

Why the Left Has No Future—

Christopher Lasch

These stale polemics, full of moral outrage and theoretical hot air, inadvertently show why the Left has no future. Unable to explain the persistence of religion, pro-family attitudes, and an ethic of personal accountability except as an expression of false consciousness—as the product of brainwashing or of an irrational attachment to “simple and easy answers” after “two decades of social upheaval”—the Left finds itself without a following. Since it refuses to take popular attitudes seriously—to “pander” to “the existing popular consciousness,” in Lillian Rubin’s curious and revealing phrase—it can hope to reform society only in the face of popular opposition or indifference. The claim that the Left speaks for the common people no longer carries the slightest conviction. But the effort to maintain it without conviction is demoralizing, while the effort to get along without it—to abandon the fiction of democracy and to lead the people to the promised land against their own judgment and inclinations—is still a little awkward for radicals brought up in a democratic political tradition. Hence the note of anguish that runs through these communications, so revealing of the Leftist frame of mind.

Faced with the embarrassing gap between Leftist ideology and “existing popular consciousness”—a gap that began to reveal itself as early as the 1940’s—the American Left has had to choose, in effect, between two equally futile and self-defeating strategies: either to wait helplessly for the revolution, while fulminating against “capitalism,” or to try to gain its objectives by outflanking public opinion, giving up the hope of creating a popular constituency for social reform, and relying instead on the courts, the mass media, and the administrative bureaucracy. As militant outsiders or bureaucratic insiders, radicals have succeeded only in laying the basis of a conservative movement that has managed to present itself, infuriatingly, as a form of cultural populism, even though its own program, especially its economic program, seeks only to perpetuate the existing distribution of wealth and power—indeed, to reverse most of the democratic gains actually achieved over the last five decades.

An analysis of the capitalist economy, even a fresh and trenchant analysis (as opposed to Lichtman’s lifeless theorizing), in itself would contribute very little to an understanding of the political situation in this country. Why should economic contraction deprive liberalism of its “rationale,” as Lichtman maintains? One might expect that it would have the opposite

effect, as it did in the 1930’s. During the Depression, liberal democrats argued that questions about the distribution of wealth, obscured in the past by a long history of economic expansion, could no longer be postponed. Liberals’ reluctance to press such a point today, when it would be equally pertinent in a climate of diminishing expectations, cannot be explained without reference to the collapse of the political coalition that sustained liberalism in the past; and this development, in turn, cannot be explained without reference to the cultural issues that have separated liberals from their popular constituency. The divisive political effects of this “cultural civil war” are documented in many historical studies—for example, in Frederick Siegel’s useful survey of American history since World War II, *Troubled Journey*. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand why the Left has fallen on hard times, as a substitute for the kind of theorizing which assumes that invocation of the magic words, capitalism and socialism, will explain everything that needs to be explained.

To readers who are tired of formulas, I can also recommend a long list of works on consumerism, mass culture, and the mass media—among others, those of Jackson Lears, Richard Fox, Stewart Ewen, William Leach, and Todd Gitlin. Read Gitlin on the media coverage of the student movement in the sixties and then try to convince yourself that a reactionary political bias accounts for everything. But don’t be afraid to rely on your own observations, which ought to be enough, all by themselves, to raise doubts about the dogma that the mass media purvey a right-wing ideology of “loyalty, . . . patriotism, and anti-intellectualism, elitism, anti-communism,” and uncritical acquiescence. Ask yourself how it is possible for so many people to believe that the media, controlled by the “eastern liberal establishment,” purvey a diametrically opposed ideology, one of undiluted liberal orthodoxy. This belief is no less misguided than the left-wing dogma that the media are wholly dominated by the “interests.” But neither belief can be dismissed out of hand. Instead of replying to one dogma with another, we have to take them seriously enough to understand how they came to be held and what makes them seem like plausible descriptions of reality. The refusal to pay attention to popular perceptions or to listen to any views that don’t agree with those one already holds is a recipe, it goes without saying, for ignorance.

As for the question of whether Americans believe

everything they see on television, fifteen minutes in a bar ought to settle the matter. Only political frustration, a relentlessly abstract quality of mind, or lack of any exposure to everyday life—or a combination of these disabilities—could have led Lichtman to say that the “great majority of Americans absorb, as though by osmosis, the vast majority of Administration deceits, lies, and distortions...” It would be hard to find a single statement that better exemplifies the plight of the Left—its diminished capacity not only for rigorous analysis of social conditions but for ordinary observation, its suffocating self-righteousness, its inability to summon up the elementary political realism that would begin by trying to understand the basis of its adversaries’ political appeal, above all its lack of any political prospects of its own. If the “vast majority of Americans” are as easily fooled as Lichtman thinks, they will never accept socialism, except at the point of a gun. It is hard to escape the conclusion that socialism—“careful now!”—appeals to Lichtman, as it appeals to so many of those “radicals” who covet the reputation of radicalism without its attendant risks, just because it is mildly unpopular (though destined, of course, for ultimate success) and therefore retains a faint afterglow of the dangerous and forbidden, at the same time providing all the intellectual comfort of a safe, predictable, fixed, unchanging body of dogmas.

Unable to explain the persistence of religion, pro-family attitudes, and an ethic of personal accountability except as an expression of false consciousness . . . the Left finds itself without a following.

Readers will find my position confusing only if they persist in thinking that any position not immediately assimilable to left-wing orthodoxy belongs automatically to the Right. The experience of adversity, under Reagan, has intensified the demand for ideological conformity on the Left and thus encouraged this kind of thinking, always appealing to those insecure people who yearn for the excitement of taking sides in the eternal struggle between the forces of progress and the forces of “regression.” “Which side are you on, boys?” When the sides were more clearly drawn, the question made some sense. It still makes sense if it means that people who profess a disinterested love of truth and justice ought to be skeptical, on principle, of the claims

of wealth and power and predisposed to side with the underdog. But the Left long ago lost any vivid interest in underdogs. It is allergic to anything that looks like a lost cause. Such moral authority as the Left enjoyed in the past derived from its identification with the oppressed; but its appeal to intellectuals, unfortunately, has usually rested on its claim to stand on the side of history and progress. What added to the thrill of choosing sides was the certainty that in socialism one chose the winning side, the “cooperative commonwealth” sure to prevail in the long run. The only morally defensible choice, however, is the choice of mercy, charity, and forgiveness over the world’s principalities and powers, the choice of truth against ideology. To make that choice today means to reject Left and Right alike.

For those who refuse the choice when it is presented in this way, my argument remains a “muddle.” (Others have been able to follow it without difficulty.) The muddle, I’m afraid, is in my critics’ heads. Lichtman pounces on what he sees as a contradiction: on the one hand I reject the attempt to define the family out of existence; on the other hand I concede that most people no longer live in nuclear families. But the improvisation of new living arrangements in the wake of marital breakdown does not mean that these new living arrangements can best be understood as “alternatives” to the conventional family or that most people view them in that way. Lillian Rubin blunders into the same “contradiction.” In her dreadfully confused discussion of choice and constraint, she reminds me, unnecessarily, that single-parent families often arise out of necessity, not choice. But this was precisely my point when I said that Orwellian sloganeering about “alternative lifestyles” and the “new diversity of family types” serves to disguise marital breakup as an exhilarating new form of freedom, just as some sloganeering about “women’s liberation” disguises the economic necessity that forces women into the labor market. My intention is to promote plain speech and discourage euphemism. To this end, my essay distinguished between two types of living arrangements misleadingly referred to as “alternative” forms of the family: those makeshift arrangements (single-parent households, blended families) that usually result from divorce or desertion and those arrangements (gay “marriages,” informal cohabitation, single persons living alone) freely chosen by people who reject family life altogether. By confusing these two quite different categories, Rubin loses the logic of my argument and then complains that “there is no logic here.”

Let me try to restate my argument about the family in a form my critics can follow. In the interest of simplicity, I want to confine most of my attention to the first category of “families.” The

second can be easily disposed of. Single persons living alone obviously can't be described very well as families (though people have tried). As for informal cohabitation, even if we could agree to call it a marriage of sorts, we would still have no reason to call it a family. In every society known to anthropology, with a few much-debated exceptions, a family consists of a man and woman united by marriage and living with their offspring. It is impossible to discuss family without reference to marriage, but it is also impossible to discuss it as if it were marriage and nothing more. Clearly it means a marriage plus children. Any other type of "family" is just word-play.

That leaves us with the first category. No one can object to the designation of blended families, extended families, or even, perhaps, to single-parent households

as families. The question is whether these arrangements represent alternatives to the "traditional" family or its ruins. I think it would be hard to show that people have elected these arrangements in the spirit of social pioneering. All the evidence suggests that people prefer more conventional domestic arrangements but find it hard to hold them together. What is misleading is not so much the description of new arrangements as families but the additional claim that people now prefer "alternative families" to the "traditional nuclear family." On the contrary, most people still seem to cherish the stability associated with the "traditional" family, even though this ideal no longer conforms very well to everyday experience.

People still cherish the stability of long-term marital and intergenerational commitments, in other words,

but find little support for them in a capitalist economy or in the prevailing ideology of individual rights. Liberal societies tend to undermine family life, even though most of them profess a sentimental attachment to “family values.” This tendency has been present from the very beginning of the liberal capitalist order, in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the first place, the family wage was a poor substitute for the self-sustaining domestic economy destroyed by industrialism. Not only did wages often fall short of a family’s actual requirements, but the family wage system had the effect, precisely when it was most successful, of making women economically dependent on men—an unhealthy state of affairs.

In the second place, the ideology of individual rights was deeply opposed to “family values” (although the

Right has never grasped this point). By defining the individual as a rational calculator of his own advantage, liberal ideology made it impossible to conceive of any form of association not based on the calculation of mutual advantage; that is, on a contract. There is no place in liberalism, or at best an insecure and precarious place, for those forms of association based on spontaneous cooperation. When people start to argue about their rights, about receiving their fair share of goods, spontaneous cooperation breaks down. When cooperation breaks down, conversely, people start to argue about their rights. It is less important to try to establish which came first, historically, than to recognize the antipathy between a contractual view of association, specifically of marriage and the family, and a view, on the other hand, that regards a promise not as

a contractual obligation but as a test of character. According to the first way of looking at things, you keep a promise as long as it works out to your advantage or—in a variant of this prudential morality only marginally superior—because it is desirable for you to establish the reputation of keeping promises. The second view, by contrast, refuses to regard promise-keeping as a matter of social convenience. It takes the position that a “promise-keeper,” as K. R. Minogue puts it in *The Liberal Mind*, “has a different character from a promise-breaker, and [that] this character can only be adequately described if we consider it in moral terms.”

As products of a liberal culture, we find it difficult to understand the importance other political traditions place on spontaneous cooperation and the value of promises. For the Greeks, the capacity to make promises was almost the definition of a political animal. Feudalism rested on a different but equally powerful conception of the importance of binding oaths. The modern conception, on the other hand—which is profoundly apolitical—is that the capacity for rational choice, rational calculation of utility and personal advantage, is what defines the citizen or the consenting adult, as we say. The modern conception gives little support to the binding promises that underlie the family, especially when we add to the ideology of individual rights the widely accepted belief in the universal obligation to be happy. Liberal ideology not only gives little support to the family, it cannot even make sense of the family, an institution that appears irrational in the sense that its members ideally do not think of their own interests and of the rights designed to protect them, and in the further sense that they promise to sustain each other through a lifetime. What folly!

The whole tendency of modern society, of modern liberalism in particular, consigns family life (by any reasonable definition of family life) to the realm of “nostalgia.” Note that I don’t blame the instability of family life on feminism. Since feminism is an expression of well-founded grievances, and since the economic and ideological assault on the foundations of family life antedated the emergence of a feminist movement, it would be foolish to blame feminism for the collapse of the family. But it is equally foolish to pretend that feminism is compatible with the family. Feminism is itself an outgrowth of liberalism, among other things, and it shares liberalism’s belief in individual rights, contractual relations, and the primacy of justice, all of which make it impossible to understand the nature or the value of spontaneous cooperation.

Spontaneous associations like the family institutionalize (in the form of promises, oaths, coven-

ants) a willingness to accept the consequences of your actions—in the case of the family, the act of procreation. The family implicates the older generation in the life of the younger. It counters the tendency, highly developed in humans and especially among human males, to run away from responsibility for the young. The family is culture’s answer to the peculiar structure of human biology, to the absence of sexual periodicity which makes it possible for humans to breed with abandon, and to the prolonged dependence of the human young. The combination of these two biological traits would be fatal to the prospects for reproduction and cultural transmission without institutions designed to tie people to their offspring and to constrain both sexes to their care.

People still cherish the stability of long-term marital and inter-generational commitments, . . . but find little support for them in a capitalist economy or in the prevailing ideology of individual rights.

Because the monogamous ideal institutionalized in the family runs counter to human biology, it is appropriate to see the family as above all a system of constraints. In our enlightened age, the apparent irrationality of these constraints, of the very idea of constraints, provides much of the energy for the effort to work out “alternative lifestyles” (an effort, however, that is not nearly as widespread as our liberators would like to believe, since it conflicts with a stubborn popular realism in these matters). In the face of this revolt against familial constraints, it is important to stress their value, which lies not only in their negative effect, in making it more difficult than it would be otherwise for men to desert their women and children, but in the encouragement these constraints give to a full understanding of freedom itself, one that goes beyond the equation of freedom with unlimited choice and “nonbinding commitments.”

Although the institution of the family forced men to become monogamous, a double standard of sexual conduct has always winked at their frequent lapses from this ideal, while punishing women for the same lapses, usually with brutal severity. The double standard was perhaps the most important single influence that eventually brought the family into discredit. The twentieth century, unfortunately, has tried to correct this

blatant injustice by instituting a single standard of sexual license, whereas the proper remedy is a more exacting standard of sexual fidelity and a more exacting definition of the responsibility of parents to their children. A “family policy” designed to shift this responsibility to the state is no solution at all. Nor is it a “radical” solution. It would merely ratify the pattern of bureaucratic individualism that already exists, in which the state takes over the nurturing functions formerly associated with parenthood and leaves people free to enjoy themselves as consumers. Such a solution makes children of us all. The world can do without a “radicalism” that proposes only to carry existing arrangements to their logical conclusion: the absorption of public life by the state and the destruction of intermediate institutions by redefining them as pressure groups or “lifestyle enclaves” (in Robert Bellah’s phrase) in which individuals are left free to pursue purely private interests and pleasures.

Since Rubin invokes the sixties in order to support her dubious claim that the radical movements of that decade found their final perfection in feminism, it would be a good idea to remind ourselves that the sixties also saw a revival of the communitarian tradition that has always coexisted with the dominant liberal tradition. The dispute between communitarians and liberals hinges on opposing conceptions of the self. Whereas liberals conceive of the self as essentially unencumbered and free to choose among a wide range of alternatives, communitarians insist that the self is situated in and constituted by tradition, membership in a historically rooted community. Liberals regard tradition as a collection of prejudices that prevent the individual from understanding his own needs. They exalt cosmopolitanism over provincialism, which in their eyes encourages conformity and intolerance. Communitarians, on the other hand, reply that “intolerance flourishes most,” in the words of Michael Sandel, “where forms of life are dislocated, roots unsettled, traditions undone.”

Communitarians share with the Right an opposition to bureaucracy, but they don’t stop with an attack on governmental bureaucracy; they are equally sensitive to the spread of corporate bureaucracy in the misnamed private sector. Indeed they tend to reject the conventional distinction between the public and the private realm, which figures so prominently both in the liberal

tradition and in the tradition of economic individualism which now calls itself conservatism (with little warrant). Both liberals and conservatives adhere to the same empty ideal of freedom as privacy; they disagree only about what is truly private. For liberals and “radicals,” it is freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of sexual preference that need to be protected, whereas those who call themselves conservatives value economic freedom more highly. The Left understands private life as primarily cultural, the Right as primarily economic. Communitarianism rejects both the left-wing and the right-wing version of the cult of privacy; and the promise of communitarian thought is already suggested by the difficulty of situating it on the conventional political spectrum. It breaks out of the deadlock between welfare liberalism and economic individualism, the opposition of which has informed so much of our politics in the past. Instead of setting up the protection of private judgment as the summit of political virtue, the communitarian point of view shows just how much the individual owes, not to “society”—that abstraction routinely invoked by the Left—but to the concrete associations (in both senses of the word) without which we would be unable to develop any sense of personal identity at all.

Orwellian sloganeering about “alternative lifestyles” and the “new diversity of family types” serves to disguise marital breakup as an exhilarating new form of freedom.

Lichtman and Rubin are right about one thing: this position is “dangerous,” a word that comes easily to both these timid souls. It is dangerous, of course, not because it comforts the Right at the expense of the Left but because it gives no comfort to either. It discloses the core of assumptions common to the Left and the Right and thus dissolves the conventional and inconclusive debate between them. It dissolves all the stock answers, throws open the doors and windows, and forces political discussion out into the open air—always a danger for tender plants bred in the greenhouse. □