

traditional critical theory, especially its central thesis regarding the demise of the individual and the disastrous implications this holds for either liberal or radical politics. In this regard it is not surprising that none of the three undertook any systematic critique of Lasch, although both Jacoby and Ewen did criticize Lasch's heavy moralizing tendency.

On the other side stood Aronowitz and Piccone who, for very different reasons, rejected the critical theory of narcissism as inadequate for a theory of late capitalism. While grounded in a relatively orthodox Marxist version of critical theory, Aronowitz reaffirmed his Marxism by defending narcissism as the self-constituting hedonism of an alienated social class. For him the contradiction between narcissism and capitalism is one dimension of the crisis of capitalism which must be politically validated rather than morally tabooed. Piccone, carefully distancing himself from this position, likewise tried to pinpoint new contradictions but on the level of social structures rather than repressed or emancipating individuals. For Piccone, it seemed that neither a normative nor social theory of the individual was decisive for an understanding of the new dynamics of late capitalism. Elshtain stood between both camps, grounded neither in Marxism or critical theory, but in a critical liberalism emphasizing the importance of tradition (in the manner of Lasch but also the Frankfurt School), and the political significance of diverse groups constituting themselves in the present (in the manner of Aronowitz but without class overtones).

For those with either scholarly or political interests in the question of narcissism or capitalism, there were sure to have been old questions answered and new questions raised. Such, of course, is the function of conferences. Some may have been disappointed in the apparent disunity or diversity of the six speakers, expecting or hoping instead for some decisive diagnosis of the collective chaos of American life. It was, however, the very diversity of perspectives among the six speakers, discussants and audience that gave the conference its strength.

NARCISSISM AND THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM

by Russell Jacoby

Talk of crisis rings false. We are drenched in crises. We have perpetual crises in foreign affairs, housing, education, and energy sources; we have crises of inflation, medical care and costs, public transportation, affirmative action, family disorganization, child abuse, occupational safety; this hardly exhausts the list. Moreover, these crises only provide the background for daily and personal life.

This life itself is increasingly composed of emergencies and crises squeezed together by a vise of catnag and violence. Distant bombings, starvation and miseries are part of the nightly TV fare. No resident of any large American city, no reader of the daily press can avoid the numerous and horrifying accounts of the local murders, shootings, dismemberments and accidents. To dwell on these reports is to risk numbness. Exponents of growth and self-realization notwithstanding, to flourish, even to function in this society, requires a shell of coldness.

Talk of crises may today be ideological; it adds to the din, and encourages, if not

compels, further retreat and flight. Another crisis is one too many. No one can pay attention. A disintegrating social order may breed not only revolution but passivity.

"Narcissism and the Crisis of Capitalism," does not escape the general fate. At best it expresses the perennial Marxist hope, the imminence of the crisis of capitalism. Unfortunately, the inverse is more accurate: Capitalism and the crisis of narcissism. As a social category, narcissism — the narcissistic society — suffers from the danger of personalizing the impersonal. Political and economic power is sublimated into individual pathology, as if the traits of a character and not the economy were the evil.

Nor does this exhaust the flaws of the theory of narcissism conscripted for a critical social analysis. A conservative, if not reactionary, atmosphere clings to the critique of narcissism. It hints of past and better times, when people were less self-obsessed. It alludes to an epoch when a patriarch ruled a sound and healthy family; and this family turned out morally and psychically tough egos. The decay of the patriarchal family signalled the onset of the new narcissism: so goes the argument. In brief, the critique of narcissism is suspected of secreting a love of authority. It honors patriarchal authority, and bemoans its decline. The term "permissive" society similarly suggests an affection for obedience, and families and societies which did not spare the rod or gallows.

Yet social theories which sever all links to conservatism risk blindness to present and past. In different terms, theories which have interpreted history as one-way streets of progress have themselves deteriorated into public relations for the contemporary individual, family, or culture. Edward Shorter's *The Making of the Modern Family* closes basking in the vision of the "free-floating couple" with "relatives hovering in the background, friendly smiles on their faces."¹ Modernization theories, and this includes varieties of Marxism, are cleansed of the taint of conservatism by washing out their color and substance. The cheerleaders of the future know the cheerless past only by the trophies of the winners.

Psychoanalysis, the theoretical sources of the critique of narcissism, also provokes the charge of conservatism. While Freud was hardly a political radical, the allegation is largely inspired by the theories and practices of later psychoanalysts. That Freud was unimpressed by historical change, may be due less to his yearnings for the past than his premonitions of the future as more of the same. To burden the theory with the deceit of social change is to aid the deceivers, not the revolt.

In any case, psychoanalysis did register changes that the psyche underwent, as the popularity of narcissism in contemporary psychoanalytic literature testifies.² Towards the end of Freud's career, psychoanalysts commented that "classic" patients of Freud had been inflicted with distinct neurotic symptoms, such as hysteria or hand-washing fetishes. The newer patients suffered more diffuse symptoms and complaints. Wilhelm Reich, describing this phenomenon, introduced the terms character analysis and character disorder. Where analysts had once seen neurotic *symptoms*, they now saw neurotic *characters*. Character disorders suggested less a specific impairment than general patterns and behaviors.

The practical and theoretical consequences of character disorders were far ranging. The patient felt the neurotic symptom as a "foreign body," and feeling ill sought medical or psychological relief.³ The patient with a character disorder did

1. Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York, 1977), p. 280.

2. See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1979), pp. 87 ff.

3. Wilhelm Reich, "On Character Analysis," (1928) in *The Psychoanalytic Reader*, R. Fliess, editor (New York, 1973), p. 109.

not suffer from a discrete symptom; hardly feeling ill, he or she was not motivated to seek relief or insight into the disorder.

What makes the patient with a character disorder a patient at all? In fact, this, as well as the related question — when is analysis terminated? — reveal the inner limits of psychoanalysis. The theory of the individual becomes a theory of society. The psychoanalytic theory of narcissism is entangled in the same web. Narcissism is a character disorder, often surfacing with such vague symptoms as “emptiness” and “futility.” Moreover, the narcissistic patient is often not dysfunctional but well adjusted. Otto Kernberg comments that the narcissistic patient who is successful in professional life often appears to himself and others as perfectly normal.⁴ This confesses, without admitting, that the character disorder is not an individual, but a social disorder.

If psychoanalysts registered the relative decrease of the “classic” symptoms of neurotic compulsions, and relative increase of character disorders, few speculated on the reasons for this change in traffic. Otto Fenichel, an exception, reasoned that classic neurosis was formed under the impact of simple repressions and prohibitions. A social environment of strict taboos bred clear-cut sexual neuroses. A liberalization of morality and sexual ethics in the course of the twentieth century transformed the raising of children. An inconsistent, looser, and shifting series of sexual commandments and taboos no longer yielded well-defined neurotic compulsions.⁵

Contemporary psychoanalytic theorists confirm that narcissism does not derive from specific childhood traumas. No fantasy (or reality) of an uncle, who has seduced or raped the mother before the eyes of the child, lies at the root of narcissism. Rather, an entire upbringing and atmosphere is involved. According to Heinz Kohut, the most common etiology of narcissism is the personality of the parents; they themselves are narcissistic. With their children, they are cold, distant, and uninterested. Narcissistic parents breed narcissistic children.⁶

A liberalized sexual code and behavior restructures the psyche. The end of chaperoned dating and courtship, approval of pre-marital sexuality, availability of automobiles for sexual encounters, and diffusion of birth control technology all weaken sexual prohibitions. That this liberalization cannot be judged unalloyed progress is due to the impact of social authority on the erotic experience. Yet the dangers of falling into a cranky conservatism must be faced. If the banners for a sexual revolution are sagging, the bumper stickers for family revival are worse. It cannot be maintained that the liberalization of sexual codes yields cheap thrills while deep satisfying relations accompanied traditional prohibition.

Marcuse's concept of “repressive desublimation” sought to do justice to the antagonistic reality of sexual liberalization: a simultaneous release of sexual energies — desublimation — and a contraction of its mode. Sexuality was integrated into late capitalism. That sexuality is used to sell every possible commodity hardly captures the reality. Sexuality more than adorns the commodity; the commodity adorns denatured sexuality. Sexuality is explicit and encouraged, and loses its explosive and individual dimension. It can no longer be separated from cigarettes, beer, and shampoo. Capitalism seduces the sexuality it shackles with the sweet talk of a life without chains.

Repressive desublimation may shed light on the narcissistic character. The psychoanalytic discussions of narcissism regularly refer to the damaged super-ego.

4. Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (N.Y., 1975), p. 254.

5. Otto Fenichel, *Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (N.Y., 1945), pp. 463-4.

6. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (N.Y., 1972), pp. 65 ff.

While both fact and fantasy comprise the super-ego, the fact of distant, cold, and inconsistent parents takes a toll. The process of idealization of parental authority, required for the super-ego, is impaired. Kohut states: "The environment which used to be experienced as threateningly close is now experienced more and more as threateningly distant; where children were formerly *overly* stimulated by the emotional life (including the erotic) of their parents, they are now often *under* stimulated."⁷ Deprived of parents to idealize, the child, according to Kohut, grows up with a damaged super-ego.

If Kohut is right, the small hot house of the family, an incubator for neuroses, is traded in for air-conditioned condos, homes of narcissistic individuals. Kernberg states that a "composite picture" of the narcissistic patient shows "consistently a parent figure, usually the mother or mother surrogate, who functions well on the surface. . . but with a degree of callousness, indifference, and non-verbalized spiteful aggression."

Yet many questions that have dogged discussions of narcissism remain unresolved. Is there a decline of authority per se ("permissiveness") or a deflection of authority? Is the "classic" bourgeois family with a strong patriarch associated with resilient egos and critical intelligence? Can or should this family form be defended? Is the newer, fragmented family composed of passive and accepting individuals?

The Frankfurt School has often been accused of romanticizing and desiring to return to the classic bourgeois family, in essence their own. It is indubitable that calls to shore up the family smack of down-home religion and hatred for up-town living. The Left, and especially the utopian Left, has historically advocated the reconstruction, not restoration, of the family. Yet, this is a fact, not an argument. It would not be the first time that the Left critique has lagged behind the developments of capitalism; and that the blueprints for a socialist future were nothing but xeroxes of the capitalist past. The re-organization of the family as a program of the future may confuse the acceleration of the past with emancipation.

In any case, the critics of narcissism and dwindling parental authority, or at least the Frankfurt School, do not urge the restoration of past forms of authority. Their analysis distinguishes between authority and authoritarianism. This is no quibble. If this distinction is lost, the social-psychology of fascism and the social configuration of narcissism blur. Their *Autorität und die Familie* (1936) and *Authoritarian Personality* (1950) dissected authoritarianism in the family. The later work correlated personality traits with a predisposition towards fascism. These traits included a rigid conformity, an inability to tolerate ambiguity, a barely repressed hostility and aggression, and so on. The parents of authoritarian personalities tended to be rigid disciplinarians. They demanded of their children total and unquestioned obedience and submission.

Is this what the Frankfurt School wants to restore? Obviously not. Here there is no abdicated authority, but total, traumatic, unbending authority. Max Horkheimer himself cites a relatively unknown text of Marx's that illuminates the problem. Marx in 1846 wrote a short article called "Peuchet: On Suicide," essentially a long extract from the memoirs of Jacques Peuchet, keeper of the archives of the Parisian police. Peuchet recorded, in loving detail, the tale of a young couple from the "lower mercantile classes," honest, decent, hardworking people, who were engaged to be

7. Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (N.Y., 1972), p. 271.

8. O. Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions*, p. 235.

9. Else Frenkel-Brunswick, "Intolerance of Ambiguity as an emotional and perceptual Personality Variable," in her *Selected Papers, Psychological Issues*, Monograph 31 (N.Y., 1974), pp. 67 ff. Frenkel-Brunswick was a collaborator of the *Authoritarian Personality*.

married. After all arrangements for the marriage were completed, a dinner celebration was held at the family of the bridegroom. The bride stayed the night. When their daughter returned the next morning, her parents heaped abuse on her. Their fury knew no bounds; neighbors joined in attacking the daughter. Utterly humiliated, she fled and threw herself into the Seine. Marx commented: "The most cowardly, unresisting people become implacable as soon as they *can exercise their absolute parental authority*. The abuse of this authority is, as it were, a *crude compensation* for all the submissiveness and dependence to which they abuse themselves willy-nilly in bourgeois society."¹⁰

Authority here is the power of the powerless; those who submit daily to the larger society take their revenge on their children. In home and hearth they are dictators, brooking no dissent. They do to the weak what has been done to them.

This vignette, and Marx's comments, tally with the description and analyses of the authoritarian personality. Brutal parental authority consoles the brutalized. No regret for the passing of this family of authority (if it in fact has passed) flutters through the Frankfurt School or the critique of narcissism. The obverse is true. The Frankfurt School has indicted family authoritarianism as the crucible of fascist and authoritarian character structure. The ego of the child crushed by unyielding and vengeful authority gravitates towards political authoritarianism.¹¹ Total hatred for authority is transmuted by pain into total identification. If narcissism is the successor to the authoritarian personality, society has advanced.

Yet narcissism may not be the successor to authoritarianism but to another social-psychological form. Class may be the missing and elusive ingredient. What lurks behind the critique of narcissism is the authority of the "classic" bourgeois family; this family and the authoritarian family diverge in their social composition. It does not seem fortuitous that Marx's example is drawn from the "lower mercantile classes;" and that the authoritarian personality, and the sources of fascism, are associated with marginal or threatened social groupings (which, however, are in no way numerically insignificant).¹²

The bourgeois family in its "classic" phase was not marginal or threatened, but secure and independent. Not its numerical frequency, but unique configuration of authority and affection is the issue. Authority was severe, but not brutal or inconsistent. Total submission was not the goal; nor was the family lacking in warmth.¹³ This is not to say there were no victims; there were, especially women. These victims furnished the patients for psychoanalysis.

The bourgeois family, it seems likely, developed into the narcissistic family; the class composition remains roughly the same. The case reports of narcissistic patients allow fleeting views of family life; these do not show parents who, after long, grueling days of waiting on tables or driving cabs, come home to bark at their too many children; but parents who are relatively successful, whose energies are directed towards themselves and their careers; and who tend to be enlightened but also cold

10. Karl Marx, "Peuchet: On Suicide," (1846), in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. IV (N.Y. and Moscow, 1975), p. 605.

11. T.W. Adorno, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (N.Y., 1950 and 1969), pp. 372 ff.

12. The social and class base of Fascism can obviously not be discussed in a sentence or two; it has provoked a large debate. See Reinhard Kühnl, *Formen bürgerlicher Herrschaft. Liberalismus-Faschismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1971); Tomas Childers, "The Social Bases of the National Socialist Votes," in *Journal of Contemporary History*, XI-4 (October, 1976), pp. 17-42; and Anson G. Rabinbach, "Towards a Marxist Theory of Fascism and National Socialism," in *New German Critique*, no. 3 (Fall, 1974), pp. 127-153

13. Cf. Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (N.Y., 1978), pp. 166 ff., and generally Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (N.Y., 1977).

to the few children at home.

That narcissism may be circumscribed by class does not, of course, dispose of it. The bourgeoisie makes society in its own image. The impact of narcissism in society may be measured by the attitude towards children. A new ethic is taking shape, and this ethic exposes the commodity structure of narcissism. More and more couples decide against, or perpetually delay, having children. This decision marks a departure from the ideal (and imperative) of a family with children.

Childless couples are not most visible among those working the hardest for the least wages. Here, a case could be made for the rationality of no children; they drain scarce psychic and economic resources. Rather, childlessness has surfaced among young, relatively wealthy professionals. These individuals, it might seem, are richest in the psychic and economic resources to bestow on children. Yet the reverse seems true; they are unable or unwilling to afford the psychic energy, affection and attention that children require.

If these sociological impressions are accurate, the terrain where psychological narcissism speaks the language of the commodity can be charted. The most advanced social groups — affluent young professionals — expose most sharply the advanced tendencies of capitalism. Narcissism is conventionally designated as hedonistic, the pursuit of self-gratification. The description misses its inner structure: the hedonism of narcissism is parsimonious. It does not squander its energies in the mad pursuit of pleasure but doles it out while scanning interest rates and stock reports.

Hedonism is not an invariant beyond and outside society, but bares the imprint of history and class.¹⁴ Not the dissolute hedonism of the surplus aristocracy but resolute hedonism marks the ambitious professionals; hedonism becomes calculated and calculating, healthy and approved, as well as profitable. As the psychic household of the individual is remodeled into a financial counseling service, children receive a poor rating; they are high risks, requiring too much initial investment and too few guaranteed returns. The exchange principle, capitalism's own weapon, is used by the bourgeoisie to prune its own family. Hedonism devours itself.

The bourgeoisie organized society around an already primordial principal — that of exchange. An eye for an eye was renovated into equal exchange of value. As Marx knew, the principle of exchange value revolutionized the world, and within a class society, razed distinctions of birth, talent, blood, and tradition. Money was the universal language, and regardless of other virtues, those who manage to obtain it wield power.

Within an exchange economy, the family sticks out as an irrational blot. Based on blood, and love and hate, it crassly violates the rationalizing drive of exchange value. Its relationships are not simply reciprocal. The relationships of parents to each other, to their parents, to their children, and so on are not two-way streets. Love and attention are not returned in equal measures. Love relations are compounded and complicated not simply by antagonisms and hatreds but by excesses which cannot be parcelled out in neat packages. An infant cannot return the love and attention bestowed on it.

The exact development of the family remains disputed; yet it can be argued that the family has ineluctably surrendered to the law of exchange. Exchange value has not simply knocked at the door but migrated into bedroom, nursery, and sickroom. This means that the family casts off unequal relationships. All relations are appraised with an eye on the psychic bank account; spending must balance

14. See Herbert Marcuse, "On Hedonism," in *Negations* (Boston, 1968).

earnings. Consequently the family contracts, eliminating the old and other kin. Requiring more care and attention than they can return, they are herded off to the state agencies and institutions. Psychic bankruptcy is avoided by retrenching, cutting off losing investments: the old, children, the sick, and so on.

Neither narcissism or the family can be considered apart from the tendencies of capitalism. Both express in different terms the subordination to the exchange principle. Both accept the same currency. Children are deemed an increasingly unwise investment. For the professional, children are judged a drain and obstacle to career and pleasures. Pets, autos, jogging, tennis lessons, offer more reliable compensation for the same expenditure. The "fatherless" and "kinless" society devolves into the "childless" society. Alvin Toffler, the professional seer, anticipates that children will play an insignificant role in the future society. Love relations which cannot be commodified are treated as if they were the threats they actually are.

The loosening of the ties between parents and children bespeaks a fundamental shift in emotional life. Once an ethic of sacrifice bound parents to children. For many groups in America this ethic constituted a religion: work, sacrifice and self-denial for the sake of the children. It also testified to a belief in a better future. Sacrifice glued together parents and children, and parents and parents, and parents and their parents.

It is no secret that sacrifice has fallen on dog days. At best it is obsolete, honored but hardly practiced (and well captured in Mary Gordon's *Final Payments*). Sacrifice, not simply in regard to children, but in regard to all people and commitments, erodes away. Like the family, sacrifice is invaded by exchange value. By definition, sacrifice is a one-way, not a two-way, relationship. More is given, bestowed, or invested than received. To the narcissistic, sacrifice is a con job, a loss with no benefits. Self-effacement, in the name of sacrifice, is a burden that the self threatened with effacement can no longer endure.

The corrosion of sacrifice did not originate in the deep recesses of the psyche, but in the excesses of the economy. For decades capitalism has been shoring itself up by intensifying consumption. The imperative to buy and enjoy displaced the religion of save and sacrifice. A deliberate attack on the "puritanism in consumption" dates at least from the 1920s.¹⁵ Advanced capitalism requires a programmed hedonism as much as earlier capitalism needed Calvinism and sacrifice.

To ease overproduction and underconsumption, capitalism extended credit towards itself and its consumers. If the public and private debt bails out the economy, it also yields inflation, the unassailable argument against saving and sacrifice. To bank on the future is to risk bankruptcy. Through every pore the message is drilled in to spend and enjoy in the here and now.

Talk of the erosion of sacrifice like the critique of narcissism seems to regret the passing of an era, to long for the return of honest sacrifice. Let there be no doubt; the non-rational moment of sacrifice has oiled all irrational movements and institutions. Its kinship with domination cannot be mistaken. That the big as well as the petty despots, the preachers and presidents, dictators and kaisers, kings and generals have all celebrated sacrifice and defamed hedonism is hardly an accident. Citizens and subjects were berated, and often compelled, to sacrifice their happiness, and sometimes their lives, to keep the larger institutions wheezing along. Dressed up as patriotism and duty, sacrifice coerced the weak to surrender quietly.

15. Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York, 1976), p. 57.

For this reason, the corrosion of sacrifice — parents to children, wife to husband, citizens to state — is hardly pure regression. Narcissism harbors a protest in the name of individual health and happiness against irrational sacrifice. Where the dead weight of sacrifice crushes, this cannot be minimized. Nor should it be uncritically celebrated. Narcissism is historically specific, dissimilar in southern Italy and the upper East Side of New York City.¹⁶ The protest of narcissism within advanced capitalism is shot through with the society it rejects; it affirms and buttresses the commodity market. Its mode of protest is private, its substance the exchange principle of capitalism. If sacrifice recalls pre-capitalist life, narcissism beckons a step closer the stock market of human relations.

16. See for instance Anne Parsons, "Paternal and Maternal Authority in the Neapolitan Family," in her *Belief, Magic and Anomie* (N.Y., 1969).

ON NARCISSISM

by Stanley Aronowitz

Ever since the discovery of the individual, Western intellectuals have been perturbed by a set of binaries: the individual and society, private and public, self and other. The distinction between inner and outer already signifies the roots of estrangement, the reconciliation of which becomes a utopian hope to which civilization periodically dedicates itself, but increasingly regards as unreachable. It was the realization that the individual and society were epistemologically opposed that, at first, gave rise to the imputed division of social life into the public and private. In this reprise, the public sphere was interpreted in two ways: political theory understood the public life as the site of discourse among equals concerning matters of mutual concern. The revelation that this discourse was, however, mediated by private interests gave rise to theories of the state as the mediation among economically motivated individuals who could not achieve equality, despite the contractually based commodity relations that undergirded their interaction.

Thus, the obliteration between self and other could only be realized in the family, now regarded, in contrast to the market and the state, as the "private sphere." As early as *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*,¹ critical philosophy discovered the sociological root of its dissolution: the death of parents and the education of the young on one hand, and the basis of the marriage in the transfer of property (Marx and Engels pointed out that women were property transferred in marriage). Thus, Hegel noticed that the family and civil society were not bifurcated as it first appears. Love relations were bound to relations of domination since they were based upon the exchange of capital and women.

It remained for Marx to remove the last illusion from bourgeois critical philosophy's hope for a private sphere by arguing that the state was an instrument of

1. See especially the section on the family. Hegel's argument for the state rests on his attempt to show the partial and incomplete character of family and civil society and the need for concrete transcendence.