue," too. The preaching of virtue to the poor and beleaguered by such court philosophers as William Bennett, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and George Will has unfortunately done much to discredit the word among friends of equality. Lasch's conception strikes a better balance than theirs between self-denial and self-assertion. It includes an emphatic lack of deference toward wealth, office, and professional credentials; contempt for luxury and greed; a strong preference for economic independence and for face-to-face relations in business and government; a sense of place; a lively curiosity about science, art, and philosophy; and perhaps most of all, a passion for vigorous debate and splendid rhetoric. A lot more, in short, than diligence and chastity, which seems to be mainly what the neoconservatives have in mind. Lasch's notion of virtue is strenuous and classical; his ideal of a democratic society is, in a magnificent phrase of Carlyle's that he quoted often, "a whole world of heroes."

A whole world of heroes—this ideal has at

least two radical implications. The first is that democracy requires a rough equality of condition. Dignity and virtue cannot survive indefinitely amid extremes of wealth and poverty; only someone with a paltry conception of virtue could believe otherwise. The second is that the democratic character can only flourish in a society constructed to human scale. Just as modern war has made military valor more or less superfluous, a world dominated by large corporations and bureaucracies offers little scope for the exercise of civic virtue; nor even, in the long run, for psychic autonomy and integrity—that is, for selfhood, as we currently understand it.

It may be that these and other prerequisites of full, rather than merely formal, democracy cannot be reestablished. The "assertion of social control" that Lasch identified as the thrust of modern history may not be reversible. Lasch himself acknowledged that although contemporary populists "call for small-scale production and political decentralization ... they do not explain how these objectives can be achieved in a modern economy" or how "the virtues associated with proprietorship can be preserved, in some other form, under economic conditions that make proprietorship untenable." Perhaps they cannot be.

If not, then new forms of virtue, heroism, democracy, and selfhood may arise. At any rate, the terms will surely persist; what they will signify



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may differ considerably, rendering their present meanings archaic. The gains—in comfort, information, mobility, tolerance, aversion to cruelty, capacity for irony, and other important respects—may conceivably outweigh the loss in psychological intensity, stability, integrity, and depth. Lasch did not think so, and the rest of us would do well to take the measure of his doubts. □

Stefan Collini

CULTURAL FANTASIES

THE DEMORALIZATION OF SOCIETY: FROM VICTORIAN VIRTUES TO MODERN VALUES, by Gertrude Himmelfarb. Knopf, 1995. 314 pp. \$24.00.

“It ain’t that hard to understand,” Newt Gingrich said recently, referring to the idea of using “shame” to stamp out undesirable behavior. “Read Himmelfarb’s book. It isn’t that complicated.” Certainly, Gingrich’s summary of *The Demoralization of Society* could not, as reported, be called “complicated.” His remarks indicate one level of response to the book, but they are premised on the assumption that Himmelfarb’s topical argument is backed by the authority of historical scholarship. It is worth considering how far that assumption is justified.

This is Gertrude Himmelfarb’s tenth book. As a historian, she has largely concentrated on the intellectual and social history of Victorian Britain; her earlier books dealt with the thought of such leading figures as Acton, Darwin, and Mill, while her more recent work has tended to focus on the analysis and treatment of poverty. Most of her historical writing has also been intended, implicitly or (increasingly) explicitly, to address issues in contemporary American society. Thus, for example, her controversial interpretation of John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Liberalism: The Case of John Stuart Mill*, published in 1974, contained a long concluding section in which she argued that the inadequacies of Mill’s conception of liberty were most manifest in, and had perhaps contributed to, the glorification of individual self-expression, and especially sexual expression, in the present. Though largely devoted to an exegesis of Mill’s writings, the book’s animating purpose was

in fact a restatement of the case for convention, tradition, and inherited order.

In recent years, she has become an increasingly prominent polemicist on behalf of right-wing causes. Several portions of her new book have already appeared in periodical form over the past seven years, their provenance constituting a roll call of influential conservative journals: the *American Scholar*, *Commentary*, *Forbes Magazine*, the *Public Interest*, the *Wall Street Journal*. And personally, too, she is at the heart of the neoconservative establishment: Irving Kristol, long-time editor of the *Public Interest*, is her husband, and William Kristol, leading Republican strategist, is her son. Though specialist scholars have expressed strong reservations about her historical work, her public standing is considerable: in 1991 she was selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities, then chaired by Lynne Cheney, to give the prestigious Jefferson Lecture, one of the highest honors available to a scholar in the humanities.

In his essay on Coleridge, John Stuart Mill declared that “an enlightened Radical or Liberal” ought “to rejoice over such a Conservative,” since the serious statement of contrary views was rare and valuable. Does Himmelfarb’s new book suggest that something similar might be said of her? Here, after all, is a senior, widely published scholar seeking to bring some of her extensive knowledge of the past to bear on problems of contemporary culture and society. In principle, even for those who may suspect they will not agree with her conclusions, this might be an exemplary performance in the role of Historian as Public Intellectual.

The Demoralization of Society contains seven chapters on aspects of Victorian society, concentrating largely on questions of poverty and charity and of sexuality and domestic life. The Prologue, “From Virtues to Values,” asserts the claim that the firmly held Victorian sense of the propriety of “the virtues” has given way to the modern relativistic sense of the variability of “values.” A substantial Epilogue, “A De-Moralized Society,” sets out her case for the devastating effect this change has had upon modern America and, less centrally, Britain, especially as indicated by statistics about illegitimacy and crime.

The historical chapters are cast in a form that makes them easily accessible to the non-expert