

# Christopher Lasch: The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. W.W. Norton: London. ISBN-0393-30738-7

Christopher Lasch was an outstanding public writer in the United States. He wrote many books on various subjects. Towards the end of his life, his focus was the socio-psychological change in the US public.

The central question of *The Culture of Narcissism* is the following: why one type of mental problem replaced another as a dominant mental problem in the US. Why were clients with strong symptoms of classic neuroses replaced by people with 'diffuse dissatisfactions'. Why were patients, instead of 'debilitating fixations of phobias' or 'conversion of repressed sexual energy into nervous ailments', come with 'vague, diffuse dissatisfactions with life' with feeling 'amorphous existence' with 'violent oscillations of self-esteem', with 'a general inability to get along'. Why was the rigorous inner sensor replaced with

'chaotic and impulse-ridden character. The new patients 'lack the capacity to mourn, because the intensity of their rage against lost love objects... [They are] sexually promiscuous... [but] they nevertheless find it difficult to "elaborate the sexual impulse" or to approach sex in the spirit of play. They avoid close involvements, which might release intense feelings of rage. Their personalities consist largely of defenses against this rage... Often these patients suffer from hypochondria and complain of a sense of inner emptiness. At the same time they entertain fantasies of omnipotence and a strong belief in their right to exploit others and be gratified... [The patient has to attach himself] to someone, living an almost parasitic existence. At the same time, his fear of emotional dependence, together with his manipulative, exploitive approach to personal relations, makes these relations bland, superficial, and deeply unsatisfying... As a psychiatric patient, the narcissist is a prime candidate for interminable analysis... The strength of his defenses, however, makes him resistant to successful analysis... To be able to enjoy life in a process of involving a growing identification with other people's happiness and achievements is tragically beyond the capacity of narcissistic personalities.' (p. 37-41)

In answering this problem, Lasch relied heavily on the

Freudian concept of the psyche. However, Lasch, in my view, consciously, went well beyond Freud - he, in fact, revised Freud. Instead of explaining the way in which society works from the personality (as Freud did), Lasch argued that social changes brought about change in border-line personalities. Therefore, Lasch's real question is the nature of the society that produces the narcissistic type of personality as a dominant type of border-line personality.

Lasch argues that two major social forces brought about this: the accumulative changes in the US society since the beginning of the 20th century and the institutional underpinnings of these changes.

What are the characteristics of this society? It is a society in which hierarchical relationships, while they exist and are sharper than ever, are invisible or underplayed, therefore, hierarchical relationships have to be expressed in symbols of material wealth and hedonistic life style (which after all suggests the existence of means to support such a life style). As a result, in this society relationship to others is determined by the competition for obtaining these symbols: inter-personal relationships become means of this. At the same time, however, because of the social division of labour, the individual is dependent on others. Therefore, personality in this society becomes a tool for both, promoting co-operation and merciless competition. This is a society in which everybody does something else than the one they appear to do, because every human activity is subordinated to achieving the symbols of material wealth, which appear to provide protection against the competition for climbing in the social hierarchy. Consequently, in this society, every activity becomes a defensive one, because the threats to the obtained symbols (material wealth, health, look) are so numerous and lack transparency to the degree that they become incomprehensible. As a result, in this society every real community (e.g. family, profession) is undermined or destroyed - the individual is completely atomised. Instead of real communities, artificial, invented communities are created that attempt, without success, to recreate the transparent and predictable social relationships that have gone with the communities on which they flourished. Finally, there is no past (as continuity with history has gone) and no future (because of uncertainty) in this society.

While Lasch was not [Marxist](#), it is impossible not to associate his argument with Marx's passages in *Capital* and in *Grundrisse*. Furthermore, Lasch uses the dialectic method for developing his arguments and this gives an additional edge to the book. In this way he could demonstrate that 'conservatives' and 'progressives', while arguing from the opposite direction, the outcomes of their arguments are essentially identical. The same applies to the final chapter of the second edition, in which Lasch convincingly argues that the infinite trust in the technological development and the complete acceptance of the principles of the New Age movement and the infinite trust in superstitions have the same root.

Lasch was not a social conservative, he understood that there was no way back on the social changes, thus his arguments, apart from exploring the origins of narcissism, were directed against the institutions that reinforce these social changes and offer no alternative.

He certainly did not spare his criticism of the self-awareness

movement (though in his post-humus book: *The Revolt of the Elites* he went much further). Lasch argued that instead of liberating the personality, instead of helping the individual to understand the world and society around him or her, the self-awareness movement suggests an even more extreme defensive stance, a momentary relief, tranquilliser. It is not the issue, Lasch points out, that people take therapies (psychotherapy, counselling, health food, purifying courses, belly dancing, etc.), but that these became a programme for solving a huge problem for which they offer no remedy (While Lasch did not name any of the counselling schools, there is one that can be identified easily and it is transactional analysis.). In fact, just the opposite: they reinforce anxiety and de-personalisation of social relationships. In his own words:

'The importance of such programs, however, lies not so much in their objectives as in the anxiety to which they appeal and the vision of reality that informs them - the perception that success depends on psychological manipulation and that all of life, even the ostensibly achievement-oriented realm of work, centers on the struggle for interpersonal advantage, the deadly game of intimidating friends and seducing people.' (p. 66)

Lasch probably would not have minded (although he still would have been amused) if these programmes had remained confined to the private life. However, they did not. The same concepts with ideological underpinning, Lasch argues, invaded major institutions, such as education, juvenile courts and social services. Let us look at briefly what Lasch's argument was about them.

In the course of the historic development, the principles of education changed radically. From the concept of creating citizens who are able to receive, understand and appraise information coming from the surrounding world, the school first became a data-feeding machine and, as a result of the inevitable failure of this, it became an entertainment outlet for children and students. Instead of the output of independent and self-reliant citizens, Lasch argued, the output is ignorant young people for whom rights and obligations are incomprehensible categories. This is the direct result of teachers and lecturers' giving up their academic responsibilities, hence leaving the students to develop themselves from their own resources. However, pupils have not got such resources, they are dominated by immediate and basic needs and they have not got the knowledge to make informed decisions either.

In such an environment pupils are unable to internalise discipline - it has to be maintained by external, alien forces, by the teachers. As a result, the liberal idea of freedom in schools turns upside down: in the name of individual liberty the tyranny of external forces rule. The school that could be the most important institution to transfer social norms and develop the superego deserts the pupils.

The betrayal of pupils is not accidental. Governments demand schools of delivering some knowledge and keeping the pupils in school until they are sixteen (and then send half of them to higher education), while the industry does not need this knowledge, hence schools deliver the knowledge only on paper (today 10% of the British adult population are illiterate). More

and more clerical jobs are filled by university graduates and cashiers have A-levels. The problem is not the rising education level, but the frustration that it creates in the individuals: they (and their parents) were cheated and they would never be able to achieve their aims. For these people the only useful thing that the school provided is the externally enforced discipline - as this dominates the workplaces. This also fuels narcissistic personality problems.

The decline is extended to the universities. Lasch's examples (page 150) probably would have brought smiles in United Kingdom. Today? We have Beckham studies, Diana studies, students are given credits for visiting the library...

The family, the other main theatre of the socialisation process, is also invaded by institutions, Lasch claimed. Good-willing people who considered the (immigrant) parents bad role models and parents, using professional persuasion as well as the force of the law, attempted to replace the unprofessional parents with professional helpers. However, as Lasch pointed out, the professional view of what is right parenting has changed a number of times (thus left the parents in confusion), secondly it undermined the authority relations in the family (thus making the healthy progress from Oedipal to post-Oedipal phase and from childhood to adolescence much more difficult. Let's illustrate these points with two quotations

'The "immature, narcissistic" American mother "is so barren of spontaneous manifestation of maternal feelings" that she redoubles her dependence on outside advice. "She studies vigilantly all the new methods of upbringing and reads treatises about psychical and mental hygiene." She acts not on her own feelings or judgment but on the "picture of what a good mother should be."' (p. 170)

'The narcissistic mother's incessant yet curiously perfunctory attentions to her child interfere at every point with the mechanism of optimal frustration. Because she so often sees the child as an extension of herself, she lavishes attentions on the child that are "awkwardly out of touch" with his needs, providing him with an excess of seemingly solicitous care but with little real warmth. By treating the child as an "exclusive possession", she encourages an exaggerated sense of his own importance; at the same time she makes it difficult for him to acknowledge his disappointment in her shortcomings. In schizophrenia, the disjunction between the child's perceptions of his mother's shallow, perfunctory care and her apparently undivided devotion becomes so painful that the child refuses to acknowledge it. Regressive defences, "loss of the boundaries of the self", delusions of omniscience, and magical thinking appear, in milder form, in narcissistic disorders.' (p 171)

The individual who has already had difficulties with developing the healthy superego, enters the workplace, where hierarchical relationships are entangled with bureaucracy and pseudo-equality, which creates confusion, anxiety and uncertainty for the climbers of this hierarchy as the rules are so unclear. These workplaces promote well-disguised border-line personalities

(cf. the current debate about the narcissistic leader), while devalue technical expertise.

'The object of the corporate career shifts "from task-orientation and task-mastery to the control of the other player's moves", success depends on "information about the personality of the other players." The better the corporate executive or bureaucrat understands the personal characteristics of his subordinates, the better he can exploit their mistakes in order to control them and to reassert his own supremacy. If he knows that his subordinates lie to him, the lie communicates the important information that they fear and wish to please him.' (p. 61-62)

Here it is worthwhile to point out that Lasch uses authority almost as a metaphor - the metaphor of transparent relationships. This helps him to discuss the problem of the war of sexes in a very concise manner. His argument is that the collapse of the man's authority (which he welcomes) in the relationship did not bring the equality of sexes, but fear of close intimate relationship with another person. This, coupled with the previously mentioned factors, encourage the re-emergence (either directly or in a transformed form) of Oedipal and pre-Oedipal fantasies and could result in schizoid personalities even. Again let us illustrate these points with a couple of quotations.

"The ideal relationship to me would be a two month relationship" said a borderline patient. "That way there'd be no commitment. At the end of the two months I'd just break it off." (p. 40).

'Whereas the resentment of women against men for the most part has solid roots in the discrimination and sexual danger to which women are constantly exposed, the resentment of men against women, when men still control most of the power and wealth in society yet feel themselves threatened on every hand - intimidated, emasculated - appears deeply irrational, and for that reason not likely to be appeased by changes in feminist tactics designed to reassure men that liberated women threaten no one. When even Mom is a menace, there is not much that feminists can say to soften the sex war or to assure their adversaries that men and women will live happily together when it is over.' (p. 205)

The individual in the culture of narcissism cannot even die in peace. Ageing means loosing in the competition (and so does decline of health), while the accumulated technical expertise and life-wisdom are discounted. The aged person's knowledge therefore becomes irrelevant (if not ridiculed) and thus the individual loses contact with the community (and vice versa), while the community is the only thing that brings eternity to the limited life-span. Instead of being part of an eternal process, the aged is left with the constant fear of passing away (without trace), which in turn, encourages further retraction to the private life (therapy programmes, life-style changes), instead of contributing to the community, because the latter

does not want it. In such a situation, ageing, instead of wisdom, brings about childishly hedonistic desires.

'Our society notoriously finds little use of the elderly. It defines them as useless, forces them to retire before they have exhausted their capacity for work, and reinforces their sense of superfluity at every opportunity. By insisting, ostensibly in a spirit of respect and friendship, that they have not lost the right to enjoy life, society reminds old people that they have nothing better to do with their time. By devaluing experience and setting great store by physical strength, dexterity, adaptability, and the ability to come up with new ideas, society defines productivity in ways that automatically exclude "senior citizens".' (p. 209)

'The irrational terror of old age and death is closely associated with the emergence of the narcissistic personality... Because the narcissist has so few inner resources, he looks to others to validate his sense of self. He needs to be admired for his beauty, charm, celebrity, or power - attributes that usually fade with time. Unable to achieve satisfying sublimations in the form of love and work, he finds that he has little to sustain him when youth passes him by. He takes no interest in the future... Psychiatrists who tell parents not to live through their offspring; married couples who postpone or reject parenthood, often for good practical reasons; social reformers who urge zero population growth, all testify to a pervasive uneasiness about reproduction - to widespread doubts, indeed about whether our society should reproduce itself at all. Under these conditions, the thought of our eventual supersession and death becomes utterly insupportable and gives rise to attempts to abolish old age and to extend life indefinitely. When men find themselves incapable of taking an interest in earthly life after their own death, they wish for eternal youth, for the same reason they no longer care to reproduce themselves. When the prospect of being superseded becomes intolerable, parenthood itself, which guarantees that it will happen, appears almost as a form of self-destruction.'

(p. 210-211)

Lasch paints a very gloomy picture (the reader by unfolding his analysis layer by layer will probably find it distinctly pessimistic), without offering a way out. As the narcissistic personality is the product of social developments, it can only be remedied by social forces that change the social relationships, while Lasch cannot see such a social force (his analysis of the radicals is particularly biting). The conservatives, who first attempted to roll back the welfare state did so in a way that degraded people (deserving and undeserving beneficiaries) and only transformed the dependency on professionals to an even more disguised form.

Lasch could not find a way out of this system (in the Revolt of the Elites his anger even reduced the strength of his argument) - can we?

