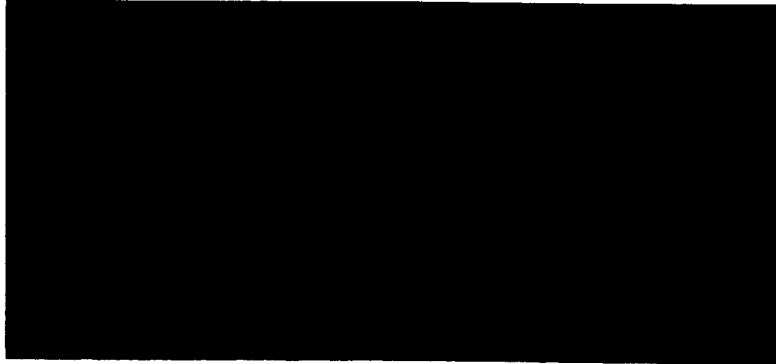




TRANSFORMATIONS  
*comparative study of social transformations*



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A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE  
ON CHRISTOPHER LASCH,  
"THE SOCIAL INVASION OF THE SELF"

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A Feminist Perspective on Christopher Lasch,  
"The Social Invasion of the Self"

Sherry B. Ortner

I am happy to have the opportunity to comment on Christopher Lasch's presentation, because I have followed his work--especially his articles in the New York Review--with interest for some time.<sup>1</sup> I have particularly appreciated his continuing stress on the relationship between the personal and the political, his strong sense of the fact that each entails the other, or anyway should. As one who has recently departed from New York City, however--and I don't quite know whether to consider myself as being in exile or as having taken refuge--I should say that I find his quite gloomy picture of the state of modern society somewhat less real than I used to find it from a location on the upper west side of Manhattan.<sup>2</sup> Too much reading of New York magazine, abounding in firsthand accounts of formerly sophisticated journalists who have found salvation in Swami so-and-so or Silva Mind Control, in regular articles on how to live alone without going crazy or how to live with someone else without doing the same; in hedonistic articles about food and wine (the last my personal favorites)--all of this is bound to give one a sense that we are in the last days of a latter-day Roman Empire. It doesn't look quite that way here in Ann Arbor, but then Ann Arbor has a religion to promote social solidarity, with blue wolverines as totems and an ultimate deity called Bo. And compared to New York Ann Arbor reeks with Gemeinschaft, but perhaps the New York-Ann Arbor comparison has gone far enough; a more relevant comparison is probably between Ann Arbor now and Ann Arbor ten years ago. The virtual disappearance of activist politics in the seventies, in this community that had been in the vanguard of American politics in the sixties, is doubtless a symptom of the sort of thing Lasch is talking about, and all the rest of it may soon follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the conference on "Narcissism in Modern Society," University of Michigan, November 1977.

<sup>2</sup> The paper circulated at the conference was entitled "The Social Invasion of the Self." It was later incorporated into Lasch's The Culture of Narcissism. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979.)

Yet it seems to me that there are grave dangers in doing instant history, not the least of which are both false optimism, as the sixties clearly show, and false pessimism in the case of the current trend. It is very difficult to know whether this is the exhausted phase of a previous era, the beginnings of a new one whose outlines are not yet visible, or very likely a mixture of both. As Professor Russo will be discussing, the figure of Narcissus had roots in a god of death and rebirth, and we may perhaps take that as a license for considering this as what anthropologists call a liminal phase, a time between times, rather than a period in itself. And like any good liminal phase, the present one is characterized by a high degree of anomie and ambiguity, which means at the same time a great deal of potential for transformation.

So we may not know yet where we are going, but at least we know where we are coming from--or do we? Lasch is at pains to distinguish modern narcissism from 19th century egotism, but the necessity for belaboring this distinction indicates to me that we are perhaps talking about minor transformations on a single underlying structure. Lasch quotes de Tocqueville saying that 18th century Americans had little sense of either ancestors or descendants, just as Lasch complains about for the 20th century, and I doubt whether we are fundamentally psychically different from our forebears. But we are in a new situation--there is no more frontier upon which we can project, with little reality-testing, our fantasies; we are experiencing the profound contradictions of advanced corporate capitalism; and many basic structures of intimate relations have been quite heavily attacked. Thus I propose that we are mislabeling, and even mystifying, what we are seeing, which is not really narcissism at all, but rather the reflex of a checked and frustrated egotism, or in other words, a contemporary transformation of a basic American structure. Indeed, it is possible that the complex of phenomena in question--withdrawal from significant relations, quests for instant

gratification, absorption in the self, and deeply buried rage--may in fact simply be depression in response to the checks and frustrations of a previously boundless egotism.

There are several virtues in such an argument. At the individual level, if one retains the classic Freudian framework, narcissism is a terribly forbidding term. Relegated to the domain of "character disorders," which is to say something so fundamentally screwed up in the person that it is virtually not amenable to change, the label bodes therapeutic defeat from the outset. Depression on the other hand is not only treatable within the classic framework, but is at least partly a function of the individual's current situation and relationships. And at the cultural level, if we consider the problem in terms of a particular historical transformation upon enduring American egotism, then we develop a more complex problematic--we are forced to question not only the sources of the transformation but the sources of the enduring structure. Specifically, one could argue that the structure of American egotism was in the past redundantly encoded in many levels of the system, from the macrostructures of the capitalist economy and state to the microstructures of family and intimate relations, whereas now, as Lasch suggests, the family may be transmitting a different and more frustrating message while the overall system continues to encode egotism. This is grossly oversimplified, of course, but it suggests a direction for a more complex analysis.

Which brings me finally to Freud, the Big Daddy looming behind this conference. For it was Freud who allowed one to insist that, despite the many linkages between the family as a world of intimate relations and society as everything else, the family need not be and indeed can rarely be purely a reflex of the wider social structure, as Lasch seems to assume.

I do not wish to dwell upon Freud's great psychic layer cake of id and ego and superego, which I find problematic in a number of ways. Richard Sennett will

be discussing Freud in a hermeneutic language that I find much more theoretically congenial, although I would also like to put in a plug for Paul Ricoeur's book, Freud & Philosophy,<sup>3</sup> an exposition of extraordinary brilliance on the relationship between Freud the psychic archaeologist and Freud the hermeneuticist. Rather, I wish to pick up on a theme raised by Lasch and a number of other contributors, the relationship between love and authority, between bonds of mutuality and bonds of submission. Lasch speaks of love in a language of "self-sacrifice," "self-abasement," and "submission," and suggests that the narcissistic inability to love is related to an inability to submit. What is implicitly evoked here is Freud's model of Totem and Taboo,<sup>4</sup> the structure of the primal horde, in which the equality and community of bonding of the brothers is made possible by their equal submission to the authority of the primal father. Only a higher authority, to which all will submit, guarantees, according to this model, cooperation, solidarity, and love.

The model surely describes an empirical reality that has been with us for a very long time, perhaps since the primal horde if one wants to think in those terms, although I should mention as an anthropological aside that recent research has shown that very few primate groups actually behave this way. In any case, what the model describes, as Freud was well aware and as Lasch indicates in a passing phrase, is the basic structure of what we know as patriarchy. And what I would like to propose, with more hope than conviction for the moment, is that that is what may be crumbling, primarily at the level of personal life and intimate relations, but with repercussions for the macrostructure. What seems to be happening--slowly, painfully, and as it were spastically--is an attempt to disengage love from dominance and submission, to break up the basic patriarchal structure.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, Freud & Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation. Trans. Denis Savage. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo. Trans. James Strachey. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1952).

Now if this is the case it would obviously put great stress upon intimate relations of every sort, relations constructed on the old model and entered into by persons put together in the old ways. Certainly it puts great stress on male-female relations, since traditionally the man's capacity to love was predicated on the woman's capacity to submit. (I would be curious, by the way, to know the male/female ratio among the "narcissistic" patients the psychiatrists are seeing.) And if Freud was right, it would put great stress on male/male relations too, since the capacity of men to form bonds with one another in the old mode was predicated upon their co-submission to some external figure or symbol or structure of authority. As for women's relations among themselves, these are clearly thriving, for these were and are the only ones not organized by the patriarchal template, though of course they were deeply affected by--"interfered with" is perhaps the correct phrase--that structure.

At the same time, assuming that Freud was right concerning the large projective component in people's relations to higher authorities, the assault upon patriarchal relations at the intimate level would surely have repercussions in-- again perhaps "interfere with" is the correct phrase--their modes of relation to the macrostructure. Lasch locates the erosion of macrostructural patriarchal authority (such as it is) in the growth of impersonal bureaucracy, the disillusionment with country and leaders following Vietnam and Watergate, and so forth, and surely all of these things are involved. Especially in the cases of Vietnam and Watergate, we have seen the primal father killed twice over, and we have not felt much guilt in watching him fall. But I am arguing that the assault is also coming from "below," largely from contemporary American feminism, and that this is not only a symptom of the erosion of authority at higher levels (as Lasch suggests) but a contributing cause. One's willingness and capacity to submit to political leaders



and to symbols of the fatherland and the state is in part a function of one's willingness and capacity to submit to patriarchal authority at home.

So the costs are high, not only at the level of psychic happiness and stable interpersonal relations, but also in terms of things like the current refusal of Americans to embrace conservation despite the self-destructive potential of not doing so. But the ultimate gains for people and society are potentially even higher. Indeed, if our panelists are complaining of a general absence of vision in contemporary society, then the gains are available right now if they would only look in the right place. The feminist movement, far from being--as it is continually misinterpreted to be--simply an attempt by women to grab "a bigger piece of the pie," actually embodies an extraordinary set of ideals, a vision of human relationships in which love is not predicated upon domination and submission.

I am sorry to wind up giving a sermon. I mean less to preach morality than to counteract to some extent the prevailing pessimism, without however underplaying the problems involved. More importantly, I wish to contribute to a more complex analysis of what in fact is going on, an analysis that would help us grasp the present situation in constructive ways rather than in despair. Nor have I wished to suggest that feminism and the reconstruction of personal relations are the be-alls and end-alls of the sorts of political activities we must involve ourselves in. Patriarchy is, heaven knows, not the only form of oppression in the world, although it plays more of a role in other modes of oppression and exploitation than we yet understand.

Let me close by restating my contention that the narcissism label may be a serious mystification. But I am grateful to Professor Lasch and to this conference for opening these issues for discussion.

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