

NARCISSISM AND THE FISSURE OF NEO-CONSERVATISM

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Christopher Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: Norton, 1978, pp. 286.

The growing influence of neo-conservatism, has spawned a series of new diagnoses of the social ills of contemporary American culture. The common theme of these criticisms has been the growth of the "me generation," a narcissistically preoccupied society which places its personal interests above those of the social good. The existence of the new narcissism can be confirmed, according to the neo-conservatives, in phenomena such as the rise of awareness and human potential movements, which stress the self as central, in the decline of patriotism and expressions of social solidarity, and in the growing loss of confidence in government and its officials to act in the interests of all in balancing competing social claims. The excess of individualism, manifested politically, leads each individual or interest group (e.g., Blacks, Women, left-wing groups) to demand from the political system more than the system can accommodate. The intransigence of these demands leads to instability and unrest which threaten the balance of the political system as a whole. Lacking self-restraint, discipline and a sense of community, the narcissistic individual threatens the cohesion of the political order. The proper relationship of the individual and the community requires that the individual restrain demands in the interests of the community.

Culture of Narcissism has become associated with the neo-conservative critique of culture. However, it differs fundamentally from this viewpoint in its diagnosis and its remedy. The relation between the individual and the community is marred not by an excess of individuality, but by its eclipse. Advanced capitalism asserts the priority of the state (though not that of the community proper) over the individual. Lasch contends that the changed relation of the state to society in advanced capitalism undermines the development of autonomous individuals. Instead, the systematic dependence of individuals upon the workings of a state-directed capitalism induces fragmented and atomized individuals unable to control their own destinies.

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In his previous work, *Haven in A Heartless World*, Lasch details the emergence of state paternalism in America at the turn of the century. Progressive Era reformers were concerned with increases in poverty, crime, family breakdown and other instances of social disorder caused by the emergence of industrial society. Faced daily with the consequences of *laissez-faire* relations of state and society, reformers felt it was the role of the government (not only national but state and municipal) to actively intervene to ameliorate social ills. The new role of government required it to take over functions previously reserved for the private sphere. Reformers approved of this, assuming a unity of interests between the state and the individual, and that the state was capable of reforming and steering social relations in an appropriate direction.

The unity of individual and state interests was to be achieved through the scientific management of social relations and such scientific knowledge was to be the basis of a program of social hygiene. However, the rationalization of personal and familiar relations was itself ideological; it concealed the political interests of the state. Reform of criminal justice, for example, implied the rejection of harsh punishment for a medical model of justice. The criminal was a sick individual to be cured by society. Extended to all social relations, by professional sociologists, the medical model offered the justification for an essentially political intervention into private life.

Lasch contends that the progressive reforms have fragmented the family. The emphasis on expert opinion undermined the experiential base of family life and weakened traditions of self-help. Blamed for all of societies ills from anxiety to crime, parents lost confidence in their ability to raise children. The "cooling" of the emotional intensity of family life (recommended as well by professionals) also has taken its toll. The child is not raised with a combination of love and discipline. It confronts cool, rational, humane (but anxious) parents, who relate to each other in a similarly "realistic" fashion. No longer a shelter from the competitive world of work, the family became the extension of the administered world of advanced capitalism.

Culture of Narcissism paints a portrait of the social character resulting from the changed relation of public and private life. Lasch's fundamental proposal is that the decline of the family and increasing state-administration of private life have weakened the strength of the ego to independently assess and criticize the society it inhabits. Under the pressures of this society the ego loses its unit, and regresses to a more primitive, malleable form of organization.

Clinical psychologists have noted a change in the typical symptoms of patients since Freud's time. Replacing the "classical" neuroses of hysteria, and obsessive compulsions, are disorders characterized by vague and undifferentiated symptoms: free floating anxiety, meaningless and empty

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lives and low level depression and loss of vitality. These have been termed borderline personality disorders. They are characterized by a weak or fragmented ego structure which lacks the integrity of a "healthier" ego. Lasch's account of this syndrome relies on writings influenced by Melanie Klein's theories of primitive object relations, and thus to grasp his argument a brief account of Klein's position is necessary.

Klein describes two main "positions" of the child towards its objects: the depressive and the paranoid-schizophrenic. Each child according to Freudian theory takes itself as its first object choice. (Here "object" means anything not the self; even though the child may make itself an object choice.) This stage is termed primary narcissism and is a normal part of the transition from autoerotic to object relations. Klein's theory concerns the modes of object relations that follow primary narcissism. The pathological forms of object relations lead to secondary narcissism, the clinical syndrome that is at the root of Lasch's analysis.

In the depressive position, the child reacts to an object that is a whole person. Defending itself against the anxiety of object loss and hence of gratification, the child introjects the lost object (generally the mother), so that it provides protection from the frustration and sense of persecution that is experienced when gratification is lost. According to Klein, the weak ego of the child experiences all frustration as attack from internal or external persecutors. The child's identification with the whole object achieves growth in the strength of the ego, because it allows the expression of concern and remorse toward the object. While the child identifies with the object, it also feels concern that the love object could be destroyed or hurt. The introjected object remains good, and the child directs feelings of remorse against itself for failure to maintain the love of the object (i.e. melancholy). The introjection of the good object is the basis of a secure relation with the self and objects in later life.

The paranoid-schizophrenic position is characterized by a relation to part objects, which does not allow the stable formation of an inner object world. The ego of the young child, as noted above, is fragile and open to fragmentation when frustrated. Its first defense against the rage of frustrated gratification is the splitting of the ego into an idealized good object, and bad objects (persecutors) which are projected onto objects. The omnipotent good object annihilates the bad objects. Whereas in the depressive position the ego is integrated, exposed to, and mastering good and bad impulses toward objects, and distinguishing between itself and objects, the paranoid-schizophrenic position is characterized by an ego unable to accommodate the conflicting pressures of its own good and bad impulses. Projecting the unmastered impulses onto objects, its relation to them is primarily narcissistic and egocentric. It's world is a projection of omnipotent control and hostile

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persecutors. The self and its object merge in a shadowy world of infantile impulses.

The narcissistic personality, fixed in the paranoid-schizophrenic position, is unable to love other individuals, or to form a creative relationship to his work. All significant erotic attachments excite, in addition, strong, destructive impulses which split the weak ego. When the good aspect of the ego is projected onto the loved object, the ego is depleted and feels enslaved by the love object. It must control this object or become completely controlled by it, for the object now contains the valued part of the self. Avoiding the "theft" of the good object means that the object must be re-introjected and held closed within the self. In this position the ego withdraws libido from the world; no significant object relations are possible.

Since character is formed only in object relations with the world (for Freud character is the precipitate of our prior object relations), with our parents, teachers, peers and admired cultural figures, the narcissist inhabits an impoverished psychic world. In the normal personality parents and, later, others serve as sources of ideals and prohibitions. We want to *be like* our parents and model our actions after admired figures whom after later growth we abandon. We still however draw a distinction between ourselves and our heroes. The narcissist makes no such distinction. He seeks objects which suit his projections of omnipotence, regardless of their actual qualities. Figures of omnipotence are not models which form mediate links between the existing self and its ideal goal. They are merged in a symbiotic bond with the ego. One has (controls) the omnipotent figure and is controlled by it. Therefore the ego believes it possesses immediately qualities of omnipotence. The narcissist has no ideals, merely an unceasing desire for control. The object that no longer provides feelings of omnipotence is abandoned immediately with no lingering traces.

Lasch finds manifestations of the narcissistic character in much of modern culture: in the excesses of radical politics whose fantasies of omnipotence led to the excesses of the weathermen; in the crises of personal relations and in the chronic anxiety and meaninglessness of life; in post-modern literature where an autobiographic mode often retreats into posturing, self-parody or clever literary tricks devoid of substance; in business where the corporate man is replaced by the gamesman, who attempts to manipulate the corporation for his own advancement; in politics where management of an effective image and the maintenance of power overtake the commitment to substantive political ends; in the fear of becoming old, the degradation of sport, the decline of educational standards and in the world of advertizing.

Lasch's critique of society is not identical to that of the neo-conservatives. The existence of mass society agreed upon by both parties has a different significance in relation to the existing social order. While the neo-

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conservatives hold that the excessive demands of the mass man threaten the stability of society, Lasch contends that they are its necessary foundation. Advanced capitalism can maintain its stability only by the deliberate de-individualization of its citizens. The transition from competitive capitalism to state-directed capitalism requires not only that the state intervene in order to stabilize economic crises, but that it take a hand in steering social and political relations as well. The ideological support of global enterprise, the channelling of motives, desires and ideas into acceptable forms can no longer be achieved through the automatic regulation of the economic system, but only through state support. This form of organization requires relatively greater control over individual freedom, than capitalism's earlier phase: creating a tension which is deepened by the relatively greater possibilities for freedom that current capitalism seemingly contains. The central cultural problems in advanced capitalism do not lie exclusively in the sphere of the individual, but in a systematic restriction of individual development. The neo-conservative critique relies on the view that society is for the most part well functioning, and that individual character is flawed. In this context the neo-conservative insistence on restraint and excellence is politically regressive. The "limits" or diminished expectations which the neo-conservatives propose imply that the existing injustices and inequalities are existentially necessary. The excessive demands of the narcissist represent an inability to recognize the necessary limits of life. In this analysis left-wing political groups who make "excessive" demands for political or distributive justice are lumped together with narcissistic individuals. Lasch's analysis, although its premises remain implicit, recognizes a subtler social dynamic. The emergence of narcissistic character represents the grand failure of advanced capitalism to provide a satisfactory way of life. Its maintenance and stability requires that individuals become fragmented — unable to actively direct their own destinies. The true significance of the narcissistic character lies not in its excesses, but in its deficiencies: it is the cry of extinguished possibilities.

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