Christopher Lasch's "War of All Against All"

Review

Primitivo Solis (David Watson)

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a review of

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

"This book," writes Christopher Lasch in the Preface to his provocative *Culture of Narcissism*, "describes a way of life that is dying—the culture of competitive individualism, which in it's decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self." [1]

Well, good riddance, one is tempted to exclaim, despite suspicions about the allegedly contemporary emergence of the "war of all against all" (a phrase which Stirner made notorious over a century ago).

Nevertheless, no one denies the fact that a way of life is passing out of existence, that Americans are suffering from a "crisis of confidence " and a lack of faith in the future, from a sense of imminent disaster in the "age of diminishing expectations" (the subtitle of Lasch's book), from a "waning of the sense of historical time."

Lasch has struck upon the sense of anxiety which is pervading American life today. Perhaps that, along with what Robert Coles shrewdly observed as our narcissistic preoccupation with our own malaise of narcissism, is what has gained the book its immense popularity and high acclaim. Lasch's terminology has been appropriated by journalists, the "new narcissism" having become a buzzword. And his description of this period as one of diminishing expectations is confirmed daily by the news media and politicians. A newspaper headline reads, "American Dream Beginning to Fade?" And on Friday the thirteenth of July, the *Detroit News* headline repeated President Carter's declaration: "Recession Here"; *Time* magazine quoted Carter to his aides on the crisis in national life: "There has been a lost sense of trust," he told them, "a loss of confidence in the future."

The fact is that this society has no future; it has reached a dead end. In his previous book Lasch argues that "at the very moment" when capitalism has created the means for a revolutionary transformation, "the will and capacity to replace it have atrophied." [2]

Despite the valuable insights of his arguments, Lasch is in error when he assumes that a society can both create the so-called *material* conditions for a free society made up of autonomous individuals, while at the same time undermining the characterological conditions necessary for this transformation. Because he is both a Marxist and a Freudian, he is reduced to comparing one stage of the development of capital (the stage in which his theoretical outlook began its own emergence) and another. He automatically assumes the necessity not only of the original accumulation of capital (which supposedly, paradoxically created the "conditions" for his autonomous, socialist individual) but of the "civilizing process" itself, which started with the original (external) acts of repression and initiated the long "descent of man" which is going on today. [3]

Yet both his description of the process of psychic deterioration from an earlier stage of capital to the contemporary one, as well as his portrayal of the malaise which dominates every aspect of activity today, are compelling.

"Today Americans are overcome not by the sense of endless possibility but by the banality of the social order they have erected against it," he writes, and compares them to "animals whose instincts have withered in captivity." "They can no longer remember," he continues, "what it feels like to be inundated by desire. They tend, rather, to be consumed with rage…Outwardly bland, submissive, and sociable, they seethe with an inner anger for which a dense, overpopulated, bureaucratic society can devise few legitimate outlets."

The present conditions of the emotional plague are rooted, however, not in some generalized metaphysical condition, but are grounded in specific historic conditions. "Every age develops its own peculiar forms of pathology," he writes, "which expresses in exaggerated form its underlying character structure." During the period when the theory of psychoanalysis was emerging, the preponderant type of personality was expressed in the exaggerated form of compulsive-obsessive neuroses. The reproduction of society took place primarily within the nexus of the patriarchal family structure —a repressive, authoritarian, mystical-religious and traditional upbringing. Hysteria and obsessional neuroses of the type described in Freud's writings, Lasch points out, "carried to extremes the personality traits associated with the capitalist order at an earlier stage of its development—acquisitiveness, fanatical devotion to work, and a fierce repression of sexuality." The culture of the time was oriented toward the values of production, forestalling gratification in order to build for the future.

But just as it was being described by psychologists and theoreticians, this culture was beginning its process of decline and disappearance, with the rise of the modern educational system, the "helping professions" and the modern forms of therapeutic authoritarianism, This movement began to take its clearest shape after the Second World: War, when the production of consumer goods rose, and the values of advertising and of the consumer society along with it. The increasing dependence of the individual upon experts in every realm of personal life, as well as a consumption-oriented capitalism which demanded a consumer unwilling to put off gratification, but rather willing to buy on credit the false necessities created by industry, resulted in the decline of the former personality type and the appearance of the narcissist personality. And just as the preponderant personality was reflected in the literature of clinical pathology of Freud's time, the literature of today reflects similarly the underlying character structure of today. The obsessional neurotic—compulsive and guilt-ridden—has been replaced by the "preschizophrenic, borderline or personality disorder," who suffers from vague, ill-defined anxieties, and complains of "pervasive feelings of emptiness and a deep disturbance of self-esteem."

Ultimately it is not the clinical examples of the pathology which concern us, but the character traits associated with narcissism "which, in less extreme form appear in such profusion in the every day life of our age." The narcissist is "facile at managing the impressions he gives to others, ravenous for admiration but contemptuous of those he manipulates into providing it; unappeasably hungry for emotional experiences with which to fill an inner void; terrified of aging and death." He suffers from a general sense of inauthenticity; he seeks the meaning to his life in fads and cults. "Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence."

Journalists who have picked up on Lasch's theme have described the lurid preoccupation with the self without understanding that the narcissistic response, far from being the result of middle class complacency and affluence, is an act of desperation which conceals a deadly internecine social combat and an increasing sense of resignation to the present conditions of life.

The modern victim of capital is amputated from the past and uninterested in the future. Inflation, and the precariousness of life within capital have rendered planning for tomorrow obsolete. He wants everything now—everything that television advertising has to offer. And elsewhere: "People no longer dream of overcoming difficulties but merely of surviving them." People seek "strategies of survival" as a response to the overwhelming sense of rootlessness, isolation, and lack of historical and cultural continuity. Clearly, the sense is accurate, since capital has rendered human beings rootless, has isolated us and destroyed natural communities and even the vestiges of community, has cut us off from even the recent past and from any sense of continuity.

The sense of chronic boredom is combined in the narcissist with the restless search for "instantaneous intimacy." This "cult of intimacy," far from reflecting a new "joy of sex" based upon permissive attitudes and liberation from previous repressive modes, represents the despair at ever achieving authentic intimacy. The narcissist falls in love every week, and out of love with the same frequency. He is incapable of maintaining long-term commitments and loyalties, and consumes and discards relationships as if they were commodities. Human beings have been liberated from earlier, "irrational" and authoritarian forms of association such as the family, in order to enjoy

the freedom to be a thing among things, both consumer and commodity, increasingly unable to feel. They go to therapists to "get in touch with their feelings." They consume the therapy like any other experience, however. The liberal, and "radical" countercultural solutions only promote the process of disintegration. The therapists, sexperts, and the manuals advise people to be spontaneous, thus subverting any chance for genuine spontaneity. "In fact," says Lasch, "the cult of intimacy originates not in the assertion of personality but in its collapse."

The collapse of intimacy of necessity spreads to and is rooted in the family, where a combination of emotional detachment and bribery replaces the old forms of love and authority. The child is socialized within the boundaries of parental narcissism, and ultimately suffers from an intense fear of being alone, along with a desire to find love and authority in the same place, in the peer group or in an authoritarian unit.

The child, like the parents, comes to disbelieve in the possibility of "altruistic" relationships—in a word, the possibility of genuine love and friendship. The prevalent cult of personal relations, Lasch observes, "conceals a thoroughgoing disenchantment with personal relations." The superficial optimism of self-help and personal growth, "which becomes increasingly intense as the hope of political solutions recedes," actually reveals a "profound despair and resignation."

If narcissism in its extremes represents the pathological response to contemporary capital, in its generalized, social and cultural form it is nothing less than the prevalent strategy for survival, simply the "psychological dimension" of the relations within society.

The individual has been reduced to absolute dependence upon the state and social institutions. Modern bureaucracy and the therapeutic and medical ideology and structures, as well as the mechanical reproduction of images, have all worked to undermine the most fundamental manifestations of human competency, self-help and mutual aid.

Modern bureaucratic organization of labor represents its final degradation—not only does work assume n independent, abstract quality, as it does under all conditions of wage labor, but the more atomized it becomes the more it shatters the potential for the struggle against the conditions of labor. Workers rebel against their jobs in order to share more in the consumption of leisure, which is organized along the same lines as work.

Loss of Faith in Oneself

Massified spectacles invert human community into the collectivity of the mob, humanity is reified into standardized monads, all wearing, eating, watching, riding and manipulating varieties of the same commodities. Specialists intervene in every aspect of life. No one knows any longer how to do anything; no one places any faith in his or her own instincts—without the intervention of experts and bureaucrats, they are increasingly incapable of feeding and clothing themselves, of raising their children and taking care of themselves. And because the experts never agree, they contribute to the sense of anxiety and uncertainty which paralyzes society. This process of separation coincides, as Lasch points out, with the appropriation by managers and technicians of the collective productive knowledge and skills of workers.

Criticism of the New Left and Counter-Culture

It is in light of this observation that Lasch focuses much of his criticism of American society on the "counter culture" and the left of the 1960s. For Lasch, the rebellious and libertarian movements of the 'sixties were, on the one hand, an impotent and essentially therapeutic form of self-dramatization and self-pre-occupation, and on the other, the vanguard movement of a newer form of capital which sought to undermine traditional restraints and disciplines in favor of a consumerist, narcissist *Brave New World*.

The left attacked the authoritarian patriarchal family at a time when therapeutic and medical institutions as well as the educational and penal systems had already brought about its collapse; it encouraged a loosening of sexual restraints thus assisting in ushering in a banalization and commoditization of sexuality which eroded the abilities of people to maintain long-range sexual commitments and to develop genuine love; it attacked elitist education and

the university at a time when the tendency towards banalization and standardization within capital was destroying previous standards of scholarship; its "cult of youth" coincided with the strategies of advertising, which, along with the loss of the sense of historical continuity, contributed to the cults of short-lived charm and celebrity and to the narcissist dread of old age and death.

For Lasch, 1960s libertarianism and radicalism, like the progressive philosophies which preceded them, were the cultural midwife of more pervasive, virulent forms of domination. The rejection of the repressive conditions of the past gave rise to "a 'cultural revolution' that reproduces the worst features of the collapsing civilization it claims to criticize."

The 1960s seem to have yielded little that was positive in his view, providing as they did more subtle forms of control. Yet at the same time he laments the passing of the social concerns of that period and the retreat by Americans to "purely personal preoccupations." He seems to derive an almost perverse glee in criticizing the radicals for their errors and lack of foresight; reading such acute observations on the verge of the 1980s, after a decade of increasing political and social acquiescence, one is likely to forget the state of things when the generation of radicals was coming of age—the stultifying bleakness of the 1950s, McCarthyism, and the isolation and suffocation by the society-at-large of militants and nonconformists of every stripe.

And so the rebels burned their draft cards and their bras, broke restraints, scoffed at traditions, pursued their desires, only to result in opening the doors for capital. Somehow, they were swallowed up in the process, recuperated by advertising, medicine and the state. Lasch's discoveries ring terrifyingly true, but he provides little insights into methods of confronting the processes which he analyzes. At best, he points out the positive aspects of the earlier stages of capitalist development which have been obliterated by more modern techniques, though he fails to point out, as we have suspected for some time now, that these "irrational," and "archaic" modes of life were only themselves the distorted vestiges of ways of life which have long since been superseded by capitalist development. This awkward position is most noticeable when Lasch defends professionalism and educational standards, since to attack them would not simply lend a hand to the anarchic onslaught of the counterculture which contributes to the atomization which he describes but would under any conditions undermine his own privileged position as an academic, an expert on the malaise who is called upon by journalists to explain the latest motion of the juggernaut. On the one hand,

Lasch decries the increasing reliance of common people upon specialists, yet on the other he defends his own specialization, implying that only radical Marxist professors and psychologists such as himself can see through to a critique.

Conservative Blinders

Perhaps it is Lasch's relationship to the means of intellectual production of this society which ultimately make him the conservative which he is. He is not a conservative because he defends the "irrational" family and "obsolete" forms against the intervention of the state and the medical welfare establishment; he is not a conservative because he defends excellence in sports both against the big businessmen of sports, as well as the sappy radicals who would have everyone playing a very polite, insipid, repressed form of "noncompetitive" New Games; not a conservative because he sees through the sexual "liberation" and exposes it to be the banalization of human emotive sensibilities that it really is. He is a conservative because he cannot see beyond the society in which he lives. He compares the capital of today with the more uncontrollable, irrational modes of earlier stages because he cannot see or imagine totally other ways of living.

He defends (if only critically) older forms of traditional authority and discipline (the glorified frontiersman mentality as well as others) because he cannot imagine the even more remote forms which are represented in the authority of the shaman and the discipline of the hunting party, for example, of the societies which capitalism obliterated, and which are not tied consistently to the machinery of domination to which all forms of authority are bound in every developed, stratified society and which is—despite the recent illusory relaxation of overt forms of domination in the western world—the emblem of this society. Professor Lasch understands how capital subverts both resistance and human cultural variation through bribery of the libido, through stupefaction, and through

fostering helplessness and dependence. Yet he can only envision a reversal of this process through a reaffirmation of sorts of human values which have already been deservedly annihilated. The discipline he counterposes to *Brave New World* is the dreary discipline of socialist productivism, spartanism, and the frontier. This is why conservatives (to his chagrin) have been so taken with this thesis.

In fact, Lasch's distrust of the desire for "personal growth" and self-fulfillment, as accurate and scathing as it is, rings shrill at times. For if the erosion of the work ethic, the rise of a pagan, pleasure-seeking sense of human mortality, and the liberation of previously unexpressed sexual desires can be reflective of a consumerist, narcissist decadence, they could also signify a necessary, though chaotic stage in making a consummate break with capital. The work ethic was the spirit and soul of private as well as state capitalism; people lived happily without it for eons before its appearance. They will never live happily again until it is gone.

The same can be said for repressive sexuality and "prudent calculation and provision for the future," which are more safely associated with counterrevolution than with radical change.

Despite his remarkable abilities in depicting the manifold aspects of the crisis in which this society finds itself, Lasch is incapable of taking his historical dynamism far enough. He describes a transition which has taken place over the last seventy years, and focuses on the last twenty years of that movement. Yet he fails to pursue other possible variations of development. He prefers to leave off with a rather lack-lustre call for socialism, "communities of competence," and self-help rather than to follow his argument through to any speculation as to where the spreading malaise may be going. If as Lasch believes, "the attempt to get rid of conflict succeeds only in driving it underground," and such conflicts and rage "always threaten to break out in their original ferocity," what does he expect to come of the narcissist society when expectations cease to diminish and collapse altogether? Lasch proclaims the social model of Horatio Alger to have been replaced by the figure of the Happy Hooker, but he does not add that the latter too is only a moment in an unfolding of historical psychology, and that another social type waits to emerge.

A Transitional Psychic Stage

Perhaps, in fact, the narcissist personality type represents a final, transitional psychic stage at the tail end of bourgeois society and at the advent of modern totalitarianism. Perhaps the eclipse of love and decency and the desperate cynicism and hedonism represent only the swing of the pendulum to its farthest stage of decadence which is to be followed by a resurgence of traditional, patriotic, militaristic and national-mythic values as U.S. society attempts to pull itself from the political, social and economic morass in which it finds itself today. Lasch never addresses these possibilities. He draws the psychological profile of a subject who has been rendered incapable of democratic living, of community or autonomy, yet he fails to draw any conclusions as to what kind of culture is going to crystallize out of that process. Capital cannot allow that social atomization to go beyond the borders of its own hegemony; therefore, if a way of life is dying, it is not that the market man is being phased out by Disco Duck—narcissism is only a stage in the decay of that way of life which is passing out of existence. It, too, will take different forms (the groveling organizational digit of fascism and state socialism, perhaps).

Lasch represents bourgeois, as well as Marxist scholarship, at its best. Hence, his inability to take his thesis either to its most Optimistic or pessimistic conclusions, as well as his containment within the modes of thought of this state of affairs, are in themselves a striking indictment of a society which is played out, with nowhere to go.

Capitalism has broken all historical continuity (the human continuity of community and generation) before it only to have reached an impasse in its own expansion. The present crisis in capital may represent the greatest crisis in human society since the emergence of a dominating class, and the nadir of the human spirit. The most far-seeing of society's ideologues cannot see beyond it. Lasch, like his colleagues cannot look far enough ahead to see how people will make a radical break with this society any more than he can look back at pre-capitalist societies for examples of other possible ways of association.

His criticism is reduced, like everything else, to being highlighted in *People* magazine and stand-up floor displays of the soon-to-be-published paperback edition at drugstore check-out counters.

Nevertheless, there is something inspiring about Christopher Lasch's book. His descriptions of the contemporary social scene touch a raw nerve in the reader because of their uncanny ability to cut through sociological and political jargon to the subjective personal conditions which underlie the social anxiety and paralysis in our own lives and culture. Inevitably, his analysis raises the question of what kind of radicalism it will take to transform life; and if Lasch has proved incapable of providing a point of departure for a resolution, such a failure only thrusts the responsibility for digging deeper and farther, to where it rightfully belongs—upon us.

What is also exciting about Lasch's books is that few have looked at our recent past with such scrutiny; most radicals dismayed over the retreat from politics that Lasch describes, either succumb to the process of degeneration themselves with cynicism, sports and drugs, or lament the passing of mindless activism by trying to reconstitute it uncritically, either through liberal or Marxist ritual. Lasch also exposes the bankruptcy of counter culture anarchism with his careful (though certainly not definitive) distinction between authority and domination. The serious reader of *Culture of Narcissism* cannot but come away with the suspicion that opposing all authority is incoherent, and that ultimately and in some way presently unclear, forms of inner authority and the authority of the human community must prevail if the forces of domination are to be defeated.

Endnotes

1. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Christopher Lasch, Norton, 1978.
2. *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*, Christopher Lasch, Basic Books, 1977.
3. Freud observed in *Future of an Illusion* that the first acts of repression were external, later internalized.

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