

Lasch: Theory of Passivity Stumbles

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Your growing conviction that people are unable (or have lost the ability) to learn from and develop conclusions about their experience, and to act to change the conditions of their lives finds its latest confirmation in Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (See review, FE #299, Oct 22, 1979). Lasch's central idea is that a given state of capitalist development contains a corresponding individual personality structure (the "narcissistic" personality type corresponding to the bureaucratic "consumer society" of "late capitalism") and that the analysis of this personality structure is the key to understanding human behavior and activity. Despite lip service to revolutionary possibilities, Lasch's thesis is a determinist one which vitiates the likelihood of the emergence of an autonomous politics in the present period.

As you correctly point out, Lasch cannot see beyond the society in which he lives, but this failure of vision is consistent with his view of human possibilities. To the extent that you accept his argument you put yourself, unwittingly or not, in the same position, from which all the "recalling" of the nomadic societies of the remote past cannot extricate you.

Representative of the Frankfurt School

Lasch sees his work as rooted in the "well established theoretical tradition" of social criticism exemplified by "Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, the early Eric Fromm, and before them Marx and Freud..." ("Politics and Social Theory: A Reply to the Critics," *Salmagundi*, No. 46, Fall 1979). Lasch describes this tradition as having concerned itself with "problems of authority, with the internalization of prevailing patterns of domination, and with the cultural and psychological devastation brought about by industrial capitalism." Lasch shares this object of investigation with his predecessors, and likewise shares the shortcomings of their analytic approach. Herbert Marcuse, to whom Lasch expresses his intellectual indebtedness, is representative of the revolutionary intellectuals of the Frankfurt School, whose view of the present period was summarized by Adorno thusly: "...the hardening of society has reduced men more and more to objects." In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse wrote: "On theoretical as well as empirical grounds, the dialectical concept pronounces its own hopelessness."

Convinced that people had become the "ferment of social cohesion," Marcuse concluded that "the critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and the future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative." Spontaneous events of the next several years, completely unanticipated by the "critical theory of society," ultimately forced Marcuse to significantly modify his view of current possibilities (as evident in a recent interview shortly before his death, where Marcuse points to the erosion of the work ethic and the increasing combativity of workers as indicative of the possibilities of the present era).

Underestimates the Activity of People

What this approach ignores is that the conditions of alienation are the product of praxis; that is, they are the product of a practice which escapes the producers' control, becoming an independent power over and against them. Cornelius Castoriadis illuminates the shortcomings of the theory of reification when he points out the contradiction in the thinking of the revolutionary intellectual who forgets that the origin of revolutionary ideas and the revolutionary project is in the creative activity of people in society:

"The revolutionary project is not a logical inference derived from correct theory. Rather, the successive theories in this field are attempts at a universal formulation of that which masses of people, over the last two hundred years...have expressed in their struggles against established social institutions. By forgetting this fact, the revolutionary intellectual falls into a ridiculous contradiction. He proclaims that his theory enables him to understand and even to judge history, yet he seems to ignore that the essential source of his theory is precisely the historical activity of the people. In this way, the revolutionary intellectual blinds himself to this activity as it manifests itself in the present." (Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Hungarian Source," *Telos*, No. 29, Fall 1976)

The theory of a reified humanity can only apparently comprehend the present situation. Failing to perceive that the structures of alienation are the result of practical activity, this theory biases itself in the direction of underestimating the activity of people in the present, which is why it can only proclaim its own impotence—relatively in the present, and absolutely when people begin openly to make their own history.

The theory of human passivity stumbles over this problem: no revolution without dissolution of the character structure produced by capitalist society; no dissolution of the character structure produced by capitalist society without a revolution. Thus it must posit a solution to the problem from the outside, either through the intervention of a "conscious" vanguard or through an external "crisis" (e.g. the collapse of the capitalist economy). The theorist must inevitably assume the position of "objective" outside observer, carefully measuring the conditions of society to determine whether they are "ripe" for intervention, or poring over the latest statistics on the economy in an effort to determine the moment of the final "collapse," without which nothing is possible. Both of these stances share a similar fallacy, which aims at scientific "certainty" as a substitute for proletarian subjectivity. The assumption is that analysis of material conditions can provide an explanation of historical activity (or its absence):

"A concrete historical investigation can, of course, help in making intelligible ex post facto, but it is never possible to jump from this description and partial understanding of conditions, motivations, actions, etc., to an explanation of the result.

"Thus, for example, a revolution is caused by exploitation and oppression. But exploitation and oppression have been there all the time, for centuries. Perhaps exploitation and oppression have reached an extreme point? And has it not been reached recurrently, without a revolution ensuing? Then again, it has to coincide with an internal crisis of the ruling class, the crumbling of the regime. But what more crumbling can one expect than that which obtained throughout most of Europe after 1918—or after 1945? In the end the revolution has not taken place because the conditions for revolution were not mature. The most important of these conditions is a sufficient level of consciousness and combativity in the masses. Sufficient for what? Well, sufficient for making a revolution. In short, a revolution has not taken place because a revolution has not taken place. This is the gist of 'Marxist' (and any other deterministic or scientific) wisdom in the matter." (Castoriadis)

Beyond Marcuse's search for "concepts" which might "bridge the gap between the present and the future" exists precisely "spontaneity," understood here as "creative historical activity in highest expression; that which has as its object the transformation of society itself...History is creation, i.e., the emergence of that which is not already contained in its causes, conditions, etc.; that which is not repetition, neither *stricto sensu* nor in the sense of a variant of the already given, but the position of new forms and figures, and new meanings—that is, self institution. To put it in a more narrow, more pragmatic, more operational way: spontaneity is the excess of the result over the causes." (Castoriadis) From this perspective, the problem of determining the genesis of the dissolution of the char-

acter structure produced by capitalist society is meaningless. People, quite simply, are not objects. They continue to resist, rebel—and the crisis of modern society is the consequence of that resistance.

Recognition of the central role of spontaneity in creating the conditions of revolution does not imply that analysis of social conditions is impossible or unimportant. As Castoriadis points out in the above cited article, while analysis of material conditions is insufficient to completely explain a revolutionary upheaval, no such upheaval is totally unrelated to the historical conditions of its genesis. Thus while the material conditions of Hungarian society “are of no help in exhaustively explaining why this particular form of revolution took place in this particular country at this particular moment...one can, of course, explain why this type of revolution did not take place in 1956 in Egypt, Iran or Java.”

To reiterate, the view that sees people as passive vis-a-vis society blinds itself to current rebellious activity. While the existence of resistance in the present is no guarantee of future revolution, neither is it of no consequence or non-existent) as is thought by the theorists of human passivity. Obviously, one of the fundamental “material pre-conditions” of a spontaneous revolution is the existence of a present resistance which extends itself to all areas of society. To ignore the existence of this resistance is to misinterpret the present and mystify the possibilities of the future.

Lasch Defends Repression and Domination

As with his Frankfurt school predecessors, psychoanalysis provides the substance from which Lasch’s argument is molded, particularly Melanie Klein’s thesis regarding the importance of “social restraints” in limiting individual aggressiveness (a notion very popular among Burkean conservatives in England, where Klein’s work has thrived, as Robert Erlich points out in his review of Lasch’s book in *Telos*, Number 40, Summer 1979).

Lasch is very much the orthodox Freudian, referring sympathetically to those “by no means negligible or hopelessly misguided” attempts “to reconcile democracy and authority in the modern world.” (“Politics and Social Theory: A Reply to the Critics”), to which he presumably considers his book a contribution. Lasch’s view about the indispensibility of authority to civilization is both explicitly spelled out by him and implicit in his analytical method. Schematically put, Lasch’s method is to describe the social forces which have allegedly “invaded” the ego, making it more and more difficult for the individual to mature. As Lasch sees it, the removal of work from the home and the usurpation of childrearing by the state have made it increasingly difficult for the child to deal with feelings of rage and fantasies of omnipotence brought forth during the process of separation. As parents have abdicated their authority, it has become difficult for the child to temper these impulses through a growing awareness of mastery of reality brought about by internalizing parental authority.

On the broadest level, Lasch’s intent is to describe the psychic structure which “corresponds” to the given state of capitalist development, tracing the changes in that structure with the ultimate intent of describing how the prevailing patterns of domination are internalized by the individual. When Lasch looks at history, he sees individuals as passively “shaped” by society, as simply reproducing its dominant structure. Thus, as might be expected, class struggle, revolution, and historical creation are absent from Lasch’s portrayal of society. (Later, we will examine how Lasch deals with the work world and the growing revolt of wage labor.) At bottom, Lasch’s thesis is a determinism whereby human behavior must be understood as conditioned by unconscious impulses which are organized and given channels of expression by society.

Lasch can no more account for spontaneity and autonomous creative activity than can Marcuse, yet this poses no problem because unlike the latter Lasch cannot even envision the possibility of such activity. Lasch’s complaint is not that people (allegedly) internalize the dominant authority thereby reproducing their own passivity, but that the dominant authority has become irrational, has outlived its historical usefulness. Thus Lasch is appropriately contemptuous of so-called “liberationist” critiques of capitalism which pose the problem of society in terms of repression and domination. He presumably would have nothing to do with Marcuse’s advocacy of a “non-repressive civilization,” counseling people instead to “come to terms with the inescapable limits on their personal freedom and power”—“limits,” he assures us, “which are inherent in the human condition.” (*The Culture of Narcissism*, page 231).

Notion of Change Restricted to a Variant of the Given

In his introduction to *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch paints an almost optimistic picture of the possibility of revolutionary change in the present era. Yet the body of his book seems to suggest that society has almost unlimited power to subdue the individual and prevent an appraisal of different possibilities. This seeming paradox can be explained when we consider that Lasch thinks the “culture of narcissism” is “dying” because of an impending economic and ecological crisis, and that Lasch faces not the problem of the emergence of an autonomous revolutionary movement out of supposed conditions of total passivity but rather the less demanding problem of the reconstitution of “rational” authority out of the current chaos. Lasch argues that the Western world can no longer afford a culture of narcissism, and presumably hopes the “left” can take advantage of this situation to build a constituency. Lasch’s rather sparing view of human possibilities leads him to spell out a familiar *realpolitik*:

“Our impending economic and ecological crisis—the crisis of uninhibited capitalist growth, now coming to an end—will demand not narcissistic self-exploration but collective discipline and sacrifice. There can be no longer any doubt about this; the only question is whether the necessary sacrifices will be democratically decided upon and distributed in a democratic manner or imposed by an authoritarian state. As Walter Dean Burnham and others have pointed out, the ‘massive public controls’ needed to deal with the energy crisis ‘cannot be maintained without consent in a democracy.’ Burnham goes on to point out that ‘if democratic consent is to be won for the very hard choices lying just over the horizon, a bona-fide, sustained, and more than rhetorical effort to approximate equality of sacrifice will have to be made by policy elites.’ Such an effort, he adds, presupposes a ‘revolutionary change in behavior norms among rank-and-file alike.’” (“Politics and Social Theory: A Reply to the Critics”)

It would appear, then, that Lasch’s notion of social change is restricted to a variant of the given. His vagueness when discussing his idea of a new society make him difficult to pin down, but we might ask just what “collective discipline and sacrifice” and “massive public controls” would mean concretely, say, to workers in an office or a factory. It is perhaps no coincidence that Lasch’s perception of what is required in the near future is harmonious with that of advanced sectors of business. Richard Sennett provides us with a somewhat different picture of the crisis of modern society, a crisis which has given rise to calls by experts in personnel management for “democratization” of the terrain of sacrifice:

“...in the last thirty years, worship of our masters has not come into being. Centralized power grows, both in large corporations and government, but the loyalty and discipline this power can command from its subjects is uncertain. While control is more centralized, it is more and more difficult for the masters to make that control seem legitimate. This problem has appeared most strikingly in work, especially since the 1960s. Laborers now show their dislike for the institutions in which they work in ways that are affecting productivity, discipline in plants and offices, and orderly planning.” (Richard Sennett, “The Boss’s New Clothes,” *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 22, 1979).

Sennett goes on to point out that such phenomena as “voluntary absenteeism,” wildcat strikes, and “efficiency resistance” are increasing dramatically and are of great concern to both public and private bureaucracies. “One response modern corporations are making to the problem of motivating their workers and making their authority believable,” Sennett writes, is to “put into practice a new ideology of work, an ideology of ‘communication,’ cooperation,’ and ‘personal growth’ for the employee. Work comes close to being a form of psychotherapy, and bosses become like analysts.” Sennett adds that the various experiments aimed at putting into practice this new ideology have met with little success thus far, with similar results likely in the future. The new ideology of work is a system based—in Sennett’s telling phrase—on “pseudo-mutuality,” a “contradiction” which he thinks may be its undoing.

“Triumph of the Therapeutic”

How Lasch portrays the world of work is an instructive example of the limitations of his narcissism thesis. Lasch would have us believe that there has been a “triumph of the therapeutic” in the workplace, that the new ideology of

work has met with such success as to make it hard for the worker to resist the “easygoing oppression” of the “humanized workplace.” Nowhere does Lasch mention the widespread resistance to work, or that the “factory as family” is more a management dream than a contemporary workplace reality. Contrary to the evidence cited by Sennett (and apparent in a cursory glance at any business journal), Lasch argues that “bureaucratic organizations devote more energy to the maintenance of hierarchical relations than to industrial efficiency,” citing as evidence Steven Marglin’s thesis that “the case for the factory system...rested not on its technological superiority over handicraft production but on the more effective control of the labor force it allowed the employer.”

Thus, from the first, factory owners sought to domesticate their unruly workers by instilling orderly work habits and such elements of discipline as showing up for work regularly and not taking the accustomed to frequent breaks. In his New York Review article, Sennett quotes a passage from Daniel Yankelovich’s new book *Work In America*, which refers to the “New Breed” of workers who are the source of the resistance to work discipline and sacrifice. According to Yankelovich, the hallmark of New Breed values is “the preoccupation with self.” In order to fit reality to his narcissism thesis, Lasch ignores those aspects of “the preoccupation with self” which point to resistance to the dominant system, preferring instead to describe a completely demoralized humanity.

A recent study of affluent high school students is, contrary to Lasch, testimony to the ability of people to precisely comprehend the conditions of their existence. Entitled “Cultural Crisis in the Suburbs,” the study examines the attitudes of typical suburban high school students. The study notes their intense hatred of school, which they characterize as “unpaid labor,” as well as their felt anxiety toward the empty roles being prepared for them in the corporate structure. What Lasch would characterize as the malaise of narcissistic self-preoccupation might be better understood as the necessary precondition of a radical assault on existing conditions. Perhaps an appreciation on your part of the shortcomings of Lasch’s argument might, to the extent you share some of his assumptions, help to dismantle the foundations of your growing pessimism.

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