Too much irony

by Gary Dorrien in the November 17, 1999 issue

For Common Things: Irony, Trust and Commitment in America Today, by Jedediah Purdy
Soul of a Citzen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time, by Paul Rogat Loeb

Twenty years ago the late social historian Christopher Lasch memorably lamented that American culture was turning its children into self-absorbed consumers who relished their self-preoccupation. Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) bewailed the prevalence of what he called "the banality of pseudo-self-awareness." In a crowded field, his chief examples were the trivialization of politics and art as forms of celebrity spectacle. Capitalism commodifies everything that it touches, he observed. Commercial society bombards its customers with images of consumer goods and convinces them that exchange value is the only value that really matters. Increasingly the standards and ethos of commercial advertising pervade the rest of culture: "We live in a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion."

The recent cult of ironic detachment struck Lasch as an especially notable example of the narcissistic trend. He attributed this phenomenon to the degradation of work. "As more and more people find themselves working at jobs that are in fact beneath their abilities, as leisure and sociability themselves take on the qualities of work, the posture of cynical detachment becomes the dominant style of everyday discourse," he observed. People coped with lousy jobs by affecting knowing superiority over them. Popular culture increasingly deflected their boredom and despair by adopting the same trope of ironic detachment. "Many forms of popular art appeal to this sense of knowingness and thereby reinforce it," Lasch noted. "They parody familiar roles and themes, inviting the audience to consider itself superior to its surroundings."

The next step in this cultural process was self-parody. Commercials began to spoof commercials; Westerns made fun of westerns; in 1979, soap operas were especially knowing. Some of the most popular shows on television were soap opera parodies: Fernwood, Soap and, above all, Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman. These shows assured

soap opera viewers of their own sophistication by mocking the conventions of soap operas. Lasch shook his head: "The disparity between romance and reality, the world of the beautiful people and the workaday world, gives rise to an ironic detachment that dulls pain but also cripples the will to change social conditions, to make even modest improvements in work and play, and to restore meaning and dignity to everyday life."

In 1979, Lasch could view ironic narcissism as a recent trend; today we are awash in it. Commercials and Web sites are laced with self-referential spin; Hollywood cranks out buckraking movie sequels that make fun of buckraking movie sequels; the ending of *Seinfeld*, "a show about nothing," was a major cultural event rating the front page of the *New York Times*; MTV's bottom-feeding *Beavis and Butthead*, with a wink and a nod, features two vulgar adolescents who spend their time watching overheated MTV videos.

With no mention of Lasch, Jedediah Purdy and Paul Rogat Loeb take up where he left off. Purdy, 24, is a Harvard graduate and home-schooled product of rural West Virginia who believes that the regnant culture of narcissism is more ironic than cynical. Loeb, 48, is a former peace activist and current entrepreneur of left-wing self-help who believes that American culture has moved beyond irony to a harder-edged narcissistic cynicism. Both of them urge that the remedy for retrogressive self-preoccupation is renewed commitment to civic and political activism.

Purdy takes the higher road, literarily speaking, modeling his prose on that of his favorite essayists, especially Henry David Thoreau, Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik and Wendell Berry. The essence of irony is "a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationships, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech-especially earnest speech," he observes. Against the romantic conception of a true self struggling for expression, the ironist takes for granted a quantum notion of the self, "all spin, all the way down." Ironic detachment is not cynical, Purdy cautions; the cynic stays home from the party and denounces frivolous partygoers with acidic superiority. The ironist goes to the party while making fun of it: "An endless joke runs through the culture of irony, not exactly at anyone's expense, but rather at the expense of the idea that anyone might take the whole affair seriously."

Purdy warns that the chief casualties of this cultural pose are moral seriousness and democratic politics. The normal course of acculturation today is to view politics with the same half-jaundiced eye that one gives to commercials. Like commercial

advertising, politics is understood to be a spectator sport; aside from its possible value as an aid to acquisitive interests, politics is worth viewing, like advertising, only for its entertainment value.

"The ironic stance invites us to be self-absorbed, but in selves that we cannot believe to be especially interesting or significant," Purdy observes. "Its sophistication is sapping, a way of cultivating suspicion of ourselves and others." In a discussion that could have used a strong dose of Kierkegaard on its theme, Purdy judges that ironic detachment is a cowardly hedge against despair. Irony refuses "to place its trust in the world." It buffers the self from the pain of the world and thus reinforces the loneliness of contemporary society.

The sad loneliness of contemporary culture is the crucial clue to the popular craze for angels and New Age spirituality, Purdy believes. What passes for "spirituality" in a great deal of best-selling religious literature is an expansive narcissism that deifies the self's psychic needs. "Angels not only minister to us as isolated, needy bundles of wishes and fears, but paradoxically help us to stay that way," he remarks. New Age spirituality is a way of resisting the disenchanted world-weariness of the culture of narcissism without giving up its essential fixation on the isolated world of the self. It requires no inner transformations or outreach; instead it promises that the world will answer our wishes, "just because they are ours."

Purdy draws on his West Virginia background and his interest in Central Europe for examples of better forms of resistance. He admires his mother, who gave years of patient labor to the local school board. He praises former West Virginia congressional representative Ken Hechler, who struggled to abolish strip-mining in Appalachia. Above all he lauds Havel, who crafted a "theater of political heroism" in Czechoslovakia during the cold war and who has since devoted himself to the grinding, ambiguous, less dramatic, less heroic, but essential work of ordinary politics. Purdy commends the vocation and ends of pragmatic public service. It is better to struggle for attainable social gains than to pretend that no social gains are attainable or worth struggling for, he argues. Civic-minded activism is more enriching emotionally and more beneficient socially than the alternatives.

A prominent culture-of-narcissism alternative is, "You can't change the world, so you might as well get ahead in it." Purdy counters that this maxim is doubly wrong. The first part feeds off the mistaken assumption that the only kind of politics worth pursuing is the kind that promises sweeping social transformation. The second part

wrongly implies that the social order will take care of itself if transformation is ruled out. Purdy implies that the skeptical ironicism of his generation is potentially wise, but only if it flowers into an ethic of chastened concern for common things. His meditation on this theme lacks the analytical rigor of Benjamin Barber or the thick descriptions of Harry Boyte, but it makes a literate plea for "the active preservation of things that we must hold in common or, eventually, lose altogether."

Loeb makes a similar pitch for the emotional and social benefits of social activism. He seeks to inspire former activists of his generation and would-be activists of the current generation to climb out of their media-shaped social stupor and reclaim the work of building the public realm.

With Purdy he worries that heroic models of politics are self-defeating, though his own political positions unfailingly make radical-left demands on the system. His literary aspirations are steeply lower than Purdy's. Both of these facts stand in some tension with his ostensible purpose. At some point, usually after losing a few campaigns or after hosting a series of events that few people attend, most left-wing activist groups raise up the lament, "If only we had our version of Rush Limbaugh . . . or Jerry Falwell . . . or Marianne Williamson." If people want to read schlock, why not give it to them with our message?

I've attended those meetings, and so has Loeb, but he found a vocation in the question. He has read a great many self-help books and he quotes them extensively. The cover of his book promises an evocative style "reminiscent of Thomas Moore and M. Scott Peck." Marianne Williamson is apparently another of his literary models. These writers are exactly the pop-spirituality mavens panned by Purdy-though in fairness to Peck, I feel compelled to note that at least he writes chapters that develop a single point or anecdote for several pages at a time. Loeb's book is considerably dumbed-down from that standard. It seems more fitting to describe him as the book's compiler or assembler than its author. His average page is sprinkled with two or three quotes ripped out of context that serve as introductions to bite-sized anecdotes. No story is analyzed or developed, the anecdotes keep coming, and the effect of reading the book is like eating a six-course meal of cotton candy.

Perhaps Loeb doesn't expect people to read his book straight through; maybe he assumes that readers will cruise the text for evocative anecdotes. In any case, I believe that he is wrong to pitch his case for a progressive spiritual politics at such a

low level. He denounces the commodifying spirit of capitalism and assumes a pose of left-wing superiority over business interests, but his story-per-page formula reeks of commercial calculation. The book ends with an advertisement for his lecture and workshop bureau.

Loeb's assumptions about his audience's lack of taste for argument and stylish expression are undoubtedly market-tested, but I think he is wrong to sell leftist activism in the same way that Williamson sells New Age spirituality. He could make the same case in a way that discards the formulaic baby-talk he has adopted and that respects the intelligence of his readers. Put differently, he could try to write more like Wendell Berry or Jedediah Purdy.

Loeb persistently treats political questions from a pop-psychology premise. In his telling, the left has lost its critical mass not because it was often wrong, but because its partisans have lost heart or lost their way or given in to the cynicism of the dominant culture. He shares with Purdy the commendable desire to lift his readers from self-absorbed indifference, but the genre of self-help is not well suited to effect this outcome. It reinforces the very habits of self-preoccupation it claims to transcend. Some ironies are saving, but not this one.