



The Second Birth of Christopher Lasch in France: Roots and Mechanisms of a Postmortem Success

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Abstract

How a US intellectual, Marxist sociologist, and history professor, who died in the mid-1990s, eventually became famous in the French public debate of ideas, mainly during the 2010s—nearly 20 years after his death—via a dual form of promotion undertaken and conducted by a “tory anarchist” philosopher, Jean-Claude Michéa, who is a specialist in the works of George Orwell, Marcel Mauss, and Karl Marx. Michéa is nowadays considered the main representative essayist of an atypical “anti-modern socialism,” or “conservative socialism,” a complex ideology in which philosophical illiberalism plays a key role. This is a story of an intellectual throwback to the origins of an astonishing and unexpected rediscovery (or, more precisely, discovery, in this French case), which principally took place in the south of France and began during the end of the 20th century.

Keywords: Christopher Lasch, Jean-Claude Michéa, conservative left, antimodern socialism, antiliberalism, intellectual populism

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DOI: 10.53483/XCPT3573

Today, it is the elites—those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate—that have lost faith in the values, or what remains of them, of the West.

Christopher Lasch¹

During the winter of 2018–2019, France’s political institutions and media landscape got scared of the Yellow Jackets Movement, a social and popular revolt against gas taxes that finally chose different and multiple faces which could show, on the one hand, rural protesters blocking the roundabouts of thousands of villages and, on the other hand, many looters and violent squads confronting policemen and sometimes destroying public infrastructure, most often in Paris. The first group of protesters, the rural one, was described by many analysts as the *France périphérique* protesters who simply wanted dignity, respect, and more economic opportunity, which the “neoliberal” economic system, whether truly or falsely incarnated by President Emmanuel Macron, was presumed by the demonstrators not able to allow. The concept of *France périphérique* was created during the early 2010s by a French urban geographer, Christophe Guilluy,² whose work is mostly inspired by that of Jean-Claude Michéa and so, as logical consequence, by George Orwell and Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) also (two of the Michéa’s main sources of inspiration).

A lot of public commentators, during the climax of the Yellow Jackets crisis, drew a parallel between the reasons for this French social anger and a book published posthumously in 1995 by Christopher Lasch: *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. This essay, which many French journalists took as a point of reference during the events of 2018–2019, evokes a “Middle America”³ described as disregarded and disdained by the both sides, by the East Coast and West Coast, of a rich, bourgeois, and pro-multiculturalist America who is supposed, according to Lasch, to have more links and ties with all the international upper classes of the rest of the world than with the working class of its own country: “The new elites are at home only in transit, en route to a high-level conference, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort. Theirs is essentially a tourist’s view of the world—not a perspective likely to encourage a passionate devotion to democracy.”⁴

In the newspaper *Les Echos*, for example, *The Revolt of the Elites* was cited, on November 19, 2018, at the very beginning of the Yellow Jackets Movement, as a “premonitory book.”⁵ In March of 2019, *La revue des deux mondes* stated that the diagnostic conceptualized by Lasch in his final essay of 1995—the theory of a new separation between the lower and upper classes in the United States (axiological values, ways of life, vernacular citizenship versus global citizenship, etc.) was also

1 Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 25–26.

2 For representative works, see Christophe Guilluy, *Fractures françaises* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2010); Christophe Guilluy, *La France périphérique—Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2014).

3 “The new elites are in revolt against ‘Middle America,’ as they imagine it: a nation technologically backward, politically reactionary, repressive in its sexual morality, middlebrow in its tastes, smug and complacent, dull and dowdy. Those who covet membership in the new aristocracy of brains tend to congregate on the coasts, turning their back on the heartland and cultivating ties with the international market in fast-moving money, glamour, fashion, and popular culture. It is a question whether they think of themselves as Americans at all. Patriotism, certainly, does not rank very highly in their hierarchy of virtues.” Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 5–6.

4 Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 6.

5 Jean-Luc Baslé, “Gilets jaunes: La trahison des élites,” *Les Echos*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/gilets-jaunes-la-trahison-des-elites-148529>.

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a valid concept for the French social issues of the 2010s.⁶ Later, during the month of August 2019, *Le Figaro* would consider *The Revolt of the Elites* as one of “the greatest essays of the 20th century.”⁷ Moreover, in September 2018, a few weeks before the first national demonstration by the Yellow Jackets, the French lawyer Renaud Beauchard published an essay on the “virtuous populism”⁸ of Christopher Lasch. More recently, the journalist Laurent Ottavi has written a biographical piece about Christopher Lasch and the question of progress.⁹

How can one correctly and rationally explain the fact that, since the start of the 2010s, an American essayist and sociologist like Christopher Lasch—who died in 1994—has become as notorious as he is nowadays in the French intellectual debate? Why has the theorist of “the revolt of the elites,” who was principally analyzing the American society as a focused topic during all his professional life, be seen today with his work recycled and re-employed by a lot of French philosophers, sociologists, thinkers, and journalists? To fully understand this mysterious and surprising phenomenon of the late discovery of Lasch’s work in France, it is partly towards Jean-Claude Michéa that our gaze must be turned.

From Rochester, New York to Montpellier, France: The Importation of an American Critical Theory of Progress and Its Ideology

The thought of Christopher Lasch has been well known, for years and decades, in US intellectual circles. His deconstruction of what he considered the deleterious effects of modernity, liberalism, and capitalism on, for example, family structures;¹⁰ the increase of the individualistic feeling;¹¹ or the new social division between upper and lower classes,¹² took place within the American public intellectual conversation during his lifetime and was discussed during, predominantly, the 1970s and 1980s.

In France, the first translation of a Christopher Lasch book appeared in 1981 (that year, the French publishing house Robert Laffont¹³ published *The Culture of Narcissism* at the behest of the Eurocritic “sovereignist” demographer and anthropologist Emmanuel Todd;¹⁴ the French title chosen for this publication was *Le complexe de Narcisse*). This release had, at this time, some influence on a restricted group of French intellectuals, especially on the sociologist and philosopher Marcel

6 Valérie Toranian, “Peuple contre élites: Comment ‘refaire société?’” *La revue des deux mondes*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.revuedesdeuxmondes.fr/article-revue/peuple-contre-elites-comment-refaire-societe/>.

7 Alexandre Devechio, “Les grands essais du XXe siècle: *La révolte des élites* de Christopher Lasch,” *Le Figaro*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/les-grands-essais-du-xxe-siecle-la-revolte-des-elites-de-christopher-lasch-20190823>.

8 Renaud Beauchard, *Christopher Lasch: Un populisme vertueux* (Paris, Éditions Michalon, 2018).

9 Laurent Ottavi, *Christopher Lasch face au progrès* (Paris: Éditions de l’Escargot, 2022).

10 Christopher Lasch, *Heaven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

11 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).

12 “The privileged classes in Los Angeles feel more kinship with their counterparts in Japan, Singapore, and Korea than with their own countrymen,” Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 46.

13 Christopher Lasch, *Le complexe de Narcisse* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981).

14 Emmanuel Todd (born 1951) is, in France, considered a “prophetic” anthropologist who correctly anticipated the collapse of the Soviet Union in his famed 1976 essay, *La chute finale: Essai sur la décomposition de la sphère soviétique*. In 2002, he published a new piece on the hypothetical future slump of the American empire, entitled *Après l’empire: Essai sur la décomposition du système américain*. In recent years, he has focused his observations on the contemporary world with a highly critical point of view on Western liberal values. In 2024, he published a new essay about Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine, titled *La défaite de l’Occident* (The Defeat of the West) after having published, in 2022 and exclusively in Japan, *La troisième guerre mondiale a commencé* (World War III Has Begun), which has become a huge success in the Japanese Archipelago, with more than 100,000 copies sold.

Gauchet,¹⁵ who has stated that, “When *The Culture of Narcissism* was published, I thought that it pointed out something that was obvious.”¹⁶ Despite this first translation and its effects on a limited academic environment, the effective contacts between Christopher Lasch and French intellectual fields would remain modest during the 1980s. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that, in 1986, an English television program on Channel 4 organized a debate between Christopher Lasch and the Greco-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis¹⁷ (in 2012, a French translation of this televised verbal exchange, called *La culture de l'égoïsme*, was published).

If the connections between Christopher Lasch and the French reflective spheres during his lifetime were light and scanty, the American academic historian nevertheless had an extensive knowledge about past and present French thinkers and philosophers (thus, in *The True and Only Heaven*,¹⁸ published in 1991, he analyses and quotes Georges Sorel, Guy Debord, or Régis Debray, for example). The French publication of *The Culture of Narcissism* in 1981 can be seen as the commencement of a leisurely impregnation of Lasch's thought into the “Hexagon.” But the real start of an effective circulation of “Laschism” in the debate of French political and philosophical ideas would not find its genesis in Paris but in the South of France, namely in Montpellier and in Castelnau-le-Lez (a small village located in the immediate suburbs of Montpellier).

In 1988, Alain Martin (born 1941) created in his own villa of Castelnau-le-Lez, with his wife Françoise, a small publishing company called Climats. Before its establishment at the end of the 1980s, Alain Martin was a salesman for the far-left publishing house Champ Libre, which was founded by the film producer Gérard Lebovici¹⁹ (1932–1984) with the unavoidable help of Guy Debord (1931–1994). Champ Libre, under the supervision of Debord, published a lot of anti-totalitarian essays. In 1971, Debord and Lebovici released *Les habits neufs du président Mao* (The Chairman's New Clothes), written by the Belgian Sinologist Simon Leys,²⁰ a relentless incrimination of Maoism and its Cultural Revolution begun in 1966. As with Castoriadis and Lefort's Socialism or Barbarism before, the anti-totalitarianism of Champ Libre was specifically a Marxist criticism of totalitarianism. Also, Champ Libre published during the 1980s, and for the first time in France, some of the 1930s essays of George Orwell (*Homage to Catalonia* in 1981, and *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1982).

¹⁵ Marcel Gauchet (born 1946) is a complex thinker. All his work on the origins of democracy demonstrates that individualism, capitalism, and liberalism have been undoubtedly essential to the historical construction process of democracy, but he does not abstain from criticism of its modern negative aspects, from his point of view. Therefore, he tries to argue that state limitations to capitalism could permit to « civilize capitalism » and so to circumscribe those modern negative effects.

¹⁶ Interview conducted by the author with Marcel Gauchet, Gallimard headquarters, Paris, October 14, 2020.

¹⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997) was, along with the sociologist Claude Lefort (1924–2010), cofounder in 1949 of the French intellectual organization known as Socialism or Barbarism, which had the political peculiarity to be, at the same time, an anti-totalitarian group opposed to Stalinism and Maoism, and a Marxist anti-capitalist movement (for example, Lefort was one of the rare far-left intellectuals who supported the Soviet dissident Viktor Kravchenko in France when the latter was accused by the Communist newspaper *Les lettres françaises*, in 1947, of being a US disinformation agent for having published his book *I Chose Freedom*, written in 1946, about Soviet totalitarianism and the gulag system). Furthermore, Socialism or Barbarism inspired Guy Debord (1931–1994) to create his Situationist International. In 1975, in his essay *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Castoriadis would partly give up Marxism and, at the end of his life, the philosopher would show a kind of anti-modern yet still anti-capitalist conservatism, especially in his 1996 book, *La montée de l'insignifiance*, (The Rise of Insignificance).

¹⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).

¹⁹ In 1984, Lebovici was murdered in Paris. The reasons of his murder have never been resolved and remain mysterious even 40 years after the crime.

²⁰ Furthermore, Simon Leys (1935–2014) was also a specialist in the works of George Orwell and wrote, in 1984 (supreme irony), *Orwell ou l'horreur de la politique* (Paris: Éditions Hermann, 1984).

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The readings of Guy Debord and his *Society of Spectacle*²¹ on the one hand, and of the George Orwell's essays on the other (but also the perusal of a lot of other Champ Libre books) would produce a huge and decisive influence on a high school philosophy teacher from Montpellier: Jean-Claude Michéa (born 1950). The latter met Alain Martin in the southern city at the end of the 1970s. Alain Martin and Jean-Claude Michéa have both been members of the French Communist Party (PCF) and they share, according to Michéa, the common experience of having "left the Party through Debord"²² (namely though an anti-totalitarian Marxism and not by renouncing opposition to capitalism as many ex-far-left thinkers of May 1968 did in France through the 1970s and 1980s, such as André Glucksmann or Romain Goupil, for example). Michéa describes himself as a kind of traditional Communist: "I was born and raised in a communist family (communist parents, communist grandparents), consequently I am a revolutionary ... because of my family tradition and not because of an oedipal revolt against the father or the mother. So, it could explain the tenderness I feel to some forms of conservative thought while remaining, however, a radical."²³

To sum up his political and philosophical ideas, Michéa uses the George Orwell concept of "Tory anarchism" (he also uses the notion of "common decency" defined in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1937 as an ordinary and instinctive morality that Orwell thinks the masses are spontaneously endowed with). During the 1980s and after having read all the translated essays of George Orwell published by Champ Libre, Jean-Claude Michéa wrote his first article about Orwell and the question of Esperanto but, despite the active support of Jorge Semprùn,²⁴ this article failed to find any important journal that wanted to publish it. At the beginning of the 1990s, Alain Martin suggested to Jean-Claude Michéa that he write an essay on the basis of his old unpublished article. This essay, released in 1995, would be the philosophy professor's first book: *Orwell, anarchiste Tory*.²⁵

Progressively, at Climats, the old friendship between Martin and Michéa turned into a prolific collaboration. In a way, Jean-Claude Michéa would play at Alain Martin's Climats the same role as Guy Debord played at Gérard Lebovici's Champ Libre. A new collection, named "Sisyphé," would even be directed by Michéa himself. Only one year after the American publication of *The Revolt of the Elites* (1995), the philosophy professor of Montpellier decided to publish a translation of what he considered the "testament-book"²⁶ of Christopher Lasch (*La révolte des élites* was the first essay published in the Sisyphé collection at Climats). Following this inaugural publication, all the other essays of Christopher Lasch would be translated and published by Climats at Castelnau-le-Lez (*The Culture of Narcissism*²⁷ in 2000, *Mass Culture Reconsidered*²⁸ in 2001, *The True and Only Heaven*²⁹ in 2002, etc.). Every single Lasch book published by Climats would likewise have a special preface

21 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967); second edition, under Champ Libre: 1971.

22 Jean-Claude Michéa interview by Guillaume Erner, France Culture Radio, January 9, 2019.

23 Jean-Claude Michéa interview by Jean Cornil for "La cause du peuple," YouTube, January 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r-tLzIGPW0>.

24 Jorge Semprùn (1923–2011) was a socialist and anti-fascist Spanish writer who fought Franco's regime during a long exile in France. Moreover, Semprùn was the brother-in-law of Alain Martin himself. He is also the father of Jaime Semprun (1947–2010), an ex-situationist intellectual who created, during the 1980s, *L'encyclopédie des nuisances*, a publishing company specializing in George Orwell's political philosophy, in criticisms of technology (Günther Anders, René Riesel, etc.), in anti-capitalist environmentalism, and in a kind of anti-modern fight against liberalism.

25 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Orwell, anarchiste Tory* (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 1995).

26 Jean-Claude Michéa, "Lasch, mode d'emploi", preface to Christopher Lasch, *La révolte des élites et la trahison de la démocratie*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 1996).

27 Christopher Lasch, *La culture du narcissisme – La vie américaine à un âge de déclin des espérances*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2000).

28 Christopher Lasch, *Culture de masse ou culture populaire ?*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2001).

29 Christopher Lasch, *Le seul et vrai paradis – Une histoire de l'idéologie du progrès et de ses critiques*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2002).

written by Michéa. Furthermore, not only did the philosophy teacher of Montpellier spread Lasch's thought by dint of the editing company of Alain Martin located in Castelnau-le-Lez, but also he re-employed "Laschism" for his own reflective work.

Thereby, in the 14 essays that the anti-liberal philosopher wrote from 1995 onward—whether it be *The Complex of Orpheus*³⁰ (2011), *The Mysteries of the Left*³¹ (2013), or *Our Enemy the Capital*³² (2017)—Lasch was always quoted and mentioned regularly by Michéa. The director of the Sisyphé collection at Climats actively promoted Laschism by resorting to, on the one hand, the publication of all Lasch's books in French and, on the other hand, by promoting Lasch's critical points of view on modernism, liberalism, and capitalism all throughout his essays written (this is why it is possible to describe this intense promotion conducted by the philosophy teacher of Montpellier as a "dual form of promotion" developed and expanded in France).

Christopher Lasch and the Possibility of a Democratic Populism: A Finally Successful Theoretical Importation in France

According to Michéa, Christopher Lasch must be seen as continuing a not-very-well-known, atypical socialist and Marxist tradition: that of the anti-modern and anti-progressive criticism of capitalism. In this perspective, the American sociologist serves Michéa's purposes by questioning modern liberal and progressive values, designated as non-moral values because ethics would be, in a capitalist society, a break with and a barrier to eternal economic growth³³ (Michéa also reuses the originally epistemological concept of Max Weber—that of "axiological neutrality"—to describe what he considers, in all modern Western societies, to be a total loss of morality and decency generated by modern liberal capitalism, whose model is seen by him as built on the morally neutral logics of law and market only).

In his 1991 work, *The True and Only Heaven*, Christopher Lasch examines firstly the "ideology of progress" and inventories all the critics who have been addressed to this "ideology." Afterward, he would go on to propose, in *The Revolt of the Elites* (1995), a rehabilitation of the concept of populism:³⁴ "Populism, as I understand it, is unambiguously committed to the principle of respect. ... Populism is the authentic voice of democracy. ... Populism is 'judgmental,' to invoke a current adjective the pejorative use of which shows the capacity for discriminating judgment has been weakened by the moral climate of humanitarian 'concern.'"³⁵

30 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Le complexe d'Orphée – La gauche, les gens ordinaires et la religion du progrès*, (Paris: Éditions Flammarion Climats, 2011).

31 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Les mystères de la gauche – De l'idéal des Lumières au triomphe du capitalisme absolu*, (Paris: Éditions Flammarion Climats, 2013).

32 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Notre ennemi le capital – Notes sur la fin des jours tranquilles*, (Paris: Éditions Flammarion Climats, 2017).

33 Moreover, Michéa regularly mentions the essay of the Communist Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (2008). Climats finally translated and published this book in 2009.

34 "Populism," despite the actual and contemporary utilization of the word—notably in the Western media landscape where this word is often used, especially in Europe, as a synonym for far-right, reactionary demagoguery or neo-fascism (for example: Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini in Italy, Marine Le Pen in France, etc., despite the existence of populists on the left as well)—actually has a unique and relatively unknown history. Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, in both the United States of America and tsarist Russia, "populist" political organizations officially appeared (the People's Party in America, whose leaders wanted to "restore the government of the republic to the hands of plain people," and the Narodniki in the Russian Empire, who fought for popular socialism, were very much opposed to Lenin, and wished to apply the goal of Karl Marx expressed in the preface to *Das Kapital* in 1867: namely to "reveal the economic law of motion of modern society"—a sentence that Lenin rejected as "problematic" in his fierce essay of 1894 against the Narodniki called *What the "Friends of the People" Are*). Thereby, in Christopher Lasch and Jean-Claude Michéa's minds, it is the original meaning of "populism" that must be defended as a democratic tool for instigating public policies made by and for the people, particularly for the lower and proletarian classes.

35 Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 106.

For Lasch, the word “populism” does not refer to what we currently know nowadays with the contemporary versions of nationalism and identity politics all over the world (Donald J. Trump, Narendra Modi, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, etc.) but to a conservative, anti-progressive and anti-modern historical populism born during the 19th century among, especially, the Western working classes: “The conventional identification of democracy with progress makes it hard to see that democratic movements in the nineteenth century took shape in opposition to innovation. The new breed of capitalists were the real progressives: working-class radicals, on the other hand, struggled to preserve a way of life that was under attack.”³⁶ Also, according to Lasch, a part of the socialist and populist 19th century can be seen as a kind of a blend of activism and conservatism³⁷ (for example, at the beginning of the 1810s in United Kingdom, the Luddite Rebellion was a workers’ revolt against economic change and the loss of jobs caused by machinery and the adoption of new technologies).³⁸

It is precisely this unusual rendition of socialism, Marxism, and populism as, possibly, anti-modern and anti-progressive ones—an interpretation which constitutes a crucial part of Lasch’s work on the “ideology of progress”³⁹—that Michéa would reuse and, then, even associate in his own essays with George Orwell’s ideas (“common decency,” “tory anarchism,” instinctive and popular socialism of “the ordinary decent men,” etc.). In the preface that the philosophy teacher of Montpellier writes for the publication of the French translation of *The Revolt of the Elites* published by Climats in 1996 (a preface entitled “Lasch, a Handbook”), it is about the moral and democratic populism of Christopher Lasch that Jean-Claude Michéa would insist on:

In this testament-book, Christopher Lasch insisted on placing his critique of the new elites of advanced capitalism under the label ‘populism,’ namely in accordance with the historical meaning of the word, a radical battle for freedom and equality fought in the name of public virtues. We know how much, for several years now, official media methodically works on erasing this original meaning, only to denounce as “fascist” or “moralizing” (in our time, the highest thought crime) all the plain people’s efforts to maintain a minimal democratic civility and to stand up to the growing empire of the “experts” over their way of life.⁴⁰

If the first French edition, released in 1981, of *The Culture of Narcissism* was able to produce a few inspirational effects, albeit only on a narrow group of mostly Parisian intellectuals, the “dual form of promotion” initiated and led by Jean-Claude Michéa at Climats since the mid-1990s would hugely and massively develop and expand “Laschism” all over France and would ultimately make the hitherto relatively unknown, anti-modern, and anti-progressive critics of capitalism of the late American sociologist renowned in France. Thenceforth, the name of Christopher Lasch would be sustainably associated, in the French public debate, with the name of

36 Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 213.

37 “Students of working-class movements have called attention again and again to their curious mixture of militancy and conservatism,” Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 213.

38 Guy Debord, an important source of inspiration for both Christopher Lasch and Jean-Claude Michéa, writes in *The Society of Spectacle* (1967) that the modern logics of capitalism suppose and implicate “a permanent victory of innovation” over “tradition.”

39 Jean-Claude Michéa, him, prefers to define this “ideology” as a true “religion of progress”, paraphrasing thus the title of an ironic book published in 1887 by the proper son-in-law of Karl Marx, the French socialist Paul Lafargue (1842–1911): *La religion du capital*. In 2018, Jean-Claude Michéa would have this sarcastic essay by Paul Lafargue republished by Climats.

40 Jean-Claude Michéa, “Lasch, mode d’emploi,” preface to Christopher Lasch, *La révolte des élites et la trahison de la démocratie*, (Castelnaud-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 1996), p. 10.

Jean-Claude Michéa, who has been, since then, perceived as the leading introducer⁴¹ of Lasch's thought into the Hexagon.

In 2005, a major and decisive event concerning Climats occurred: one of the biggest French publishing houses, Flammarion, acquired the entire catalog of the small enterprise from Castelnau-le-Lez, which allowed Alain Martin and his wife to finally retire. From that moment on, Climats was no longer a little artisanal publisher of the Montpellier area but instead formally became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Flammarion publishing.⁴² In this way, all the books already published since 1988 by Climats are now likely to reap a national success (even if, by dint of the writing and editing toil of Jean-Claude Michéa, the tiny publishing house had become, since the beginning of the 2000s, a reputable institution in humanities and social sciences). Having been turned into an imprint of Flammarion, Climats continues nonetheless not only to publish Jean-Claude Michéa's own essays but also to welcome the editorial advice and choices of the anti-liberal philosophy teacher of Montpellier (thus, as of today, a total of seven Christopher Lasch books⁴³ have been published by Climats/Flammarion since 1996). With the sale of the company in 2005, a vast amplification phenomenon produced undoubtedly massive effects on the notability of both Jean-Claude Michéa and Christopher Lasch (in such a way that, at the start of the 2010s, a lot of French journalistic articles⁴⁴ refer to Lasch's work as a must-read).

At the beginning of the 2010s, the growing fame of Michéa himself heavily influenced the promotion of Lasch's concepts in France. A young generation of journalists, raised on the theories of Michéa (and on Lasch's and Orwell's as well), created an online media outlet called Ragemag from 2012 to 2014. Their moto was: "There is in me a blend of an anarchist and of a conservative but in proportions that remain to be determined."⁴⁵ Moreover, Ragemag assumed at the time a clear political and philosophical ideology: "The thought of Jean-Claude Michéa, and also the thoughts of his favorite authors, George Orwell and Christopher Lasch, constitute the intellectual fundament of our magazine."⁴⁶ Ten years after the disappearance of the website, some of the former journalists of Ragemag are nowadays working at some of the most important French media outlets, such as the weekly news magazine *Marianne*, for example. On the intellectual side, the theories of the Michéa-Lasch duo managed to influence, already in the early 2010s, a lot of French sociologists, philosophers, and thinkers.

In 2011, in reaction to the diffusion of an analysis article from the Terra Nova think tank (an organization close to the Socialist Party of France [PS]), which advised the French left to understand that the lower classes had by then switched to the side of the far right Front National (FN), and so to politically play on "the France of

41 In an article published by the newspaper *Marianne* in 2001, the essayist Philippe Muray (1945–2006) would describe Jean-Claude Michéa as a "magnificent propagator of Lasch's work." See Philippe Muray, "Christopher Lasch ou le parti de la vie," *Marianne*, 2001, as transcribed in Philippe Muray, *Exorcismes spirituels III in Essais* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010), p. 1261.

42 To clearly understand the importance of Flammarion, Michel Houellebecq—the most famous current French novelist—is a Flammarion-affiliated writer.

43 Frédéric Joly (born 1973), the translator of *The True and Only Heaven* back in 2002, would for a long time run the Climats collection at Flammarion. He would also gradually address some criticisms to Jean-Claude Michéa, accusing the latter of a slow intellectual "sclerosis" and "stiffening" (see "Frédéric Joly: 'Jean-Claude Michéa, une pensée qui se sclérose,'" *Le Monde*, January 10, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/01/10/frédéric-joly-jean-claude-michea-une-pensee-qui-se-sclérose_5060369_3232.html).

44 If, during the 2000s, most of the articles mentioned Christopher Lasch mainly in direct connection with his French introducer Jean-Claude Michéa, since the early 2010s references to the American anti-modern historian have been much more numerous. For example, from 2006 to 2010, only about 10 or so articles of *Le Figaro* mentioned Lasch while, between 2011 and 2021, there were approximately 100.

45 This quotation is, most often, attributed to the minister of war of the French Third Republic, Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929), though it is believed to be apocryphal.

46 Ragemag (website), December 10, 2012, Ragemag archives (2012–2014), available on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org>.

tomorrow” composed of graduates, youth, women, and minorities,⁴⁷ the political scientist Laurent Bouvet (1968–2021) and the urban geographer Christophe Guilluy (born 1964) founded an activist network called La Gauche Populaire (The Populist Left).

In the essays of both Laurent Bouvet⁴⁸ and Christophe Guilluy written during the 2010s, their references to concepts developed by Christopher Lasch, and later made famous by Jean-Claude Michéa in France, were notably manifold. In the case of Guilluy, the urban geographer can even be considered as a true “Michéist” intellectual who continually relies not only on the thought of Jean-Claude Michéa for his own publications but also the conceptual contributions of Christopher Lasch and George Orwell, which he discovered through the books of the philosophy teacher of Montpellier. If La Gauche Populaire of Bouvet and Guilluy disappeared in 2013, and Ragemag followed suit in 2014, during the 2012–2013 period the two dynamics were notoriously convergent (a lot of references to The Populist Left were made on Ragemag, and Laurent Bouvet ostensibly supported the web magazine at that time).⁴⁹

In the wake of the collapse of Ragemag, the second half of the 2010s would see a lot of journals being created by young journalists directly inspired by Jean-Claude Michéa, and so obviously by Christopher Lasch as well, which would take a critical position regarding consumerism but in an anti-modern and anti-progressive way (*Le Comptoir*, *Limite*, *Philitt*, etc.). These journals can have different political sensitivities (*Le comptoir* is in favor of “degrowth” and fights for “a society without classes, founded on the traditional values of gift and mutual aid,”⁵⁰ while *Limite* speaks out for a Christian conservative approach to ecology, etc.), but all are deeply inspired by Jean-Claude Michéa and Christopher Lasch.⁵¹

Some of the 2010s novice journalists of Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*, *Limite*, or *Philitt* are nowadays, a decade after the launch of these limited-audience journals, working in much bigger newsrooms like those of *Marianne*⁵² or *Le Figaro*.⁵³ When she became the director of *Marianne* in 2018, the journalist and essayist Natacha Polony (born 1975, who describes herself as a “left-wing reactionary,”⁵⁴ was involved in the “sovereigntist” presidential campaign of Jean-Pierre Chevènement in 2002, and who claims to be profoundly inspired by Jean-Claude Michéa) would go on to hire a lot of the former journalists of Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*, *Limite*, and *Philitt*. If the diffusion and the expansion dynamic of Lasch’s thought in France really began to take root in the Montpellier area from the mid-1990s via the intense “dual form of promotion”

47 Olivier Ferrand, Romain Prudent, and Bruno Jeanbart, “Gauche: quelle majorité électorale pour 2012?” *Terra Nova*, May 10, 2011, <https://tnova.fr/democratie/politique-institutions/gauche-quelle-majorite-electorale-pour-2012/>.

48 For representative works, see Laurent Bouvet, *Le sens du peuple—La gauche, la démocratie, le populisme* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard [Le Débat], 2012); Laurent Bouvet, *L’insécurité culturelle* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2015).

49 Laurent Bouvet, “Talking about Ragemag, it is not advertising, it is serving the public interest,” Twitter, July 30, 2012, [defunct account].

50 Le Comptoir, “Le Comptoir, socialistes et révolutionnaires,” *Le Comptoir*, November 15, 2017, <https://comptoir.org/2017/11/15/le-comptoir-socialistes-et-revolutionnaires/>.

51 Among their other inspirations, we can find a lot of authors to whom Jean-Claude Michéa regularly refers, such as Simone Weil (1909–1943), George Orwell (1903–1950), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), etc.

52 Ludvine Bénard (Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*), Kévin Boucaud-Victoire (Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*, *Limite*) and Matthieu Giroux (*Philitt*) all now work for *Marianne*.

53 Eugénie Bastié (*Limite*) writes for the *FigaroVox* (the part of the French newspaper dedicated to philosophical and political ideas). In the *FigaroVox*, likewise, the young journalist Alexandre Devecchio names Michéa as one of his “masters,” and speaks of a true “Michéa generation” in France. See Alexandre Devecchio, *Les nouveaux enfants du siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2016). He describes Lasch’s *Revolt of the Elites* as a “posthumous masterpiece that seems to have been written the day before yesterday” (Alexandre Devecchio, commenting on his article “Les grands essais du XXe siècle: La révolte des élites de Christopher Lasch,” *Le Figaro*, August 23, 2019), <https://twitter.com/AlexDevecchio/status/1164870150845358081>.

54 “Être une gauche libérée, c’est pas si facile” *Causeur*, no. 33, March 2016, <https://www.causeur.fr/gauche-republique-laicite-37298>.

Amaury Giraud

initiated by Michéa, then since the end of the 2010s, the circulation of Lasch's critical ideas about modernism, capitalism, and liberalism has been actively pursued by this new generation of journalists working for *Marianne* or *Le Figaro*.⁵⁵

By joining these much larger newsrooms since the end of the 2010s, this new generation of journalists is henceforth perfectly situated to promote "Laschism" in France through the mass media this new generation belongs to now. This partly explains why, during the events of the Yellow Jackets Movement of the winter of 2018–2019, a large number of parallels were drawn in many Hexagonal media outlets between this French social revolt and the analysis proposed in *The Revolt of the Elites* more than 20 years before.

In May 2018, just a few months before the Yellow Jackets outbreak, the sociologist and philosopher Marcel Gauchet was interviewed about Lasch's theory: "The Lasch thesis is very interesting, even though he did not anticipate the revolt of the people following the revolt of the elites! There is a great truth in his thesis, which embraces the truth of globalization. The elites are more on the global side, while the peoples are more on the local and the national side. In a general manner, the fundamental problem of our societies is the link between the global sphere and the national communities. ... Our first task is to highlight this contradiction, in order to define an acceptable compromise between an open society and protectionism."⁵⁶

Conclusion

When money talks, everybody else is condemned to listen. For that reason, a democratic society cannot allow unlimited accumulation. Social and civic equality presuppose at least a rough approximation of economic equality.

Christopher Lasch⁵⁷

Largely unknown in France when he died in 1994, in spite of the French translation and publication of *The Culture of Narcissism* in 1981, Christopher Lasch became posthumously renowned and famed during the 2000s and, chiefly, the 2010s. Due to the highly keen "dual form of promotion," which started at the end of the 20th century and was carried on by a high school philosophy teacher from Montpellier, Jean-Claude Michéa, through the small Castelnau-le-Lez publishing house Climats, this unexpected, and atypical celebrity—later followed by a new generation of journalists at the end of the 2010s—makes of Christopher Lasch one of the most famed American intellectuals in France today (albeit with an unusual time lag).

55 Paradoxically, *Le Figaro*, which in France is considered the leading right-wing conservative print media outlet, seems to be the French newspaper which is nowadays the most favorable to the still anti-capitalist Marxist and populist philosophies of both Michéa and Lasch.

56 Hocine Rahli, "La démocratie qui vient: Entretien avec Marcel Gauchet," *Nonfiction*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.nonfiction.fr/article-9410-la-democratie-qui-vient-entretien-avec-marcel-gauchet.htm>.

57 Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 22.

The Second Birth of Christopher Lasch in France

Whether it be, for example, Natacha Polony,⁵⁸ Christophe Guilluy,⁵⁹ or Marcel Gauchet,⁶⁰ a conservative fringe of the French intellectual left now likes to refer profusely to the theories of the late history professor at the University of Rochester. But this belated intellectual stardom of the American Marxist historian and sociologist seems to have even exceeded the strict perimeters of the French reflective left.

Indeed, and very surprisingly, even a far-right leader and former journalist such as Éric Zemmour⁶¹ also refers nowadays to the anti-modern criticism of Christopher Lasch—though always by conveniently omitting Lasch’s fundamental anti-capitalist orientation (in the same way as liberal right-wing leaders and anti-Communist figures have, for a long time and especially during the Cold War, omitted the passionate socialism and anti-capitalism of George Orwell in order to only focus on the anti-totalitarian part of the British writer’s masterpieces). Perhaps the critical comment of the American historian Russell Jacoby (born 1945, and whose PhD dissertation was also partly supervised by Christopher Lasch himself) could be applied here, in which he describes right-wing and extreme right-wing leaders in favor of economic liberalism (and always presenting themselves to their electorate as truly and surely “conservative”) as the kind of incoherent politicians who paradoxically “worship the market while cursing the culture it engenders.”⁶²

58 Natacha Polony, “La sécession des élites et la colère des peuples,” *Le Figaro*, April 5, 2013, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/mon-figaro/2013/04/05/10001-20130405ARTFIG00557-la-secession-des-elites-et-la-colere-des-peuples.php>.

59 “‘There’s no such thing as society’ ... In October 1987 Margaret Thatcher spoke these words. ... This prophetic vision announced indeed the great secession, that of the upper world, which, by abandoning the common good, was going to plunge Western countries into the chaos of relative society. ... In 1994, the historian Christopher Lasch was already talking about the secession of the elites,” Christophe Guilluy, *No society—La fin de la classe moyenne occidentale* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2018), p. 9-10.

60 “The idea formulated by Lasch that ‘populism is the authentic voice of democracy’ seems obvious to me. Populism is simply a response to the anti-majoritarian nature of the conduct of Western governments for forty years, it is a response to all the crucial questions posed by globalization. Populism is the child of globalization,” interview conducted by the author with Marcel Gauchet, Gallimard Headquarters, Paris, October 14, 2020.

61 “Éric Zemmour: ‘Narcisse si laid en son miroir,’” *Le Figaro*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2018/05/09/31003-20180509ARTFIG00209-eric-zemmour-narcisse-si-laid-en-son-miroir.php>.

62 Quoted in Jean-Claude Michéa, *L’empire du moindre mal: Essai sur la civilisation libérale* (Castelnaud-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2007), p. 130.