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A Look at Christopher Lasch's Look at America

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THE CENTER MAGAZINE

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In his recent commencement address at Harvard University, former Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance warned that the next ten years will be perilous for our nation. Because the difficulties will be deeply felt by the people, they may be receptive to policies that tell them what they want to hear. Among these, Mr. Vance said, is the "pervasive fallacy that America could have the power to order the world just the way we want it to be." He called this a "dangerous new nostalgia that leads to simplistic solutions and go-it-alone illusions." He also urged resistance to temptations to go for policy decisions that involve "quick fixes, new gimmicks, bluffs, or threats." The alternative, according to Mr. Vance, is policy based on a thorough understanding of a world in process of change.

The former Secretary's remarks came at precisely the right moment for those of us at the Center. We have had moving dialogue sessions on the continuing impact of the Vietnam war, particularly from the veterans' point of view. A film crew from French national television was here to film a Center dialogue on the future of cities. That will be part of a documentary that will appear on European television in the fall. We have had other dialogues on the rights of criminal suspects, on the correcting of Mexican-American history, and on the Carter Administration's record on human rights.

All of these are complex public issues. The Center respects their complexity. It continues to sharpen its role as critical analyst of political and social problems.

We know we must continue to work with great vigor, imagination, critical intensity, and constructive, creative energy. It does seem that the alternatives to "simplistic solutions" and the "dangerous new nostalgia" for "go-it-alone illusions" are understated and only weakly understood in many quarters today. To identify those alternatives, and to express them with candor and conviction, is one of our purposes at the Center.

—WALTER H. CAPPS
Director

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Is there a "national mood" in America? If so, what is it? Are national moods discernible? How can one speak of them with authority? In particular, how authentic is historian Christopher Lasch's most recent book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, in identifying what he calls the "contemporary climate," contemporary American awareness and sensibility?



Participants in a recent Center dialogue addressed these questions. Excerpts from their observations, and excerpts from the opening chapter of Mr. Lasch's book, which was circulated before the discussion, follow.

A Look at Christopher Lasch's Look at America

Walter H. Capps

*Director, The Robert Maynard Hutchins Center
for the Study of Democratic Institutions
Professor of Religious Studies
University of California at Santa Barbara*

Methodologically, Christopher Lasch's study belongs to a series of sketches of how American senses of ambition and self-identity are changing. The series goes back to at least the mid-nineteen-sixties. Such analyses approach social and cultural change by invoking psychological and/or psychoanalytical categories. The assumption seems to be that occurrences that can be discerned within the personality provide the best insight into what is happening in the more extensive historical, cultural, and social world. Lasch uses the

imagery of narcissism, a phenomenon Sigmund Freud defined as "the libidinal complement of egoism." Some years ago, Robert J. Lifton used a different figure from Greek mythology—Proteus. Lifton described contemporary man as someone with a fluid, flexible sense of self-identity, the protean style being a self-process, endless in its experiments and explorations.

Now, the desire to identify the sense of the age is hardly ever without presuppositions. What Lasch, Lifton, Kenneth Keniston, Theodore Roszak, Philip Slater, Richard Sennett, David Riesman, Norman O. Brown, Erik Erikson, and many others have given us are not simply analyses of the contemporary scene. More frequently, they are moral, political, even theological, affirmations expressed in the language of

From *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch

“As the twentieth century approaches its end, the conviction grows that many other things are ending too. Storm warnings, portents, hints of catastrophe haunt our times.”

“After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to ‘relate,’ overcoming the ‘fear of pleasure.’”

“To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future.”

“Having surrendered most of his technical skills to the corporation, [the contemporary American] can no longer provide for his material needs. As the family loses not only its productive functions but many of its reproductive functions as well, men and women no longer manage even to raise their children without the help of certified experts. The atrophy of older traditions of self-help has eroded everyday competence, in one area after another, and has made the individual dependent on the state, the corporation, and other bureaucracies.”

“Narcissism represents the psychological dimension of this dependence. Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without an admiring audience.”

“Today Americans are overcome not by the sense of endless possibility but by the banality of the social order they have erected against it. Having internalized the social restraints by means of which they formerly sought to keep possibility within civilized limits, they feel themselves overwhelmed by an annihilating boredom, like animals whose instincts have withered in captivity.”

“The struggle to maintain psychic equilibrium in a society that demands submission to the rules of social intercourse but refuses to ground those rules in a code of moral conduct encourages a form of self-absorption that has little in common with the primary narcissism of the imperial self.”

“Plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness, the ‘psychological man’ of the twentieth century seeks neither individual self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence but peace of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it.”

“As long as political movements exercise a fatal attraction for those who seek to drown the sense of personal failure in collective action—as if collective action somehow precluded rigorous attention to the quality of personal life—political movements will have little to say about the personal dimension of social crisis.”

“The mass media, with their cult of celebrity and their attempt to surround it with glamour and excitement, have made Americans a nation of fans, moviegoers. The media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the ‘herd,’ and make it more and more difficult for him to accept the banality of everyday existence.”

present-day sociocultural analysis. Indeed, analysis of the contemporary scene has become one of the most dominant conceptual and symbolic modes for registering one's convictions about what is most fundamentally important.

Lasch's book, Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man*, Morris Dickstein's *Gates of Eden*, Theodore Roszak's *Person/Planet*, and similar books not only express their authors' convictions about the way things ought to be, they also focus on something much more specific, with reference to which the writers then offer their own contentions. In each case, the issue is the relationship between individual and corporate reality.

Lasch does not claim to have identified the characteristics of the national mood at any particular point in time. He has simply pointed out correlations between models of personality formation and current sociocultural conditions. He contends that during times when societies are uncertain, particularly after they have suffered grave disappointment, it is to be expected that individuals will suspend social or group ambitions, at least temporarily, and will pursue more individualistic interests. "Narcissism" is not a necessary description of that pursuit. It is Christopher Lasch's reading of the situation which allows him to register his own moral convictions about what constitutes responsible personhood. One man's narcissism may be another man's spirituality. The same is true of the analyses of other writers. They are moral and religious statements, couched in the language of current events, just as the ancient theodicies were cast in the language of theology.



Donald Evans

*Professor of Religious Studies
University of Toronto*

Most of us would probably agree that, compared with the middle or late nineteen-sixties, there has been on the part of many Americans a retreat from politics, a decreasing sense of interest in the common good, a greater preoccupation with their own intrapersonal and interpersonal lives. Assuming that this is a trend that Christopher Lasch is describing, is narcissism the appropri-

ate term for it? I do not think it is.

A second question: If it is a trend, is it a significant one? Is it one we want to draw attention to, explore, and then either deplore or applaud, depending on our views? Or are there other trends of greater significance?

Narcissism is the inability and/or unwillingness to enter into genuinely reciprocal relations with one's environment, particularly the social environment. Narcissism has two main characteristics. One of them is a special preoccupation with whether one has more or less status or power than other human beings. Second, there is a vacillation between the two extremes of self-inflation and self-deflation. On the one hand, there is an image or a fantasy of oneself as self-sufficient, as the center of the universe, as in control of everything. The self-deflating image is the reverse of that. One feels totally dependent, one must find all one's resources outside oneself, one is powerless, on the periphery. There is alternation between these two images, and each plays on the other.

There are many different forms of self-inflation. Some are quite compatible with a high degree of social activism and social involvement. There is a self-sufficient altruism in which one is concerned to help other human beings—as a member of the helping professions, or in some form of social activism—in such a way that they are not in a position to be able to help one. There is a great deal of self-sufficient altruism in North American culture; and a great deal of social activism has come out of it. At a deep level, that is merely one way to deal with the problem of narcissism.

There are other ways. There is a kind of tunnel vision in narcissism, in which one sees one's own project—it may be a group project—as the sole matter of concern and importance in the universe. It may be a very worthwhile project, but as one looks ahead at it, one sees it through a tunnel of mirrors, and so one always thinks of it as "my" project or "our" project.

I could describe many further species of self-inflation. One must always remember that a hidden self-deflation is the main source of the need for extreme self-inflation.

In brief, narcissism is a most inappropriate term to describe what Lasch is talking about. Perhaps "petty individualism" would be a more appropriate term.

Is the issue which confronts us in Lasch's book—i.e., withdrawal from political engagement and a reduction in one's sense of the common good—the most important issue or trend? I myself am very reticent about making pronouncements about important trends, in the context that Lasch is talking about. I think that rather than this being a time in which people are unduly

concerned with their own private development, there is a kind of panicky rigidity in society. That is, individuals who are trying to "improve themselves psychically" are coming under very heavy fire from people like Christopher Lasch. Actually, I am far more alarmed by what I see as an increasing tendency to control spontaneous developments. One example: at the University of Toronto there is now a trend away from the emphasis on elective courses. Students are coming under a rather regimented regime. They are being compelled to take this, that, and the other subject. And many other petty regulations are coming in as well.

I see trends in our society of the kind which Wilhelm Reich was deploring in the early nineteen-thirties in Germany. There is a sense now that other people should not be "having it so good," and that if people are trying to improve themselves psychically, spiritually, or any other way, it is something to be deplored. That kind of criticism seems to come from people who, because they sense that their own lives are narrow and constricted, ask, why should other people be able to "improve their lives" and fulfill themselves?



W. Richard Comstock

*Chairman and Professor, Department of Religious Studies
University of California at Santa Barbara*

Lasch is obviously committed to the idea of moving toward a better future, the myth of progress. Good people work in time to make the world better, and it certainly will get better tomorrow, or the day after. He seems to feel that any rejection of this tradition is an obvious moral failure of nerve; so he lumps together all stances that are in any way ahistorical and sees them as simply one.

For example, there is the hedonism of the moment. But there is also a humanist commitment to the now that says, we don't know about the future, we are not going to work for a utopia for tomorrow. Instead, we will try to better the human moments in the present. In Lasch, both of these statements sound like the same thing. In Christian theology, there is a Christian realism that says there is no future millennium in time toward which we

are moving; still the Christian is to live in the moment, avail himself of the grace of God, and try to make human this moment in the midst of darkness. Even as supposedly pessimistic a thinker as Jacques Ellul talks that way. I was surprised at Lasch's unwillingness to see any distinction between this kind of Christian realism and a hedonism of the moment. He thinks both represent a failure of moral nerve.

The myth of progress is not dead, but a judicious account of our situation must appreciate that some of these ahistorical positions are not narcissistic failures, but have their own integrity.



Richard Flacks

*Chairman and Professor, Department of Sociology
University of California at Santa Barbara*

Given the surfeit of trends that we are constantly reading about, one has to question whether the strategy of looking for trends is anything more than a journalistic enterprise, rather than a method of getting at an understanding of social reality at a deep level. Whenever I am exposed to discussion about trends, I ask, what is the counter-trend that is surely undermining this trend? The same kind of analysis used by Lasch and in the more popular journalistic accounts could identify a trend in the nineteen-seventies which shows a widening participation in the public sphere, more concern for the common good than was true in the nineteen-sixties.

Trends are constructed by people who are in the business of constructing trends for various reasons. One of the most important problems with trends is that they are intended to be self-fulfilling prophecies. The announcement of a trend furthers the trend, whereas the failure to announce a trend tends to undermine the development of some other social development or process. As a social scientist, I have to get away from that style of thinking. I am more interested in understanding social reality in the fullest sense than simply trying to identify what appear to be unidimensional developments.

Now, with respect to the person, the same kind of comment can be made. There is good reason for questioning personality types like narcissism. The very descriptions of narcissism probably lead all of us to think-

ing, well, I have some of those same tendencies. And, indeed, they *are* abstracted out of a general picture of human traits and motives. Those can be elicited or called out, either by actual social circumstances or from a particular vantage point of observation. So, not only at the level of society and social process, but also at the level of individual action, one might question any effort to impose a specific line of development or set of propensities as an explanation of human behavior.

Finally, what is missing from Lasch to an astonishing degree is any direct observation of anything. At least David Riesman talked to people before he wrote *The Lonely Crowd*. At least Erik Erikson had patients in a therapeutic relationship before he wrote his books; and so did Kenneth Keniston. But we are now at the stage where people feel absolutely free to generate their notions of what is going on in society without actually talking to anyone. I know that Lasch talks to people, but probably fewer people than many other writers talk to.

My own preference is to try to identify what is going on by getting at the way that people actually live. We know very little about the daily life of Americans, about how they really live, what they are experiencing. That is more interesting to read about and to talk to people about than trying to identify large-scale trends. I am not arguing for a completely descriptive account. I have some definite ideas myself about "what is going on." But I prefer to think about "what is going on," not as a single set of trends, but as a whole set of diverse, contradictory experiences that people are having both in themselves and with other people. Those have to be captured more "globally," I think.



Leonard Marsak

*Professor of History
University of California at Santa Barbara*

The world of passion often, if not always, informs the scientist. We are told that that was true of Isaac Newton. We know it was true of Auguste Comte. Conventional wisdom insists that the subjective element enters even into the most abstract, hard-core sciences, at least in the process of scientific discovery. So, I would have assumed we all understood that Christopher Lasch has a definite point of view, which is that of someone at-

tached to history and historical consciousness. How little historical consciousness there is among the young! And what an effort it is to raise that consciousness when you get them in the history class! I take this to be a signal feature in Lasch's presentation: he is worried about the diminution of historical consciousness, and what that signifies.

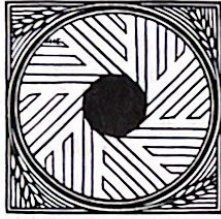
Call it narcissism, or not, as you like. Whatever it is, the signs are clear. The movement away from historical consciousness has governed modern consciousness for the last two or three centuries. We are being told by everyone and his brother that we are moving into a post-modern and post-industrial society, so we should not be surprised when we see a departure from the historical attitude.

Now, how does one describe trends? There is an old and respectable term used by historians for that: it is called "climate of opinion." Lasch is trying to do for our time what historians try to do for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when they define and describe the Age of Enlightenment, and the Age of Reason. That is a perfectly legitimate enterprise.

That Lasch has not talked to a number of people may be the criticism of a sociologist, but certainly not of a historian, because, of course, the historian does not have anyone to talk to, unless he is doing contemporary history. And that does, of course, present its own special problems.

But Lasch exemplifies to a high degree the way that the historian operates in attempting to delineate any climate of opinion. He has a collection of documents, which are reports of what people say. He has to figure out as clearly as he can what these documents actually say, not what he supposes they are saying. Then something which is even more important, he has to read between the lines and discern those assumptions of writers that are so much taken for granted they feel it is not necessary to spell them out. Having dealt with those assumptions, the historian is now concerned with their implications and with the relevance of the dialogue, which, normally, is between past and present, but in Lasch's case, is between Lasch and his contemporaries.

Of course, there are limitations to this method. There are in any method. But that is the legitimate method; indeed, it is the only method open to the historian. The English philosopher of history, R.G. Collingwood, has insisted on this three-way approach. That there is less than perfection as a result should not surprise us. But it seems to me that if one has followed that method one has done a remarkable job in contemporary history, a kind of history which is always beset by greater dangers than is a history of some earlier period.



Paul Bohannan

*Professor of Anthropology
University of California at Santa Barbara*

The questions we are asking are all very shallow in their time dimensions. By shallow, I mean they go back only four or five hundred years. In taking such short views, we can't really see what is happening. A much longer point of view would allow us to see that there is a new form of community emerging in this land. I very much agree with Richard Flacks' point that we really do not know anything about what goes on in American households and businesses today. We may be evolving a new set of basic social structures. And the narcissism, the concern with single-issue politics, the whole therapy movement, all those things are an attempt to understand this new form of community. The phenomenon is analogous to the way the peasant community was formed centuries ago when the band of hunting peoples became an unstable social form.



David Gold

*Professor of Sociology
University of California at Santa Barbara*

The nature of Lasch's historical work is illustrated by the comment, what I say may not be true, but at least it is important. And the nature of social science research is illustrated by the comment, what I say may not be important, but at least it is true.

I think that Christopher Lasch is saying something very important, but I do not think we can make judgments about it in terms of its truth value. Lasch's method is selective illustration. That is an extremely seductive method with respect to criticism, and we fall into this trap when we tend to respond in terms of

selective illustration. Lasch's work is a significant piece of heuristic commentary, and it can indeed be used to specify systematic social science research. The question, why would we want to do this, or not, is another matter. But it could be done. Lasch's book is filled with fascinating hypotheses about the nature of contemporary American society, all of which can be pursued in terms of some systematic and rigorous social science research.

There is another methodological assumption that is involved in his work, and, again, we have fallen into a trap in attempting to comment on it. We talk about a narcissistic society. The assumption is that somehow it is reasonable to characterize a complex, highly segmented society as a homogenous whole. It may be perfectly reasonable to characterize a particular segment of society in one fashion, and other segments of society in other fashions. I have the uncomfortable feeling that what is involved in Lasch's work is the upper-middle-class intellectual segment of our society. But as soon as you start taking into account social stratification and the relationship that this has to various patterns of behavior, then it becomes very difficult to talk about all of society as a homogeneous whole.



Daniel Peck

*Associate Professor of English
University of California at Santa Barbara*

The portions of Lasch's book which I have read as they have appeared in journals and reviews have repeatedly struck me as brilliant. I cherish his call for a restoration of historical consciousness, for a restored sense of what went before, and what should come after. The criticism that Lasch is discerning trends without direct observation is somewhat misplaced. As Leonard Marsak says, any methodology, even in the hard sciences, is filled with the bias of its discipline.

Books like Lasch's are valuable. They help us to mark our moment, if only momentarily. Thus they are genuinely therapeutic; they tell us that our responses to a given historical situation are not merely our own. That is why some of us welcome them. A work of this kind resembles the work of Paul Goodman or Edmund Wilson, men of letters who ranged over American society

with a general intelligence, rather than with the methodology of a particular discipline.

There is a huge advantage in permitting such responses to come. They help us to escape the bias of the specialist. And if they are eccentric at points, even misdirected, and perhaps not fully "scientific," books such as Lasch's play a vital role in helping us to identify our moment.



Herbert Fingarette

*Professor of Philosophy
University of California at Santa Barbara*

What is truth? That makes me think about an ancient Chinese tradition. In pre-Han times, it was essential, when engaging in any kind of political or moral discussion, criticism, debate, or argument, to set it in a traditional context, and particularly to find the basis for the discussion in traditional texts, those taken from an earlier time. One quoted the historical narrative that could be interpreted to support the moral, religious, or political point of view that one had. The trouble was that the text did not always provide adequate support, and so, scholars would write additional texts in the same format. But since the texts had already been written for the period, let us say, from 400 B.C. to 350 B.C., you had to pre-date your text and make it 500 B.C. Then after 500 B.C. was taken up, and someone had to write a text in the historical form, it was a text purportedly from 600 B.C.

So you have a large traditional literature going way back in Chinese thought. From my standpoint it is all fake, but it is terribly important. It was the center of intellectual discussion there.

The point that I am getting at is that in this complicated kind of moral, political, and religious discussion, people were intellectually and ideologically concerned that the historical format be the medium within which to conduct those discussions. It had to be presented as history.

Most Westerners, when they look at this, are amused and puzzled. How could serious scholars have been writing these fake texts and putting fake dates on them? The moral is that we are doing something quite similar to what the Chinese were doing, but we are so familiar

with it that we do not realize it. People who are writing in this way are writing for a culture which for a long time has been intellectually preoccupied with the notion that one writes in order to analyze causal processes. Science means causality; causality means something happened and that caused something else to happen, and then something else will happen next as a result of that. Therefore, there is a tendency today both to write and to read any commentary on the social or personal situation as if it were a causal analysis. Then one finds, as a number of people have pointed out here, that it just won't do as causal analysis, because people have not been interviewed, statistics have not been gathered, and so on.

I think I share some of the skepticism expressed by David Gold. Actually, so far, the attempt to do causal analysis of social processes, and even psychological ones, whenever big issues have come up, has failed. As a realist, then, one has to say, we don't know how to do causal analysis in the important cases. Whatever the ideas and whatever the possibilities, it is just not doable, whether by sociologists, by economists, or anybody else. No one has been able to predict the really big events and changes.

So, I think we are confused if we think of the kind of literature represented by Lasch's book as causal analysis. It is rather some complicated form of moral, religious, and psychological argument and persuasion. It is an expression of ideals, as Richard Comstock said. It is a conception of what the world might be; and then it is a selective picking out of certain things in the world. It is not that such writing has no contact with reality. Far from it. But it is not a causal analysis.



Joseph J. Schwab

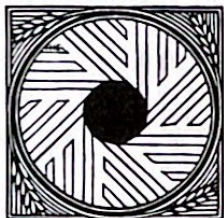
Center Associate

The so-called subjectivity of the scientist is usually directed at a selection of data among possible candidates. Once the data are selected, the subjectivity certainly directs or affects the interpretation of the data, where flexibility of interpretation is possible.

But there is another step to which "subjectivity" can go, and which can only be called cheating. That con-

sists of asserting as a declarative sentence what could not possibly be so justified. I will cite just one in Lasch's book. It is on page 5, where he writes: "Woody Allen's movie, *Sleeper*, issued in 1973"—notice that belabored claim for accuracy and specificity—"accurately caught the mood of the seventies." Now, you cannot say that something accurately caught the mood of the seventies, unless you know the mood of the seventies. What evidence could he have? What evidence does he cite?

What we have here is what was once referred to as pop psychology and pop sociology. The stuff written by newspaper columnists is now being written by academics. Then some of us read it and respond to it in much the same way that we respond to didactic novels. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* fooled an awful lot of people into thinking that D. H. Lawrence knew something about sex. These people discovered, to their discouragement, that they were wrong in so thinking.



Michael Crandell

Project Coordinator, The Robert Maynard Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions
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I think Lasch is writing to express his great anxiety about massive social change. Analogies often obfuscate more than they clarify, but his book reminds me of one that was written in the late fifteenth century, called *Ship of Fools*. That was written by a man whose metaphor of Europe was that of a big ship. He asked, where are we headed? Who is navigating for us? Who is steering? It attempted to interpret social change in terms of psychological development, habit, and personality. The writer thought that Europe was a ship of fools, when what he was seeing were the first changes that issued eventually in the Reformation. Entire chapters, beautifully illustrated with woodcuts, castigate acedia, drunkenness, gluttony, pride. That writer was defending his medieval world. He was trying to avert what he saw as its disintegration, the dissolution of its last vestiges.

Now, there is no way to judge whether or not something similar is happening with Lasch's book. I do not think that a book like this does much to avert whatever

massive social changes may be taking place. But his book may turn out in another fifty years—or five hundred years—to be a wonderful record of someone's anxiety about change in our age.



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Lasch, of course, has responded to criticism of his book. His latest response appears in his journal *Salmagundi*. He does several things there. First, he explicitly disavows that his book should be taken as being in the genre of trend analysis. He was very much opposed, when the new paperback edition of his book appeared, to people linking him and it with Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*, Charles Reich's *Greening of America*, Nancy Friday's *My Mother, My Self*.

I am surprised that we have not addressed what I think is the methodology of his work, which is his attempt at causal explanation, right or wrong. He does get into Marxist-Freudian analysis. He claims that narcissism is the result of the extremes of capitalism, and that this is not a contradiction in capitalism; rather, it is the mode of its expression in the contemporary world. Lasch thinks that we are suffering the consequences of that. He calls for abandoning that trend and returning to some kind of pre-industrial state. He does have an argument in the last part of the book which many people do not focus on. He is talking about a return to eighteenth-century liberalism, which he thinks will be manifest in a kind of socialist state.

So, Lasch is not simply attempting to focus on a selected number of things such as family, modern sports, and higher education, and then pointing out some of the narcissistic qualities that can be discerned in those areas. Rather, he is suggesting that all of these are, in fact, reflections of a common cause, the further extensions of the bureaucratic mechanisms of capitalism, permeating various aspects of our life.

In one sense, Lasch is painting a gloomy, pessimistic future. But then he brings it all back by asking whether or not we need to take another look at the very roots of our democratic experiment. □