

Ramblings of a Narcissist

Beth Frage

Every once in a while you run into one of those books or pieces of music or art, that no matter what its faults, force you to see your life from an entirely different perspective. Lasch wrote a couple of books that did that for me, even though I was left with a distinct distaste for his oversimplified Calvinistic judgments. Not that it wouldn't be nice at times to stand on the mountain with god and write down the ten, and then hold them like a thunderbolt inside to ride through life's uncertainties, but even if life may have been easier with Jehovah's words inside you, that just isn't where it's at nowadays, and I don't think many of us really regret that.

The reasons that Lasch hit home—sometimes too close to home—is that he discusses contemporary personalities under consumer capitalism, and he discusses contemporary interpersonal relationships under consumer capitalism, and a lot of what he says does justice to the cultural conglomeration created by Madison Avenue advertising, middle-class how-to-get-into-you rhetoric, and counter-culture non-rebellion trips which have created the ME generation.

Not everybody has a sense that something is really wrong nowadays—some people really don't. But a lot of people do—hence the need for the how-to-live manuals mass-produced for the populace by PhD's in psycho, and the frenzied overproduction of optimistic cheer generated by Madison Avenue to get people to buy the latest gadget necessary for health and well-being built by the capitalists, and hence the need for the various counter-culture creeds and cults which promise salvation to those who believe strongly enough in the words of esoteric leaders. Not everybody has the sense that something is radically wrong, but a whole lot of people need drugs and crime and mental health therapy in order to get through the day, and not too many newspaper headlines provide positive tidings on what's going on in the world today.

Lasch attempts to tackle the huge mess created by the capitalist world order from a vantage-point of what might loosely be called the "Marxist" tradition, once again asking the typical academic question: why is it that given the "objective conditions" ripe for the overthrow of capitalism, the revolution has not taken place. His answer is centered around the basic idea that each stage of capitalism has created a certain type of personality, and the basic type of personality created by consumer capitalism is incapable of revolution, because it is objectified, nullified, incapable of true subjectivity, monadized to the point of extinction, rootless, valueless, incapable of living beyond the moment. Narcissistic, he calls it—the mirror man, woman, at its worst, people experiencing themselves as "dark wet holes" where "the self shrinks back toward a passive and primeval state in which the world remains uncreated, unformed." Actor upon the world's stage, but needing an audience to make sure that he's really there. Lasch describes the narcissistic personality as:

"Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without an admiring audience. His apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free him to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to the insecurity, which he can overcome only by seeing his "grandiose self" reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power, or charisma. For the narcissist, the world is a mirror."

We all know people like that; each of us has a bit of that in ourselves. But we all have a lot of everything in us—the old-fashioned moralist, the libertarian, the desperado, the child, the mother, the father. Things are never as simple and straightforward as the social critic likes to portray them. What is true of Lasch’s description, at least in my opinion, is the portrayal of the dominant social ideology and the portrayal of those who have never transcended that ideology.

However, too many people have not “bought” the “me generation” package in one or another area of their lives: Lasch’s comments and critique, timely though it may be, and containing plenty of grains of truth, still falls short in many critical areas. While many may live, as one unfriendly critic of Bohemia in the thirties put it, as “Philistines who have gone on an excursion into the land of the creative person but who cannot really live there,” in their pursuit of the elusive essence of freedom and self-fulfillment within the larger social context of consumer capitalism, Lasch fails to flip the coin over and ask what people who really desire some avenues of genuine freedom and self-fulfillment are to do in an era which defines freedom as the right to scramble for the highest-paying slot in the machine at the social level or sleep with as many people as possible at the personal level. The pursuit of genuine options is perceived by most people to be out of their range, and while correctly condemning an ideology which functions as an “opiate for the masses,” Lasch fails to thoroughly ground his criticisms in a solidly defined estimation of what is historically possible for those who do not care to capitulate to the dominant social reality.

He explains to a certain extent the predominant social reality, but he doesn’t explain either the desperate nihilism which underlies so much of it, or the tenacious holding on of so many to some last vestige of the past which does provide a focus point for concentrated human effort, and which does maintain a social cohesion, no matter how badly some of it needs to come unglued. So much for the effete aspects of Lasch’s thought.

Some of the more fruitful aspects of Lasch’s thought concerns his tracing the breakdown of the family institution as capitalism spread over larger and larger portions of the globe, and the effects of the dissolution of the family on both personality development and the growth of societal institutions which increasingly took over familial functions.

“The family has been slowly coming apart for more than a hundred years,” states Lasch. Contemporary debates over the effects of feminism on society, alarmist’ reactions to the divorce rate and the revolt of the young are but echoes of debates that began in the nineteenth century. The growth of the bourgeois nuclear family was supported by the idea that it provided an emotional haven from the cold cruel world of competitive wage slavery; women were assigned the role of nurturer, men the role of breadwinner, children the role of apprentices in learning the skills necessary for slipping smoothly into the increasingly well-oiled machinery of the social order.

While the ideal had and still does have compelling power—people still think of the family as a refuge, as a haven of security—the reality of the bourgeois nuclear family was something else. Cut off from a wider kinship system, the close-knit village society, and society in general, pressures increased greatly within the family commensurate with the pressures capitalism exerted upon individuals. The devaluation of work, combined with the radical separation that had occurred between work and leisure, public and private life, individual and community, all began to exact a tremendous toll from individuals. Relations in the private realm began to reflect more and more the objectification of human life—just as labor-power turned into a commodity to be bought and sold in the market place, so did other human relations begin to assume the fantastic shape of relations between things, as Marx had observed earlier in the century. The revolt of women and the young, while hastening the demise of an unstable institution, was not altogether positive: while challenging their “thingification” within the family structure, far too often the women and kids only found an alternative mode of “thingification” within the larger world. The patriarchs of capital still ran things for the most part.

Another contemporary social institution began to sprout roots at about the same time. The age of the “experts” began, reflecting at a societal level the massive division and rationalization of labor which was taking place under capitalism. Every aspect of family life was subjected to scrutiny, most of it non-critical of existing reality, and the experts began their heyday of offering advice on how often a healthy baby should take a shit and what constituted an adult female orgasm. The spurious privacy and autonomy of the family eroded, as men and women, no longer sure of what people had more or less taken for granted for centuries, began to gobble up the advice anyone with a claim to “scientific” training could offer.

Lasch, speaking of an ideal and of the reality of the Rockefellers and Morgans, perhaps, manages to praise the bourgeois nuclear family under the free enterprise stage of capitalism as:

“The Protestant concept of the calling not only dignified worldly life, insisted on the moral value of life, and legitimized prudent calculation and provision for the future, it also upheld the spiritual dignity of marriage and domesticity. The repudiation of the monastic virtues of poverty and chastity, the upgrading of marriage and the emergence of a new concept of marriage based on prudence and foresight went hand in hand with the new value attached to capital accumulation. The bourgeois mind conceived of children as hostages to the future and devoted an unprecedented amount of attention to their upbringing. The new style of domestic life created psychological conditions favorable to the emergence of a new type of inner-directed self-reliant personality, the family’s deepest contribution to the needs of a market society based on competition, individualism, postponement of gratification, rational foresight, and the accumulation of worldly goods.”

Here I think he is full of shit. Society got robber barons, repressed petit bourgeoisie, and a whole lot of people who learned that you fucking well better watch out for number one; it got whole classes of miserable working men and women who constantly threatened the social order with revolution; it got artists and philosophers who jumped off the bridge; it got political leaders who got more people killed in shorter periods of time than had ever occurred before in history. Lasch mistakes an historical, intellectual myth for reality.

What did happen is that society got wound tighter and tighter around an economic system which was basically crazy at its core, and those “individualists,” few of whom actually existed, built huge financial and economic institutions which wove the world into their web. Political and societal institutions began to assume the rationalized, bureaucratic form of the economic institutions, and somehow the enemy of true individualism and human value got lost in the paper shuffling that it takes to run anything of such enormous, stratified dimensions. The rationalization of life that went along with the capitalists’ dividing up the world among themselves made it more and more impossible to offer a transcendental viewpoint from which to challenge the status quo. There were so many reified clouds to check out that people spent entire lifetimes investigating one small portion of any certain cloud. It didn’t matter that most of it was an illusion; it served in fact to make it easier for those in power to maintain their power. Lasch provides an interesting description of the *mondus operatus* of those in power today:

“In former times, power surrounded itself with elaborate apologetics, philosophical definitions of the status quo. As religion gave way to law as the principle source of social cohesion, and law to social therapy, the governing classes no longer attempted to mediate their pretensions with appeals to legitimacy. They appealed only to the unmediated authority of the fact. They asked not that the citizen or the worker submit to legitimate authority but that he submit to reality itself. Those who wielded power now discouraged inquiries into the principle of its origins. Hence the decay of philosophy and rise of social science. The new forms of control sought to ground themselves not in the superego—the internalized compulsion to obey—but in the ego’s sense of reality. As religion and politics gave way to the new anti-religion of mental health, authority identified itself not with what ought to be, but with what is. Not the superego’s harsh command, but the ‘reality-testing’ routinely conducted by the ego was to assure the individual that resistance had become, not unprincipled, but ‘unrealistic.’”

As control over the processes both of production and reproduction were lost, families became increasingly incapable of rearing the young. Not only did adult members of families begin to experience increasingly schizoid lives because of the roles they had to play within the work world and private world, the values of community and religion began to seem increasingly irrelevant. Parents were no longer capable of transmitting a clear-cut sense of values to their offspring. Buffeted with contradictory advice by the experts of socialization, and by the realities of their own lives, and the increasingly impossible impotence they experienced, nervous parents could rely only on an antiquated authoritarianism and repressive social institutions to handle their kids.

“Nihilism,” wrote Marcuse, “as the indictment of inhuman conditions may be a truly humanist attitude.” Yet the nihilism of resignation which spread throughout capitalist society seldom offered such an indictment. Locating objective reality within the necessities of conformism led to, at best, the transmission of a value system centered around the accumulation of commodities and from the more intelligent the knowledge of the various techniques needed to outwit the system.

All of this occurred more or less on the surface—the social lie given credence. At levels not quite so obvious more and more people dealt with a sense of desperation and the revolt of women, children, and—increasingly—men, continued. By the late sixties it became obvious to observers of the social scene that a lot of the old order had vanished. Radical political protest and counter culture slogans filled the air. Those with power were challenged, having to rely on their traditional weapons—police with guns—to maintain order. Young people and the more aware among the older generation turned to radical critique; anarchist and socialist flags were raised again through the smoke of bonfires. One of the prime institutions for socializing the young was challenged: schools were recognized for the prisons that they were which served basically the interests of the status quo.

Again this was at the surface of things. Two contradictory strands ran through the period of social upheaval; the “revolution” was centered around a very real social critique, which failed for the most part to challenge the roots of the social system, and a more individual type of critique which recognized that individual life had been robbed of most of its meaning and demanded clearer avenues of self-fulfillment.

What was different about this social upheaval was the quickness with which the capitalists were able to pick up the barbs directed against it and turn them into a money making venture. Follow the pleasure principle: buy your means of salvation at your local department store whether in the sporting goods department or at the perfume counter. Even radical politics and counter-culture ideologies—whether Zen or communal living—began to assume more and more the shape of a commodity to be bought in the market place. Form replaced essence as the measure of how chic or “in” individuals were—revolutionaries sold the rhetoric of some esoteric leader rather than fighting in the street; radical thinking within the auspices of revolutionary organizations was frowned on in favor of mouthing perfectly the correct slogans. The revolution lost its guts.

Lasch thinks that part of the reason that all of this happened—and he critiques political participants of the late sixties as exemplifying the process—was the basic shift toward the development of narcissistic personalities which had gradually occurred under capitalism. The narcissist, incapable of leading a real revolution, took the stage only to have his/her sense of self validated by providing a spectacle for the masses. And the individuals among the masses gave lip service to the spectacle because that was their way of validating their existence. Two dark wet holes meeting—and neither with the sense to pick up a gun.

Capitalism created the conditions for the objectification of every aspect of human life; now people experienced their own lives from the outside—looking down on themselves like the charming actors/actresses that they were within the drama of history. increasingly experiencing their lives as alien objects to be played with, to be manipulated, to be made whole by the therapy cult which is the mode of the moment, to be placed at the service of an institutional body, whether traditional or counter-cultural, individuals increasingly sought the means which would allow them to forget their tormented lack of real individuality. Many ideological escape packages went up for sale in the marketplace of ideas: ‘buying’ one of them however, does not insure the individual an escape from the dehumanized reality which surrounds us: too many components of what we need to experience our humanness no longer exist and pre-packaged interpretations of reality offer neither the means of transcendence which can effect personal change nor the means of action which can effect social change. Turned into a commodity, human life lacks real value, and people find it difficult to escape the conviction born of the dominant reality that they are expendable in just about every area of life.

Ironically, in a period in which the subjective realm has become the subject of close scrutiny, as witnessed by the proliferation of the various psychic liberation cults, has there been so few truly subjective people who, guided by a firm set of values or a compelling dream, direct their energies, emotional and intellectual, toward making an impact on the world. Lasch states that “The struggle to maintain psychic equilibrium in a society which demands submission to the roles of social intercourse but refuses to ground those rules in a code of moral conduct encourages a form of self-absorption that has little in common with the primary narcissism of the imperial self. Archaic elements increasingly dominate personality structure, and ‘the self shrinks back toward a passive and primeval state in which the world remains uncreated, unformed.”

Lasch, in refusing to recognize the societal pressures which mitigate against individuals seeking to form their own world, blames the individual for refusing to become an individual. Many people have lost it, in terms of being able to accept the dominant social reality as the guideposts for their lives. What Lasch does not see, however, is

that a lot of people just don't get—too loud about it, given a set of circumstances in which the means to change the system just aren't there.

To develop your human potential within the context of contemporary capitalism can at best be a shout into the wind, without a supporting community to encourage the growth of its members. And it is difficult to find an oasis within this society which is free from the pressures capitalism exerts upon individuals to practice any type of humanism, even if people wouldn't need a long healing period to get over the effects of capitalist socialization. Nowhere is this more evident than in the arena of interpersonal relationships. Just as the cult of ME robbed of the genuine value it had within the context of humanism led to individuals uncomfortable with themselves and increasingly unfamiliar with the values of humanism, so did the cult of "intimate relationships" outside the framework of traditional family and societal institutions mask a growing incapacity for many to create genuinely intimate relationships.

Relationships between men and women became more problematic, even as more and more people experimented openly with their sexuality. Even though proponents of sexual liberation glowed over the psychic liberation that would occur with the overthrow of repressive sexual standards, they did not foresee the commoditization of sexuality. While many people did not experience a fusion of love and sexuality in other times, sex far too often being a distasteful duty for women as wife and a means of support for women as prostitute, and a means to exploit and subordinate women for men as husband or just plain horny, the expression a sexuality today is not in much better shape. Cosmo Girl meets Playboy -of-the-Month, she reeking of Madison Avenue induced sex appeal hot and horny for the liberated macho playboy with his jewel studded cock. Object woman meets object man to delight in sexual performance where the scripts have already been written by Johnny 14" Wad. One extreme—myth for the most part, but one that is alive and well in the heads of many young narcissists. Sexuality, not necessarily debilitated through being severed from its connection with procreation and family life, has been robbed of much more through being severed from human emotion. Lasch describes sexual relationships as beginning increasingly to mirror relationships found in the work world as "indistinguishable from any other relationship founded on self-interest and the manipulation of others' emotions."

Love went in and out of style. Kierkegaard wrote: "To cheat oneself out of love is the most terrible deception; it is an eternal loss for which there is no reparation, either in time or in eternity." The combined loss of subjectivity and societal pressures to be cool leads to a state of affairs in which it is doubtful if many recognize love if it hits them in the face. Lasch describes the current attitude to sexuality as being reflective of a "prevailing fear of heterosexual passion, even of sexual intercourse itself. The repudiation of monogamy expresses an accurate understanding of the destructive effects of possessive individualism extended to the emotional realm, of the jealousy that confuses love with emotional ownership. Yet it also expresses a rejection of intimacy and a search for sex without emotion—the 'zipless fuck' in which 'no one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone.'"

Increasingly people did get less and less from sexual relationships: the flight from commitment and love led to a state of affairs in which people may have circumvented many of the traditional forms into which sexual expression had been cast, but you might ask why they went to the bother. People were still out trying to prove something and get something out of their partners, even if only the acknowledgment that they were fantastic lovers.

Far too often the cult of sexuality without commitment has led to men using women to get their rocks off, and women, freed from the burden of possible procreation, still playing the same old games to get a man. Men and women quite understandably, warily view each other from opposite corners of the earth. The saddest part—in the age of the 'zipless fuck'—is that sexuality, which can be the deepest reflection and experience of the human psyche, has been objectified and reified and utterly banalized by capitalist culture.

And for people still caught up in the never-ending debates concerning sexuality—monogamous, tradition-oriented expression of sexuality versus anything goes as long as something rises and all of the endless and combinations and permutations between the two. extremes, the cult of sexual liberation has often become a nightmare, exacerbating the sense of monadization and alienation that the more sensitive and intelligent already experience as their legacy from capitalist culture.

Lasch has no answers. Neither, of course, do we. Daily life continues—though it may not, given the psychic, social, political, ecological, and military reality of the capitalist world order. Life has always been nasty, short and brutish for them that have not—and most of us do not have. We are all greatly restricted in our pursuit of value whether

we desire to grow personally—intellectually, emotionally, artistically, or whether we desire to establish networks within communities of people who genuinely care about each other.

We aren't anywhere near launching a massive attack on the capitalist system, and to continue to scream "Fuck Authority" or parrot-mouth Trotsky or paper Chairman Mao all over town, is very simply not doing very much to alter the course of history. The pigs aren't even taking us seriously.

Lasch does stimulate some thought over the hows and whys of this phenomenon. He helped me see myself as narcissist—powerless, acted upon in the world—and insight and understanding can lay the groundwork for action. The trouble is—and this is where his critique is blind—narcissism does provide a mode of relating to the world—and when you take it away, many people find it agonizing to deal with the angst. Life in the fast lane. Life too much pain without cocaine, as a euphemism for all of the escape packages people depend on to avoid dealing with the hard questions which confront us.

As capitalism spread over the globe, western thinkers began to record its impact on the human mind and spirit. God is dead, wrote Nietzsche. Man will find himself on a rope suspended over an abyss. Socialism or barbarism, wrote Marx, but today's socialism is a barbarism. Eros versus Thanatos, wrote Freud. Did you see Eros get blown away by Thanatos in the clouds somewhere in the clouds above the skyscrapers of Manhattan?

For the would-be Fausts of the twentieth century: for the haters of capitalism and its authority and its banalization of the human spirit and its exploitation and injustices and basic insanity—I don't know what real choices we have. Perhaps it will only be pass the straw until it can be pass the guns. Perhaps there are no answers except go for it while you can. But at least, perhaps, we can continue debate on what's worth going for.

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