



Leadership and Morality

Conceptualizing a non-concept: defining *Common decency*

Abstract

Not easily identified, common decency is however a key notion for a social critique disconnected as well from Marxism as from communitarianism. The English writer George Orwell conceived it as a intuitive sense of morality that exists among the common people. The American sociologist Christopher Lasch reused this idea to denounce the corruption of the contemporary elites. Common decency implies a material and spiritual independence of the individual, who owns an acute sense of limitation, accepting life as it comes, without unrealistic aspirations. Tool for challenging leadership, common decency is a claim for improving democracy.

“All concepts in which a whole process is summarized in signs escape definition; only that which is without history can be defined”

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

Dealing with the notion of “*punishment*”, Nietzsche challenged the possibility to condense a whole historical process into a singular unity. Empirical phenomena are subject to constant fluctuations, their conceptual translations are not immune to changes in deep. The meaning given to a phenomenon at a specific moment, as it appears through a concept, is probably very far from the

¹ *On the genealogy of morals* II §13 (1996) Oxford University Press, translation by Douglas Smith

original sense (which also remains elusive). It is thus commonly assumed that the initial purpose of punishment is to arouse feelings of guilt. According to Nietzsche, the punishment originally had no moral connotation; it drifted just from the contractual obligation. It was a threatening guarantee of the relationship between the creditor and debtor. Though the concept is supposed to display an immutable reality, it conceals itself unceasingly. The genealogy of the concepts puts us in the inability to translate moral and social phenomena in perennial forms.

Our task is therefore to overcome this obstacle and thus to formalize a somewhat unusual concept in political theory: *Common decency*. This term was coined in the writings of British author Eric Arthur Blair (1903-1950), better known as George Orwell, famous author of *the Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949). Though he frequently employed the concept, he did not give clear and precise definition, at least in the academic sense. Briefly, we could draw a first draft of common decency: it appears as a form of spontaneous morality, an intuitive sense of good and evil that anyone can feel, since he is integrated in community. In summary, common decency is “*reason of the common people*” (Michéa, 2003; 103). Such a definition seems quite unsatisfactory for any expert in social sciences, who hopes to raise his findings up to the status of scientific knowledge. Orwell was obviously not a theoretician; he even distrusted intellectuals as the plague and he disparaged complacently their abstract jargon.

This scepticism about conceptual constructs we do not facilitate the task. We will try to clarify the contours and the nature of common decency. It cannot be shaped in the same way as classical logical concept, i.e. a complete abstract lexical object, but must derive from concrete examples and experiments. Studying the use of that notion in George Orwell's works, and also Christopher Lasch's, we will identify its core elements, its necessary and sufficient conditions, and eventually, to what extent this notion can be useful, i.e. to what extent common decency can become a basis for a radical criticism of contemporary liberal elites.

"No grown-up person can read Dickens without feeling his limitations, and yet there does remain his native generosity of mind, which acts as a kind of anchor and nearly always keeps him where he

*belongs. It is probably the central secret of his popularity. A good-tempered antinomianism rather of Dickens's type is one of the marks of Western popular culture."*²

George Orwell

George Orwell did not give a precisely stated definition of common decency. However, we can extract some features from a concrete application of the notion established by the writer. In his account of Charles Dickens's life and work, Orwell provides an appropriate illustration of it. With this portrait of the famous writer, Orwell provides his own conception of morality.

Orwell presents the famous author of *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* as a man from the urban middle-class, moderate in his thoughts, reluctant to social troubles, but deeply sensitive to the sufferings of the poor people, and especially when there are children. His concern about the injustices in society is clearly not bound to a deep interpretation of the structures of society, but it is rather an intuition, a spontaneous knowledge of what is good or bad. Decency sounds like an evidence, something obvious and unquestionable: "*If men would behave decently the world would be decent*"³. Actually, Dickens' moral sensitivity, somewhat surprising for his time, is grounded in the own experiment of the author⁴. Life itself is a resource for moral judgement. Bruce Bégout (2008;) noted correctly that George Orwell must have been influenced in some way by the Scottish moralists, notably by Francis Hutcheson, who considered that the moral sense, that is the ability to distinguish virtue from vice, was innate. In a sense, Orwell's common decency approximates the qualities of the human being at the state of nature, in the romantic definition notably given by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1754). Human beings have a natural feeling of compassion which precedes the use of reason, especially rational and teleological calculation; moreover, reason is responsible for the decay of this natural

2 George Orwell, *Charles Dickens* (1940) p.24

3 Idem. p.2

4 "*A sympathetic attitude towards children was a much rarer thing in Dickens's day than it is now. The early nineteenth century was not a good time to be a child. In Dickens's youth children were still being 'solemnly tried at a criminal bar, where they were held up to be seen', and it was not so long since boys of thirteen had been hanged for petty theft. The doctrine of 'breaking the child's spirit' was in full vigour, and The Fairchild Family was a standard book for children till late into the century. This evil book is now issued in pretty-pretty expurgated editions, but it is well worth reading in the original version. It gives one some idea of the lengths to which child-discipline was sometimes carried.*" idem p.7

pity⁵. Indeed, the more people develop their intellectual faculties, the more they endeavour to rationalize their behaviours, and thus they cut from their initial impulses, from their natural feelings. George Orwell seems to agree with Rousseau on that point when he states about Dickens that “*he lacked that kind of imagination. He has an infallible moral sense, but very little intellectual curiosity*”⁶. A distinction remains between the two authors: while Rousseau conceives pity as a purely natural sense, corrupted by the life in society, Orwell assumes that decency cannot flourish without the socialization of the individual, his inclusion within a community. This is the reason why Dickens' positive descriptions of the poor are not completely idolized: indeed, if he is sensitive to their sufferings, he thinks that the more miserable people must have lost their morality, because of the sub-human conditions of living they have. Then, we have more chance to find common decency among the little people of the cities, who preserve a relative autonomy, than among the proletariat, which is completely helpless and even repulsive⁷. In both cases, the intuition and the heart prevail over reason, but while the former has little hope about the loss of natural morality, the second relies on the resources of meaning that people get as soon as they interact with each other.

5 “*I am speaking of compassion, which is a disposition suitable to creatures so weak and subject to so many evils as we certainly are: by so much the more universal and useful to mankind, as it comes before any kind of reflection; and at the same time so natural, that the very brutes themselves sometimes give evident proofs of it. (...) Were it even true that pity is no more than a feeling, which puts us in the place of the sufferer, a feeling, obscure yet lively in a savage, developed yet feeble in civilised man; this truth would have no other consequence than to confirm my argument. Compassion must, in fact, be the stronger; the more the animal beholding any kind of distress identifies himself with the animal that suffers. Now, it is plain that such identification must have been much more perfect in a state of nature than it is in a state of reason. It is reason that engenders self-respect, and reflection that confirms it: it is reason which turns man's mind back upon itself, and divides him from everything that could disturb or afflict him.*”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A discours on a subject proposed by the Academy of Dijon: "What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorised by natural law?"*, 1754, Translated by G.D H. Cole, Part I
<http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq.htm>

6 George Orwell, *Charles Dickens*, (1940), p.17

7 “*Dickens had grown up near enough to poverty to be terrified of it, and in spite of his generosity of mind, he is not free from the special prejudices of the shabby-genteel. It is usual to claim him as a ‘popular’ writer, a champion of the ‘oppressed masses’.* So he is, so long as he thinks of them as oppressed; but there are two things that condition his attitude. In the first place, he is a south-of-England man, and a Cockney at that, and therefore out of touch with the bulk of the real oppressed masses, the industrial and agricultural labourers. It is interesting to see how Chesterton, another Cockney, always presents Dickens as the spokesman of ‘the poor’, without showing much awareness of who ‘the poor’ really are. To Chesterton ‘the poor’ means small shopkeepers and servants. Sam Weller, he says, ‘is the great symbol in English literature of the populace peculiar to England’; and Sam Weller is a valet! The other point is that Dickens's early experiences have given him a horror of proletarian roughness. He shows this unmistakably whenever he writes of the very poorest of the poor, the slum-dwellers. His descriptions of the London slums are always full of undisguised repulsion”
George Orwell, *Charles Dickens* (1940), p.11

Another aspect of Dickens' personality that Orwell reveals is his moderate temper. Orwell considers this sobriety as a key feature of common decency, which is exempted from any radicalism. Orwell presents Dickens, not necessarily as a conservative, but definitely as someone tightened to traditional institutions, notably family and neighbourhood, in which individuals feel safe and secure. He criticizes society as soon as it breaks these bases for solidarity, from which the individual builds his personality and inherits his moral consciousness. But recognizing the necessity of these institutions requires a certain level of maturity, that is the sense of limitation, the acknowledgement from the reasonable subject that everything is not possible. Dickens appears quite sceptical, and Orwell agrees with him, about political radicalism. Any attempt to implement a drastic change, even with idealistic intentions, will only cause more damages to simple people and communities. The critical stand of Dickens (and Orwell's too) relies on a constant discontent about social order, and certainly not on the idea that a "perfect world" could be built. Changing political institutions or economic organizations will change nothing, since people remain the same, greedy, scornful and selfish. There must always be more improvements, not by overthrowing the social order, but rather by changing people's minds, as Orwell underlines it: "*in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure*"⁸. Dickens does only propose to remind people the basic principles of decency, that they have forgotten over time⁹, like Mr. Scrooge, the main character in his famous tale *A Christmas Carol* (1843), an old selfish man, who eventually turns generous after the visit of three ghosts who made him remember his duties towards his fellows. If Orwell regrets that Dickens is so apolitical, nevertheless he recognizes the alternative that he suggested: "*If you hate violence and don't believe in politics, the only remedy remaining is education. Perhaps society is past praying for, but there is always hope for the individual human being, if you can catch him young enough*"¹⁰. Thinking that morality is socially based on, Dickens concludes that adults have to take care of children, to teach

8 Idem. p.8

9 "*His radicalism is of the vaguest kind, and yet one always knows that it is there. That is the difference between being a moralist and a politician. He has no constructive suggestions, not even a clear grasp of the nature of the society he is attacking, only an emotional perception that something is wrong, all he can finally say is, 'Behave decently', which, as I suggested earlier, is not necessarily so shallow as it sounds.*" idem. p24

10 Idem. p.6

them how to lead their lives decently, in order they do not fall in misery. A society which gives up the new generations is doomed. As Hannah Arendt said, “*Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world, which, however revolutionary*”¹¹. A child must be introduced progressively in a world that precedes him, he has to integrate the essential social cues and moral values, in order to be able latter to get his own rules and to add to the old society a new vitality. Individual creativity is not an act of pure invention, a new generation does not appear *ex nihilo*; former rules must be learnt before being transcended.

This conception of politics and education quite conservative may be rooted in the fact that neither Dickens nor Orwell believe in the idea of progress. An old-fashioned morality is not compatible with the optimistic conception of History that the Liberals as well as the Marxists have promoted (Orwell clearly rejects *historical materialism*, and several times in his essay he denounces the attempts by Marxist authors to instrumentalize Dickens' works). There is no ideology in their thoughts. Things happen in history, not because of hypothetical metaphysical laws, but when the discrepancy between the values and the fact become unbearable for the common people, when the injustices and the abuses of the elites has become so obvious that decency no longer exists. Orwell gives the example of the French Revolution: “*In other words, the French aristocracy had dug their own graves. But there is no perception here of what is now called historic necessity. Dickens sees that the results are inevitable, given the causes, but he thinks that the causes might have been avoided. The Revolution is something that happens because centuries of oppression have made the French peasantry sub-human. If the wicked nobleman could somehow have turned over a new leaf, like Scrooge, there would have been no Revolution, no jacquerie, no guillotine*”¹². As soon as decency is respected, people have no reason to rebel, they are motivated by a so-called “*will of power*”, class struggles are always avoidable. Orwell remarks that Dickens is somewhat fatalist; this absence of idealism, of utopianism, is bound with the idea that society will always be unsatisfactory,

11 Hannah Arendt, "The crisis in education" (1954) in *Between past and future (la Crise de la culture*, Gallimard, 1972, p.247)

12 George Orwell, *Charles Dickens* (1940), p.5

that inequalities will persist whatever we do. However, if injustices are inevitable, they imposed duties to the privileged ones. Orwell thus points out the recurrent figure in Dickens's books of “*the good rich man*”, who has not lost his genuine morality, his responsibilities as a member of a community. The good rich man, not blinded by money, intervenes at the end of the story to solve the difficulties of the characters. Nevertheless, this feature cannot be understood as a rehabilitation of patronage¹³, but rather as an insistence on the necessity not to lose one's links with other people¹⁴. Wealth creates a risk of corrupting the soul; people must cultivate their natural sympathy by a constant exercise in altruism. This generosity is considered neither as a duty from an established dogma, nor as a paternalist, but simply as the normal principles that everyone should follow. Decency is the convenient behaviour to be adopted when someone is confronted with injustice.

This first pattern of common decency, extracted from Orwell's comments on Charles Dickens, lacks however a strong political dimension. Orwell highlights Dickens' criticism of society and its cruelties, but this blame is deprived of any really active sense. Dickens proposes no real solution (certainly not a political one), except a sort of retreat into privacy. He only advocates that everyone should lead a simple life without excess, respectful of his fellows. To complete his notion of common decency, Orwell has therefore to include a political dimension.

Written in 1941, while London was under the fire of the *Blitz*, *the Lion and the Unicorn* can be considered as George Orwell's contribution to the resistance of Great Britain in the World War II. Because of his health problems, Orwell could not take part to the fightings. Therefore, he became involved in the patriotic press, in order to help his people to face adversity. The title refers to the symbols of the United Kingdom; indeed George Orwell praises in this pamphlet the English spirit, mainly because the English people remain hardly receptive to ideologies or to *Weltanschauung*¹⁵. This spirit is especially preserved by the common people, the common English men, whose lives

13 "In the books of the middle period the good rich man fades out to some extent. There is no one who plays this part in *A Tale of Two Cities*, nor in *Great Expectations* — *Great Expectations* is, in fact, definitely an attack on patronage" idem p.3

14 "*Boffin* is a proletarian by origin and only rich by inheritance, but he is the usual *deus ex machina*, solving everybody's problems by showering money in all directions" idem p.3

15 "They have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic 'world-view.'" George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941), p.2

are shaped by national values. They feel more tightened than their leaders to the good old customs, producing social ties and brotherhood. They are less lured by the vanity of gold and power, and thus, they are able to resist to the vicious intellectual trends imported from abroad¹⁶. Inasmuch as Orwell's particular conception of Socialism is bound with patriotism. Orwell denounces capitalist economy, in which small independent producers are crushed by great companies which exploit workers¹⁷, and he thinks that a certain degree of equality is necessary to set up a decent society¹⁸. But the socialist revolution can only happen in a particular national context, with an awakening of the feelings of patriotism and solidarity¹⁹. Once again, Orwell reject Marxist theories, notably Trotsky's "*permanent revolution*". Besides, even in his socialist criticism, Orwell still considers that British elites have mostly escaped from the influence of Fascist or Stalinist ideas. In spite of their corruption and their unceasing mistakes²⁰, the old aristocrats and the political class, thanks to their old-fashioned manners, are deeply attached to their country; they would be ready to sacrifice

16 "*But in all societies the common people must live to some extent against the existing order. The genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface, unofficially and more or less frowned on by the authorities. One thing one notices if one looks directly at the common people, especially in the big towns, is that they are not puritanical. They are inveterate gamblers, drink as much beer as their wages will permit, are devoted to bawdy jokes, and use probably the foulest language in the world. They have to satisfy these tastes in the face of astonishing, hypocritical laws (licensing laws, lottery acts, etc. etc.) which are designed to interfere with everybody but in practice allow everything to happen. Also, the common people are without definite religious belief, and have been so for centuries.*" idem. p.3

"*In all countries the poor are more national than the rich, but the English working class are outstanding in their abhorrence of foreign habits. Even when they are obliged to live abroad for years they refuse either to accustom themselves to foreign food or to learn foreign languages.*" idem. p.6

17 "*The great monopoly companies swallowed up hosts of petty traders*" idem. p.10

18 "*However, it has become clear in the last few years that 'common ownership of the means of production' is not in itself a sufficient definition of Socialism. One must also add the following: approximate equality of incomes (it need be no more than approximate), political democracy, and abolition of all hereditary privilege, especially in education.*" idem. p.14

"*2. Incomes. Limitation of incomes implies the fixing of a minimum wage, which implies a managed internal currency based simply on the amount of consumption goods available. And this again implies a stricter rationing scheme than is now in operation. It is no use at this stage of the world's history to suggest that all human beings should have exactly equal incomes. It has been shown over and over again that without some kind of money reward there is no incentive to undertake certain jobs. On the other hand the money reward need not be very large. In practice it is impossible that earnings should be limited quite as rigidly as I have suggested. There will always be anomalies and evasions. But there is no reason why ten to one should not be the maximum normal variation. And within those limits some sense of equality is possible. A man with £3 a week and a man with £1,500 a year can feel themselves fellow creatures, which the Duke of Westminster and the sleepers on the Embankment benches cannot.*" idem. p.25

19 "*It is only by revolution that the native genius of the English people can be set free*" idem. p.6

"*Patriotism has nothing to do with Conservatism. It is actually the opposite of Conservatism, since it is a devotion to something that is always changing and yet is felt to be mystically the same. It is the bridge between the future and the past. No real revolutionary has ever been an internationalist.*" idem. p.28

20 "*England was ruled by an aristocracy constantly recruited from parvenus*" idem. p.8

themselves to protect their land, keeping their chivalrous instinct²¹. The English spirit have prevented them from understanding, and eventually joining, absolutely indecent ideologies²². In a kind of continuity with the old British conservatives, like David Hume or Edmund Burke, Orwell praises traditions (so he could define himself as a “*Tory anarchist*”²³); common decency is actually transmitted and spread through these traditions.

On the other hand, Orwell is very critical towards the imperial elites, especially the civil servants who rule a whole Empire behind closed doors; they cut themselves from the true people, applying impersonal and technical commands, without moral considerations²⁴. Orwell also attacks sharply the intellectuals, notably for their political fanaticism. Either communist or fascist, intellectual are dreaming of violent revolutions, *tabula rasa*; in crisis, they are always making the worst choices, because they are completely disconnected from reality²⁵, whereas the common people, who remain rooted in the day-to-day life, only hope for quietude and preserving good moods. Intellectuals, with their global visions of the world and history, forget cultural particularities and moral values, and eventually they are involved in the destruction of them²⁶. Orwell denounces thus the way intellectuals are using language. Because of their jargon, they blur the understanding of reality and they alter the meaning of things. In his short essay *Politics and the English language* (1946), Orwell opposes the traditional language, used by common people, which is concrete and provides powerful images of reality, to the modern language, conceived by ideologists and

21 “One thing that has always shown that the English ruling class are morally fairly sound, is that in time of war they are ready enough to get themselves killed” idem. p.10

22 “They could not struggle against Nazism or Fascism, because they could not understand them. Neither could they have struggled against Communism, if Communism had been a serious force in western Europe. To understand Fascism they would have had to study the theory of Socialism, which would have forced them to realize that the economic system by which they lived was unjust, inefficient and out-of-date.” idem. p.9

23 Michéa (2003;61)

24 “Ambassadors, generals, officials and colonial administrators who are senile or pro-Fascist are more dangerous than Cabinet ministers whose follies have to be committed in public. Right through our national life we have got to fight against privilege, against the notion that a half-witted public-schoolboy is better for command than an intelligent mechanic.” idem. p.18

25 “There is little in them except the irresponsible carping of people who have never been and never expect to be in a position of power. Another marked characteristic is the emotional shallowness of people who live in a world of ideas and have little contact with physical reality. Many intellectuals of the Left were flabbily pacifist up to 1935, shrieked for war against Germany in the years 1935-9, and then promptly cooled off when the war started.” idem. p.11

26 “The insularity of the English, their refusal to take foreigners seriously, is a folly that has to be paid for very heavily from time to time. But it plays its part in the English mystique, and the intellectuals who have tried to break it down have generally done more harm than good.” idem. p.6

corrupted politicians, allusive and full of euphemisms. This language is the opposite of authenticity and sincerity, and it aims only to manipulate the masses, to make people believe lies, and moreover to make them act cruelly. The impoverishment of language weakens the freedom of thought and finally weakens the common decency²⁷. People lose their landmarks and their ability to evaluate what is good or bad. Those who control the language can distort reality, they can shape it at will, and then deceive people. This is actually the characteristic of totalitarian regimes that Orwell reveals in his opus magnum *1984*: these regimes elaborate a “*Newspeak*”, which prevent any actual communication between individuals and hide the structure of power, only transmitting the propaganda of the regime. Indeed, Syme, the lexicographer of the Party in *1984*, declares: “*The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect. Newspeak is Ingsoc and Ingsoc is Newspeak*”²⁸; when the language is totally corrupted by ideology, common decency disappears and people falls completely under the power of the regimes. These two categories have lost progressively the common decency, under the pressure of the impersonal bureaucracy, and also because of they have become hooked by the power of abstractions and ideologies, giving up their genuine sincerity.

Through Orwell's works, we found some elements to shape the notion of common decency:

- The basic principles that everyone should follow in society, which are necessary to act decently, are not established by rational and systematic philosophical constructions, but derive from the experiment of day-to-day life, from the social links with other people, set up with simple manners and sincerity.
- Common decency relies on the maturity of common people, who reject fanaticism and unrealistic utopias.
- Common decency is a moral sense opposed to both political calculation and intellectual radicalism.
- The values transmitted by common decency are rooted in culture, and therefore vary according to the national context in which it spreads.

²⁷ "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better. The debased language that I have been discussing is in some ways very convenient."

George Orwell *Politics and the English language* (1946), p.6

²⁸ George Orwell, *1984*, (1949) Part I, chap.V

<http://www.orwell.ru/library/novels/1984/english/>

“Any movement that offers any real hope for the future will have to find much of its moral inspiration in the plebeian radicalism of the past and more generally in the indictment of progress, large-scale production and bureaucracy that was drawn up by a long line of moralists whose perceptions were shaped by the producers' view of the world.”²⁹

Christopher Lasch

Half a century after Orwell, another author tackled the issue of common decency. However, he gave up the light tone of the writer, adopting the pessimistic prose of the social critic. American historian Christopher Lasch (1932-1994) acquired an international reputation with the publication of *The culture of narcissism* in 1979. In the sceptical atmosphere of the late 1970s, marked notably by Daniel Bell's *The cultural contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) and Richard Sennett's *The Fall of the Public Man* (1977), Lasch denounced the emergence of the self-centred personality of modern individuals, eager for consuming and disinterested of his fellows, thus debunking the myth of the *American way of life*. These issues seem quite far from Orwell's concerns about decency; however the counterpart of Lasch's attack on narcissism is the rehabilitation of the morality of the common people.

As George Orwell, who took up the cudgels for the simple people after his discovery of human exploitation while he was serving in the colonial administration in Burma (Leys, 1984; 26), Lasch's intellectual itinerary is closely bound to his political involvements and life experiments. Committed in the political struggles of the 1960's, Christopher Lasch (2006; 27) felt strongly disappointed by the orientations of the modern Left. He denounced that “*New Left*”, which renounced to struggle for the emancipation of the people, and eventually is responsible for the development of new kinds of dependency. The last chapter of *The culture of narcissism* is dedicated to the criticism of the Welfare State, that Lasch considers as a “*Therapist State*”, which only compensates inequalities instead of breaking them down: “*the new means of social control have stabilized capitalism, without solving any fundamental problems: the gap between the rich and the*

²⁹ Lasch, Christopher (1991). "Liberalism and Civic Virtue". *Telos* (88): 57–68. , p68

poor, the inability of the purchasing power to monitor the productivity, economic stagnation” (2000; 277). Lasch does not idealize the State, contrary to Orwell, who appeared to consider State ownership and collectivization as the means to fulfil equality and individual autonomy³⁰. On the contrary, Lasch (2000; 270) analyses that after the destruction of traditional social links by capitalism, already highlighted by Karl Marx³¹, the Welfare State has become a substitute for family, which takes care of individuals, as Lord Beveridge said, “*from cradle to grave*”³², gradually suppressing personal autonomy, while bureaucratization is spreading impersonal ties. The paternalist State and its civil servants consider individuals as sick or disabled, unable to take their own responsibilities, to define their life choices and values; then, they fall under the control of the social workers and the psychologists of the system. Thus, Lasch (2006;88 seq.) blames harshly John Maynard Keynes, great inspirer of the New Left, considered by many as the theoretician of the Welfare State. Far from proposing a complete alternative to capitalism, as his rightist opponents stated, Keynesian economic theories allowed to save capitalism from its contradictions. Thanks to State aids, the poor have become able to take part in the mass consumption, renewing the outlets for consumer goods. The State could thus subject individuals to economic dependence and perpetuate the system. Besides, Keynes was an hedonist, contemptuous towards traditional rules. Indeed, Lasch sees that the New Left cuts itself off from the common people. Then, he turns away from his old masters Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, when they discovered the “*authoritarian*

30 "Socialism is usually defined as 'common ownership of the means of production'. Crudely: the State, representing the whole nation, owns everything, and everyone is a State employee. This does not mean that people are stripped of private possessions such as clothes and furniture, but it does mean that all productive goods, such as land, mines, ships and machinery, are the property of the State."

George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941), p.14

"The State could quell this idea by declaring itself responsible for all education"
idem. p.25

31 « *The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors", and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment". It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom — Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers. The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.* » *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), Part I « Bourgeois and Proletarians »

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>

32 http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/brave_new_world/welfare.htm

personality” (2006; 547 seq.): they regarded the affection of ordinary people to traditions and prejudices as the evidence of their anti-democratic tendencies. As soon as the New Left has started to distrust and to scorn the people, to see its members as a mass of potential reactionaries and racists, that New Left gave up common decency.

Face to the ruin of social ties by capitalism and the growing dependence to the “*Therapist State*”, the individual withdraws into his inner world. Fearing the future, he seeks to live in the moment, to satisfy eagerly his desires. Then he loses gradually he historical consciousness, he forgets that he is enrolled in a continuity, which imposes the respect for elders as well as responsibilities for the subsequent generations (2000; 31). Modernity appears as the triumph of the narcissistic personality, excessively focused on his ego (2000; 63 seq.). Narcissus is unable to establish any relationship of personal, because he is too preoccupied with his personal specific concerns to have any attention to others. Moreover, the therapeutic society itself encourages him to unleash any of his impulses, which were constrained by traditional norms. Capitalism, which had relied on the repression of primary impulses (i.e. investing instead of consuming and being devoted to work), now stirs the lower desires of the individual. Advertising makes people to believe that the realization of their personalities can be acquired by immediate consumption. The individual does not understand any more the necessity for duty or love towards his fellows (2000; 41). He would rather the shelter of therapeutic comfort; in the cabinet of the psychoanalysis, Narcissus is able to expose all his anguish, exalting his ego, disconnected from any civic concerns.

If Lasch appears very critical towards modern western societies, he does not think that common decency is completely lost, notably because the morality of ordinary people has always been supported by Populism. It is the actual expression of common decency according to Lasch. Besides, *The True and only Heaven* (1991) is really an history of that specific political tradition, from Thomas Paine to Andrew Jackson, from the English Chartist movement and George Sorel to the American Progressive Movement. Contrary to liberalism or Marxism, populism rejects both the myth of progress and any sort of elitism. This is a tradition that defends the rights of people and

claims for equality, but remains rooted in the community and its values. The social struggle must be connected with a specific culture, which unifies the people. Thus, Christopher Lasch could take over Rousseau's statement: *“This should tell us what we ought to think of those so-called cosmopolitans, who justify the love of their country on the basis of their love for the human race, and vaunt themselves as loving everyone so that they can have the right to love no-one.”*³³ (2006; 147); a so-called international revolution is impossible, because people are members communities before members of a social class. Ordinary people rely on morality, which flourishes in local areas, thanks to permanent conversations that happen in *“intermediate places”* (1996; 127), as coffee shops, bars or workplaces. Values and moral norms preserve neighbourhood solidarities (Lasch has the same concern as Orwell about the necessity of a concrete and familiar language that binds people).

The populist tradition also aims to ensure a real individual autonomy. Against any dependence, whether to the big capitalist firm or to the Welfare-State, Populism purposes to establish a society free from great organizations and bureaucracies. Lasch finds the solution promoted by the Social-democracy³⁴, i.e. to improve working conditions instead of truly emancipating the worker, as really disappointing. He praises the model of the small independent producers (2006; 246 seq.), the craftsman who works in direct contact with matter and with his partners. Through a concrete activity, which is conditioned by pre-established rules and takes place in a familiar environment, the individual gives a sense to his own existence, he realizes his subjectivity within a community that have been already existing before him³⁵. The integration in a tradition provides values, while the individual gains both material and intellectual independence

33 *Of the Social Contract or Essay on the Form of the Republic* (1st version) Translated from the French by Christopher Bertram, Chapter 2: Of the General Society of the Human Race

http://eis.bris.ac.uk/~plcdib/General_Society.htm

34 « *The employee remains an employee, instead of trying to become an owner or partner; an enlightened social policy would check if his employment is assured, his working conditions tolerable, a fair wage and the opportunity to organize his private life privately without any obstacles imposed by archaic legal obstacles.* » (2006; 245)

35 The human condition is to be propelled into the future; the human being is absorbed in the course of time, and moreover, he is conscious of that condition: he is conscious of own finitude, he knows that he will die. However, the individual succeeds in overcoming his *angst*, i.e. his existential anxiety, since he gives meaning to his existence. He appropriates a place, i.e. he assimilates the essence of that place, he recognizes the values attached to it, and then he can build on it, that is giving a shape to it. Then, he is able to live in the place, and thus finding the plenitude. cf. Martin Heidegger, « *Wohnen Bauen Denken* » (« *Bâtir Habiter Penser* », *Essais et conférences* 1980, Gallimard)

thanks to his own work. He obeys only himself and does not let anyone dictate his thoughts: he is the ideal of the common man, the democratic man *par excellence*. The populist tradition tries to spread that model: a real democratic society is composed of independent and relatively equal men and women, altogether animated by a same spirit, the common decency.

The last important leader of the populist tradition in American politics, according to Lasch, was Martin Luther King (1996; 92). He rejected the “*cult of the victim*” and the resentment that many minorities adopted to denounce their oppression. On the contrary, the Blacks had to affirm their responsibilities; equal rights meant also equal duties towards the society. They would be truly recognized as citizens if they demonstrate the universality of their struggle and the solid values underlying their movement. However, at the end of his life, Martin Luther King compromised with the administration; he thought that he could fulfil his fight with the help of the government. Lasch (2006; 497 seq.) regretted bitterly that misleading of the Civil Rights movements. After King's death, Lasch saw at the same time the rise of multiculturalism (i.e. the race divisions) and the affirmative action (i.e. an increasing dependence of minorities to the State). Thereafter, populism has declined and is now disqualified from the public. Lasch insists upon the distinction between true populism and the rightist populism (2006; 623): if populists are often considered as racist or intolerant, it is due to the misappropriation of populism by the Neo-conservatives, who have been using traditional morality to draw the ordinary people. Ordinary people, disgusted by the paternalism of liberal elites, have become more and more rigorous and even intolerant³⁶.

Throughout his work, Lasch strives to rehabilitate the role of religion in society. Religion gathers individuals around a base of core shared values, and thus it sows the seeds of morality in the heart of human beings. This conception appears in Lasch's eulogy of the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (2006; 448 seq.). Against the dominance of the cold rationalism, Niebuhr – and Lasch –

36 « *The tolerance of growing coarseness of the display of sexuality, pornography, drugs, and homosexuality seemed to indicate a general breakdown of common decency. American workers do not consider model of rectitude, and most did not adhere to a rigid morality which condemned all forms of sexual fulfillment.* » (2006; 611)

Lasch himself became quite rigorous at the end of life; he was somewhat contemptuous towards feminist, gay and lesbian movements, considering that their struggles were diverting social struggles from the real oppositions in society, between small independent workers and capitalists. His moral conservatism, associated to his Marxist analysis, made him hermetic to the legitimate claims of women and homosexuals.

restores the power of emotions and irrationality. The cult of progress has been built on the idea that science and technology would allow indefinite improvements in culture and standards of living; however, such a belief apathies the citizens, it discourages them from fighting for their rights. Niebuhr defend the strength of myths to make people to get involved in politics. These myths provide moral rules and moreover the hope, necessary to believe in political struggles. With hope, people believe that they have the power to change their living conditions with the sustain of God. The praise of Jewish and Christian prophetic traditions gives way to a criticism of both mysticism, in which people withdraw from the material world, and liberal optimism, which stirs to adopt a passive position. Common decency, as a table of core values, can be a base for hope; ordinary people need hope to rebel against social order. Indeed, the narcissistic mentality has spread among contemporary elites; they cut themselves from their own nations³⁷ and they lost any sense of limitation (1996; 39), growing in immaturity. Therefore, common decency can be the essential tool to reveal the absolute indecency of the global narcissistic elites.

- Bureaucratization and modern capitalism annihilate the traditional social ties, and thus are responsible for the weakening of common decency.
- Individuals react to this loss of moral resources by adopting hedonistic and egocentric behaviours, which harm deeply social relations; i.e. narcissism can be considered as the opposite of common decency.
- Common decency is still preserved among small communities by independent workers, who know how to keep their sense of limitation.
- Therefore, common decency is a critical concept against contemporary elites, who lost their links with their fellows and are responsible for the dissemination of the culture of narcissism.

Some key features of common decency have been pointed out: it is a kind of morality that proceeds from the rooting in a place, inside a social network, framed by specific norms, culturally determined. It provides criteria of intuitive judgement and thus imposes a sense of limitation. The common decency, preserved by ordinary people, prescribes a moralization of democratic societies.

³⁷ [American elites] “*have more in common with their counterparts in Brussels or Hong Kong than with the masses of Americans not yet plugged into the network of global communication*” (Lasch, 1995; 35)

It is a constant reminder of the requirements of equality and respect, which contravenes the *hubris*, the excesses and the abuses of the powerful. Common decency is not simply descriptive ; it may well become a technique for criticizing the power available to the humblest. Common decency does not suggest an alternative to democracy, but precisely a corrective to it. Democracy cannot be only a procedure or a list of individual rights, this regime requires an ethics, conceived by the people themselves and not by an elite³⁸.

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38 This is the point of conflict between Lasch and conservatives thinkers, like Leo Strauss or Allan Bloom, based on the same analysis, who defend the need for a superior morality, developed by an enlightened elite.