

# Narcissism and Political Psychology: from the Frankfurt School to Christopher Lasch

NORMAN FISCHER

This essay is about the career of the concept of narcissism, from radical critical tool in the writings of the Frankfurt school and Erich Fromm to politically ambiguous lament in the work of Christopher Lasch .

The fullest expression of Frankfurt school ideas about narcissism is Theodore W. Adorno's "Freudian Theory and the pattern of Fascist propaganda," which is in turn based quite closely on Freud's excursus into political psychology, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. (Adorno 1951; Freud 1960) While Freud's book was certainly the first to give a social psychological analysis of narcissism, Adorno's attempt to analyze fascism in terms of narcissism obviously went beyond Freud's account in the scope of its emphasis on concrete history and its critique of authoritarianism.

In his 1914 essay "On Narcissism," Freud had argued that the narcissist directed libidinal energy toward himself or herself. In 1921, in *Group psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, he went on to argue that the concentration on self characteristic of the narcissist could easily be turned into identification with a crowd or leader. Adorno built on this theory and emphasized that such identification was most easily accomplished by weak egos of the sort that he thought were manipulated by fascist leaders or speechmakers. (Freud 1914: 139-147 ; Freud 1960: 52 ; Adorno 1951: 418-419) Adorno's essay reflected both his experience of German fascism and the empirical analysis of American society done by him and other members of the Frankfurt school after they left Germany in the nineteen-thirties and came to the United States.

The subsequent career of the concept of narcissism in Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt school such as Herbert Marcuse

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and Max Horkheimer, as well as Erich Fromm, who published his early German essays in the Frankfurt school journal but later went his own way, is a complicated one. Nevertheless, two points stand out. First, narcissism was always a theory of both individual neurosis and of the society in which it occurs. Second, the theory of narcissism was always colored by the general goal of finding a psychological basis for why people accept unjustified authority. It must be seen as one expression of the search for understanding authoritarian behaviour, a search which runs through the philosophical psychology of Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Fromm and is expressed in such diverse Frankfurt school works as the political philosophy of Franz Neumann and the literary criticism of Walter Benjamin. (Adorno 1974 : 16-18; Marcuse 1963 : 58; Horkheimer 1949 : 369; Fromm 1965 : 17-33; Neumann 1957 : 12-67; Benjamin 1973)

These two points must be kept in mind when looking at the way the concept of narcissism has surfaced again in the United States with the recent work of Christopher Lasch. For, first, methodological difficulties which plagued Frankfurt school attempts to create an individual and social theory of narcissism are exacerbated in Lasch's account. Second, with Lasch the concept of narcissism has ceased to play the anti-authoritarian role that it played for the Frankfurt school and Fromm as they analyzed the psychological basis of fascism.

The methodological difficulties arose as the theorists of the Frankfurt school grappled with the duality of narcissism as a theory of both society and the individual. The narcissistic character was held to be different from the neurotic usually studied by Freud. Whereas the latter lived in a society in which the most fundamental etiology of neurosis or at least the most direct one, was found in the family, the former lived in a society in which the most direct etiology of neurosis was found not in the family but in public society. Because of this the relation between one, the study of individual neurosis and two, the social conditions for it, was said to have changed. The first became less important and the second more important. (Marcuse 1963 : 47-50; Adorno 1951 : 431-432) Hence the theory of narcissism required, but never really received, at least from Adorno, Marcuse or Horkheimer, a new methodology for studying the modern relation between the individual and society. Furthermore, the various attempts to find such a methodology led to an inconsistency with another major contribution of Frankfurt

school philosophy of psychology : Adorno's and Marcuse's methodological defense of classical Freudian analysis against the notion that it must be revised from a sociological perspective.

This defence, however, was so one-sided that it did not even adequately account for Freud's own use of sociology in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, much less for Adorno's and Marcuse's more extensive use of Marxist and other sociological concepts in their own writings on narcissism. Against such neo-Freudians as Fromm and Karen Horney, Marcuse and Adorno argued that Freud's categories aimed at studying the social element that was already in the individual before entering adult society and hence did not need to be revised as much as the neo-Freudians thought by adding to them elements garnered from the study of interaction between adult egos and society. (Adorno 1952 : 27; Marcuse 1955 : 254) I am not interested at the moment in the merits of this dispute, but in the fact that the Frankfurt school thinkers' arguments against the revisionists are inconsistent with their own theory of narcissism. There are extreme problems with combining the anti-neo-Freudian claim that Freud's categories already contain enough social elements in them, with an account of narcissism which essentially demands the introduction of sociological concepts that increasingly and of necessity become more complex even than the ones that Freud added in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

In elaborating the principle that Freudian categories are already adequately social the Frankfurt school emphasized that the family, i.e., a social unit, helped create the psychological individual. They were concerned that the neo-Freudians wanted to concentrate too much on adult public society and not enough on the original family situation. (Adorno 1952: 26-28; Marcuse 1955: 248-249) From a methodological standpoint the Frankfurt school analysis was only individualistic in that it emphasised how concentration on the early social struggle of the individual in the family gave a deeper analysis than concentration on an individual abstracted from those early formative relations and then analyzed in his or her present relation to society. Since their aim was studying the social in the individual, the Frankfurt school theory was not individualistic in its aim. However, since emphasis was put on studying the individual in order to see the social better, their analysis was individualistic in its means.

How is the anti-revisionist principle of studying the social in the individual undermined by the theory of narcissism? In his first fully formulated critique of the neo-Freudians "Die Revidierte Psychoanalyse," Adorno had criticised both what he saw as their overemphasis on the ego as opposed to the id, and their exaggeration of the importance of adult social interaction in understanding neurosis. (Adorno 1952: 26) The argument of this 1946 essay, however, is in striking contrast to the one found in Adorno's 1951 "Freudian Theory and the pattern of Fascist propaganda." 3 This latter work, in developing a new theory of narcissism, first, accepted Freud's 1914 definition of narcissism as a state involving the direction of libidinal energy to one's own ego. Second, it accepted Freud's own modification of that theory in his attempt to analyze crowds. For both Freud and Adorno the narcissistic character may redirect the libidinal energy originally directed to self back again to crowds or leaders, but is still narcissistic because those others are only seen as extensions of self. (Freud 1960: 56; Adorno 1951: 418-419)

One might ask why narcissists should identify with others. This question leads to the third component of Adorno's theory of narcissism, and his clearest advance over Freud: the followers of fascist leaders have weak egos which necessitates their identification with others because of their own powerlessness. Fascist authoritarians then manipulate those weak egos. (Adorno 1951: 418-419) I would put it in the following way: narcissists who follow authoritarian leaders have large but weak egos. The largeness of their egos causes them to direct libidinal energy to themselves, but the weakness of their egos causes them to identify with others in a submissive way.

Now it should be obvious that Adorno's theory of narcissistic fascism is inconsistent with his strong methodological attack on the neo-Freudians made five years earlier. Far from simply studying the social in the individual his theory of narcissism looks precisely at and emphasizes the role of actual public society in creating the narcissistic character. Thus, there is considerable development between Adorno's original negative critique of revisionism in 1946 and his own positive theory of narcissism in 1951. However, it was only in his 1955 essay, "Sociology and Psychology," written nine years after "Die Revidierte Psychoanalyse," and four years after "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda." that Adorno really began to take note of how he must change his own critique of the neo-Freudians in order to account for his own theory

of narcissism. (Adorno 1955, 1967, 1968). In that essay Adorno made the important concession to the neo-Freudians that Freud did misunderstand the extent to which the feeling of helplessness, for example, comes not only from early childhood but also from adult social interaction. (Adorno 1963 : 88-89).

Indeed, nine years after his original blast against the neo-Freudians in 1946, Adorno's principle disagreement with them became not so much their emphasis on social factors in adult life as what he still regarded as their excessive emphasis on ego factors. Adorno thought that the manipulation of narcissists in mass society was more often done through the unconscious and the id than he claimed the neo-Freudians realized. (Adorno 1968 : 89)

Unfortunately Adorno never admitted that he had changed his ideas, nor did he extend what amounted to a more positive reevaluation of neo-Freudian stress on social factors to a reevaluation of any specific neo-Freudian theory of narcissism. If only Adorno had extended his brief comments in 1955 to a comparison of his own theory of narcissism with a full scale rival theory such as the one later offered by Erich Fromm, the arguments between Frankfurt school stress on instinct and Frommian stress on society could perhaps have been at least stated more clearly. However in his early accounts of social psychology, *Escape from Freedom, Man for Himself*, and *The Forgotten Language*, Fromm did not make the concept of narcissism central. By the time he did, in books like *The Heart of Man* and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Adorno was losing interest in the topic. (Fromm 1965, 1947, 1951 1971 : 71-17. 19 3 : 200-205)

One may ask of course, how significant is Adorno's admission that the theory of narcissism must accommodate the revisionist stress on adult society. Answering this question would involve an inquiry into the possible reach of a social psychology. To what extent can a social psychology illuminate both psyche and society? This in turn involves asking how far a repressive society can reach into the individual psyche. It also involves asking to what extent a unified view about the social ethics and liberation of human beings depends on integrating sociology and psychology. How much are the individual and society integrated and how much should they be integrated? Adorno's utilization of adult social interaction in his own theory of narcissism does not resolve the former issue, in that it does not resolve the debate over the extent that an instinctual psychology can be used as a barometer of what is happening in society. To what

extent does society follow its own logic and to what extent does it follow the logic of the instincts? Adorno gave more of a sketch of a resolution than an actual resolution of the issue. Clearly Adorno thought that the reach of society into the individual was very strong, at the same time holding that instinctual psychology can reveal much about adult society. If Fromm was willing to give up some reliance on the study of instinctual drives such as the libido, in order to concentrate more on society's reach into the individual, Adorno seemed to want to maintain both equally. (Fromm 1980 ; 1-33; Adorno 1966 : 88-89) But this desire remained only a program and was not thoroughly worked out.

Given our newly gained perspective that the theory of narcissism developed by the central figures of the Frankfurt school, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, included a strong sociological element even as they railed against Fromm and Horney for including such an element, our attention naturally turns to the content of their sociological analysis of narcissism. Primarily they concerned themselves with (1) the weakening of the family, (2) the development of fascism and (3) the growth of a society dominated by consumerism. (Adorno 1951; Marcuse 1963; Horkheimer 1949) Jessica Benjamin, however, in her searching analyses of Frankfurt school psychology, criticizes these alleged nodal points in the historical and social application of the theory of narcissism. She notes that such criteria for the thesis of the weakening and decline of the family as less internalization by young people of family values is rendered problematic by the gathering of cross class data. (Benjamin 1978: 52) In addition, as Benjamin also notes, it is unclear sometimes how Marcuse and Adorno conceive of the relation between fascism & consumer society. In some ways they seem to be conflated. (Benjamin 1977: 54; Marcuse 1963 : 52 ; Adorno 1951 : 432)

These difficulties make the sociological grounding of narcissism problematic. Even more problematic, however, is the relationship between the claims about the decline of the family, and the growth of fascist and consumer society on the one hand and the alleged general decline of the individual on the other. Of course the theory of the decline of the individual is in part simply the theory of narcissism itself, but only in part. In general the Frankfurt school mean by the decline of the individual that people have lost so much autonomy and uniqueness that privacy itself has become problematic. (Horkheimer 1974 : 128-161) Now one but only one, reason why one can say that the individual declines is because of the growth of large weak egos characteristic of the narcissist. Although such

individuals often claim to be doing their "own thing" their own thing is usually socially controlled. There are, however, also a number of other causes offered for individuality's decline. Frankfurt school economic theory, for example, distinguished between competitive capitalism, in which the individual still had claims to some autonomy and privacy, and monopoly capitalism, of which fascism was supposed to be most conspicuous example, and in which the individual's decline was rather precipitous, (Neumann 1957 : 41-42 ; Horkheimer 1974 : 333 ; Adorno 1974 : 135)

Of course different members of the Frankfurt school emphasized different causes of the decline of the individual in the broad as opposed to just the psychoanalytic sense. Horkheimer, for example, was particularly fond of pinpointing the weakening of the family as a major cause. (Horkheimer 1949 : 333) Yet he did not develop as comprehensive a Freudian theory of the decline of the individual as did Marcuse and Adorno. In contrast, Adorno's "Freudian Theory and the pattern of Fascist Propaganda," does not emphasize the weakening of the family at all. What is interesting is that it is usually when the decline of the individual is seen in its largest social context that the inability of Freudian theory to explain it is most apparent, either to the reader or the Frankfurt school writings or to the writers themselves.

In this context both Adorno and Marcuse left records of their own doubts concerning the perfect or even imperfect coexistence of (1) the theory of the decline of the individual and its psychological derivation, the "obsolescence of the Freudian concept of man," with (2) the critique of neo-Freudianism and the assumption that the individual has not declined and that the Freudian concept of the human being retains full applicability and does not have to be supplemented with sociological investigation. We have already seen some of these doubts in "Sociology and Psychology," but the following passage from "Freudian Theory and the pattern of Fascist Propaganda," already expresses doubts about the theory of narcissism even in the midst of a defense of it:

"It is not accidental that the nineteenth century is the great era of psychological thought. In a thoroughly reified society, in which there are no direct relationships between men, and in which each person has been reduced to a social atom, to a mere function of collectivity, the psychological processes, though they still appear in each individual, have ceased to appear as the determining force of the social process. Thus the psychology of the individual has lost what Hegel would have called its

substance. It is perhaps the greatest merit of Freud's book that though he restricted himself to the field of individual psychology and wisely abstained from introducing sociological factors from outside he nevertheless reached the turning point where psychology abdicates." (Adorno 1951 : 431-432).

In contrast, Herbert Marcuse's initial reaction to Adorno's doubts in "Sociology and Psychology," was to criticise them and respond by reasserting the theory of the social in the individual :

"But the psychological approach seems to fail at a decisive point : history has progressed "behind the back" and over the individuals, and the laws of the historical process have been those governing the reified institutions rather than the individuals. (Here Marcuse footnotes Adorno 1955, the original German version of "Sociology and Psychology")" Against this criticism we have argued that Freud's psychology reaches into a dimension of the mental apparatus where the individual is still the genus, the present still the past.....By virtue of this Generic conception, Freud's psychology of the individual is *per se* psychology of the Genus." (Marcuse 1966 : 106)

In spite of this critique of Adorno, made in 1955, by 1963 in "The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man," Marcuse stated the inconsistency between traditional Freudian theory and the tools necessary to understand modern society with probably as much clarity as it could be stated at the time. He also related the inconsistency to the concept of the decline of the individual, discussing the latter in the far reaching sociological and psychological terms that it deserves. In this essay Marcuse also begins, but does not clearly accomplish, the task of separating the concept of narcissism, with the attendant notion of the obsolescence of the Freudian concept of the human being, from his critique of neo-Freudianism, which entailed precisely a defense of the traditional Freudian notion of the individual. In his original "Preface" to *From a Critique of Civilization* Marcuse had glimpsed that indeed the thesis of the decline or end of the individual would have to lead to a deemphasis on the psychological interpretation of political and social theory :

"Formerly autonomous and identifiable psychic processes are being absorbed by the function of the individual in the state.....Psychological problems therefore turn into political problems.....Psychology could be elaborated as a special discipline as long as the psyche could sustain itself against the public power, as long as privacy was real, really desired and self-shaped; if the individual has neither the ability nor the possibility to be for himself, the terms of psychology become the terms



of the social forces which define the psyche. Under these circumstances applying psychology in the analysis of social and political events means taking an approach which has been vitiated by those very events." (Marcuse 1966 : XXV11)

Unfortunately, like many prefaces this statement lays out the author's future plans more than his present accomplishments. *Eros and Civilization* actually still assumes the relevance of the Freudian concept of human beings which the "Preface" seems to abjure. The "Preface" is really a better introduction to *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964), which does attempt to define the modern psyche socially more than modern society psychologically, thus abandoning the contradictory concept of a narcissism based simultaneously on the Freudian theory of the individual and on the idea that this individual has been systematically undermined.

It is true that Marcuse is not entirely clear on these points. In the "Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man." written between, *Eros and Civilization* and *One Dimensional Man*, he was still trying to merge Freudian stress on the individual and Frankfurt theory of the decline of the individual. The merger is accomplished through the paradox that precisely the disappearance of the Freudian individual can be explained by the Freudian concept of the human being, i. e., that the disappearance of the individual can be explained by the early socialization of the individual. Yet Marcuse does not resolve question of how we would study this deindividualized individual who, through his or her early socialization is caused to become the narcissistic "mass man." However, in Marcuse's suggestion that the individual is socialized early on to become a human being of the mass, he seems to indicate a theoretical path that he might have followed if he had not written *One Dimensional Man*, a path, that as we will see, Christopher Lasch actually followed: to construct a psychological theory of mass society which justifies itself on the basis that since masses are produced by state or public intervention into the psyches of children, mass society can be understood through the study of individual psychology. But Marcuse's understanding that he could not really follow that path is shown by the following comment from the essay: "Society has surpassed the stage where psychiatric theory could elucidate the ingression of society into the mental structure of the individuals and thus reveal the mechanisms of social control in the individual." (Marcuse 1963 : 53)

It is thus clear that the theory of narcissism, far from stretching the importance of the individual, undermines it. It is thus inconsistent with the Frankfurt school principles of studying the social in the individual. Although neither Marcuse nor Adorno ever faced up to this inconsistency in a completely consistent way, still, in practice, and sometimes in theory too, as we have just seen, they modified the principle of studying the social in the individual.

These oscillations seem to illustrate the problem of any methodology that moves too quickly from analysis of social conditions to analysis of individual mental health or neurosis. Adorno's realization of this perhaps explains why he often strove for a certain pluralism on the question of the relation between studying the individual and studying society. (Adorno 1963 : 96; 1966 : 39) The lesson to be learned from this is that there is no methodology that gets adequately at both. There is no one to one correspondence between social theory and psychology. Furthermore, insofar as there is none, this raises internal problems for the Frankfurt school theory of the totally administered society, according to which it is imagined that a repressive society can almost create a personality type, such as the narcissistic one, over which it has perfect control. Since from the methodological standpoint there remains a gap between individual and society, it thus becomes much more difficult to say that any society is totally administered. 6 There is no single concept, such as narcissism, which precisely indicates both social and psychological breakdown. Such a theory will inevitably identify the individual and society too closely.

It is a paradox that it was the instinctualists in the Frankfurt school who developed this notion of the totally administered society and the revisionist Fromm, with his emphasis on the logic of society over and above the instincts, who resisted it. Yet Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno also continued to have their doubts about the totally administered society, and as we will see, it was only Christopher Lasch who succumbed to the idea, and overcame all Frankfurt school doubts about the total domination of the individual psyche by society.

For all of above developments left the concept of narcissism in a kind of limbo, at least in the American context, until the work of Christopher Lasch. 7 Lasch attempted an once again unite the method of studying the social in the individual with the thesis of the decline of the individual. (Lasch 1978 : 34-36) There is, indeed, an argument that

Lasch makes which seems as though it might allow him to accomplish the task of uniting the two theories, but which in fact does not. I am referring to his emphasis on social control of the family by the state. (Lasch 1978: 11; 1980) For if the large scale social process through which narcissistic traits thrive had become increasingly substitute for socialization by the family, then one could indeed argue that such social narcissism could be discovered by studying individual data without concentrating on the actual data of society. the argument would be that the family has been increasingly influenced by the state and that studying the individual can reveal this.

However, this argument would be an extremely naive response to the methodological problems faced by the Frankfurt school, If one could understand such state action by looking at the psyche, then the Frankfurt school theory of the decline of the individual would be both maintained and undermined, maintained because one could understand the decline of the individual by studying the individual, undermined because one could not really learn that much by studying the psyche of someone who has been put too much under the sway of mass society to reveal any autonomous psychic processes. Although Lasch, or for that matter Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno, might have found some consistent combination of his defense of Freudian instinctualism with a more sociological account, it is not likely to be accomplished, as Lasch attempts, by simply repeating the illogical attack of the Frankfurt school on neo-Freudianism as an illegitimate attempt to introduce social concepts into Freud's theory. (Lasch 1978: 34-36)

Although Lasch has never been very clear about the methodological issues involved, the paradoxes that occur in his work are a logical result of his effort to develop a theory of narcissism which, in the nineteen forties, fifties and sixties, Marcuse and Adorno had already developed and then abandoned as a blind alley. We have also seen Marcuse asking for its replacement by a holistic account of industrial society; I would add to Marcuse's proposal that this account of industrial society should not flinch, as Marcuse's did not, from examining the dependence of individuals on that society and the psychology of how that dependence manifests itself.

This Marcusean direction, represented by *One Dimensional Man*, is certainly preferable to the development of a Laschian scare story about actual intervention by the state, represented by welfare

workers, etc., entering the homes and private lives of soon to be narcissistic children who would later on be examined by psychologists who, in turn, would conclude on the basis of studying the social in the individual that these people had narcissistic personality structures and belonged to a narcissistic society. Such a mythology leads Lasch to oscillate back and forth between an individualist analysis of narcissism, based on clinical data or the psyche of public figures (the latter always a dubious proposition anyway), and an analysis of narcissism based on general social currents. (Lasch 1978 : 35-38) But Lasch never tells us, for example, what the relation is between the individual psychological data, based on middle or upper class patients, and the sociological analysis, which extends far beyond that class. In contrast, both Marcuse and Adorno recognized that the theory of narcissism raised an obstacle for psychological analysis itself, a warning that Lasch did not take to heart.

Frankfurt school psychology oscillated between a vision of an individual whose character has been primarily formed by the family, and one whose character has been largely formed by the public institutions of mass industrial society. In the former case, the individual remains a fullfledged person, and the theorists of the Frankfurt school can use the method of studying the social in the individual without falling in to contradictions. In the latter case, individuality declines, narcissism ensues, and thus some of the Frankfurt school grounds for abjecting to the sociological psychology of people like Fromm are removed. The Frankfurt school notion of the social origins of the individual, when expanded from seeing those origins in the family, to seeing them in public society, leaves little room either for a fullfledged individual or for any relatively autonomous psychology for studying narcissism.

Frankfurt school psychology never does reveal the proper relation between social analysis and individual analysis. To accomplish this task one would have to go beyond Adornian paradox. This is not to deny that the paradoxes of Frankfurt school psychology are often extremely suggestive. Lasch's work, too, inherits some of this thematic power. For his work culminates in the essentially correct idea that narcissism, which entails increasing privatism, is made possible in part by the growing role of the state and other forms of public power. Unfortunately, Lasch vitiates the power of his theory by first, moving arbitrarily back and forth between psychological and social and political categories and, second, relying too heavily on the thesis of actual state intervention into the family in order to justify the tight fit that he

finds between the individual and society. Hence his vision of the totally administered society is much more extreme than that of the Frankfurt school and presents less even abstract possibilities for individuals to escape from society's norms. I will now show the connection between the methodological problems in the social psychology of narcissism, and the ethical critique of unjustified authority which dominated Frankfurt school psychology and Fromm's psychology and gets lost in Lasch.

Although I have argued that Lasch's account of narcissism in *The Culture of Narcissism* is seriously flawed, because of its exacerbation of methodological problems that beset the Frankfurt school in their attempt to create a social psychology, I have, nevertheless, treated it as basically continuing the theory of the Frankfurt school. However, already in *The Culture of Narcissism* there were other tendencies which came to fruition in *The Minimal Self* and which can only be regarded as reversing the anti-authoritarian aims of Frankfurt School psychology. Part of the problem, as it appeared in *The Culture of Narcissism*, was that Lasch took the themes of the decline of the individual and the family out of the context that they had when they worked to shed light on acceptance of fascist authority. It was, for example, in the interest of explaining the blind obedience to authority that the experience of fascism underlined as a permanent possibility in human beings, that Horkheimer developed his sociological analysis of the narcissistic personality. He argued that in a fatherless society, i. e., given the sociological assumptions of the day, a society where the family also declines because of the lessening of the father's significance, some sons will be less likely to resist fascist and consumerist manipulation and will decline in autonomy. Indeed Horkheimer may have anticipated Lasch's lament for even the older forms of authority associated with an earlier type of family. Still, when looked at in its total context Horkheimer's theory remained anti-authoritarian. (Benjamin 1977 : 54; Horkheimer 1949 : 333; Lasch 1978 : 154-186)

Certainly neither Horkheimer nor Marcuse, nor Adorno, ever assumed, as Lasch does in *The Culture of Narcissism* that their theory gave them a vantage point for criticizing allegedly neurotic anti-authoritarianism. (Lasch 1978 : 23 24) Indeed, there is a strange footnote in *The Minimal Self* in which Lasch even regrets the lack of attention paid to critiquing the superego and conservative and authoritarian Freudianism generally in *The Culture of Narcissism*. (Lasch 1984 : 286-287) However,

what is surprising is that even after making this autocritique Lasch goes on to new heights in *The Minimal Self* in eliminating the strong respect for liberty that was part and parcel of the Frankfurt school concept of narcissism.

*The Minimal Self* continues the naive intermingling of clinical data and sociological analysis that characterizes *The Culture of Narcissism's* assumption of a seamless web connecting society and the individual. The clinical data itself, however, is interpreted differently, and the cultural, sociological analysis has changed, indeed, has altered dramatically. The clinical data found in *The Minimal Self* is interpreted much more in the light of the basically post-Frankfurt school theory that narcissism is a resolution of the pre-oedipal dichotomy between remaining dependent on the mother and womb or becoming independent of them, in favor of the former. Furthermore, far from limiting his claims about the power of the concept of narcissism to help analyze both individual and society, Lasch now develops a new, more encompassing account of that relation. Claiming that the political analogue to psychological narcissism's refusal to allow separation is what he calls the party of Narcissus, Lasch now includes in this party those ecologists, peace activists, feminists, who, like their paradigm leader, Marcuse, want to extend the desire of the psychological narcissist to return to the womb and to a political perspective embracing liberation of repressed desires and empathy for what is natural. (Lasch 1984 : 234, 244-46)

That Lasch has now turned against even the Frankfurt school as represented by Marcuse is not surprising. For, first, the new interpretation of narcissism that he offers is incompatible with one aspect of the theory of narcissism common to Freud, Marcuse, Adorno and Fromm. For them the sociological nature of the theory of narcissism continually stretched the limits of psychological explanation. In that sense they were all revisionists and it is not surprising that Lasch castigates Marcuse for doubting the applicability of the Freudian concept of the human being in "The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of man". (Lasch 1984 : 233) As we saw, Marcuse's doubts were generated by his realization of the difficulty of deducing social currents from the individual narcissistic psyche. These difficulties, however, are vastly increased with Lasch's more ambitious project of proclaiming an affinity between contemporary American society and the general psychological narcissism of wanting to abolish differences between self and others; the difficulties are further

increased when not only the obviously unhealthy aspects of contemporary American society, but also such significant world wide movements as the peace, ecology and feminist movements are not only identified in central aspects with the retreat to the pathological state of wanting to abolish differences between oneself and others, but are said to represent Marcuse's narcissistic ideal.

It may seem surprising for Lasch to accuse Marcuse of presenting a narcissistic ideal when, as we have seen, Marcuse, as Lasch himself understood, was a bitter critic of narcissism. However, Lasch is right in finding such an ideal in Marcuse, but wrong in failing to show its exact relation to (1), the obviously unhealthy narcissism that Marcuse, Freud, Fromm, Lasch, Horkheimer and Adorno all criticise and to (2) the theory of narcissism as arising out of the pre-oedipal stage of wanting to abolish differences, which Lasch utilizes in *The Minimal Self*. It is true that Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* did present (3), a positive ideal of narcissism as a state in which we change our exploitative relation to nature. (Marcuse 1966 : 164) 9 This third notion of narcissism, however is clearly distinguished from (1) and certainly not explicitly based on (2). Furthermore, any argument that it is logically based on or entails (2) must proceed by naively identifying complex social and cultural movements such as ecology with the infantile inability or unwillingness to recognize the reality of the external world. By not being clear about these distinctions Lasch is able to slip from the fact that Marcuse praises narcissism to the idea that this praise involves both a childish inability to separate oneself from nature and the unhealthy narcissism of large but weak egos of which Marcuse was a bitter critic.

But Marcuse's positive ideal of narcissism has nothing to do with the notion of narcissism as involving large but weak egos discussed earlier. Nor is it clear that it has anything but superficial affinities, logical or otherwise, with the preoedipal theory of narcissism as wanting to abolish all differences between self and world. It certainly may have some theoretical connection with the peace, ecology and feminist movements, once both those movements and Marcuse's positive notion of a non-nature exploiting narcissism are separated from large but weak ego narcissism and inability to distinguish the real world narcissism, then Lasch's argument against Marcuse are seen to be mainly question begging.

There is a second reason why Lasch's critique of Marcuse in *The Minimal Self* is not surprising. For if the theory of narcissism as

large but weak egos is seen in the context of trying to understand why people, supposedly normal as well as abnormal, accept unjustified authority, then insofar as it moved toward the pessimistic notion of a totally manipulated society, one must pose the question whether liberation from such a society is possible. Even the most conservative aspect of Frankfurt school psychology, Horkheimer's view that one could often attain greater anti-authoritarianism by internalizing the authority of the father than by simply rejecting it, is still an example of a desire to sketch some obstacle to the totally administered society. There are, however, other obstacles to anything like a totally administered society which are presented by the original social theorists of narcissism, but Lasch is contemptuous of all of them, including Fromm's ideal of following rational ethical principles which avoid either submission or domination, and Marcuse's ideal of liberation from domination and exploitation of the world, an ideal which in the Frankfurt school, but not in Lasch, is strictly distinguished from the negative account of narcissism as involving large but weak egos. (Lasch 1984 ; 228, 23-234)<sub>1</sub>.

Horkheimer's principle of internalization of antiauthoritarianism, Fromm's liberal psychological ethics, Marcuse's utopia beyond the exacerbated conflict with nature that he finds in so much of human history, all cast doubt on the possibility of a totally administered society, a notion which suffers anyway from its grandiose pretensions of offering a one to one method of studying individual character and society. If society is completely manipulated, and if the individual fits cleanly into its seamless web, then how can one escape from it? Thus, the Frankfurt school doubts about utilizing the theory of narcissism as large but weak egos as a complete tool for studying both individual and society are natural, given their belief that some liberation is possible. All this goes to show that the two themes that I emphasized at the beginning, Frankfurt school anti-authoritarianism, & the methodological difficulties in the concept of narcissism, go together, just as there is a link between Lasch's naive acceptance of narcissism as showing the individual tied in a seamless web to society, and his general disinterest in the basic problematic of irrational acceptance of authority in Frankfurt school psychology.



## Notes and References

1. For Adorno's empirical work in the United States see Adorno et. al. 1950 and Jay 1973 : 219-252.
2. Fromm's essays from the Frankfurt school journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, are republished in Fromm 1971.
3. According to David Held (1980: 114) this essay was originally written in 1946.
4. The absolute incompatibility between Frankfurt school psychology and the later work of Fromm thus must be challenged. The acerbic debate between Fromm and Marcuse created this myth, Russell Jacoby solidified it in *Social Amnesia*, and it became absolute dogma with Lasch. (Fromm 1971 : 25-31 ; Marcuse 1966 : 238-274; Jacoby 1975 : 13-14; Lasch 1978: 31-32) However, some of the analysis in Jacoby's recent book on Otto Fenichel would seem to imply a less rigid opposition between Fromm and the Frankfurt School. (Jacoby 1983)
5. The reference to Freud's book is to *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.
6. For the totally administered society see Marcuse 1963 : 50.
7. For the German discussion of radical psychology see Bopp 1979 and Mayer 1984.
8. Lasch 1984 : 166-170. Lasch also jumbled the pre-Oedipal theory and the Frankfurt theory of narcissism in *The Culture of Narcissism*. (Lasch 1978 : 36-40) However, the pre-Oedipal is not emphasized nearly as much in that book as in *The Minimal Self*. Hence Lasch's failure to be clear about the logical connection between the two theories is more troubling in the later book than in the earlier one.
9. For a discussion of Lasch and the Marcuse of *Eros and Civilization*, see Alford 1985.
10. See Fromm 1965 : 186-190. Although Fromm is not formally included in the section on the party of the ego (205-233), the pages on "Psychoanalysis and the Liberal Tradition of Moral Optimism," (208-211), combined with Lasch's reference to neo-Freudians and Fromm as clinging to a "humanitarian, reformist 'prophylactic' interpretation of the psychoanalytic mission," (236) clearly show that Lasch means to put him there.

Associate Professor,  
Department of Philosophy,  
Kent State University