THE EMERGENCE OF NARCISSISM IN AMERICAN CULTURE: THE LAMENTATIONS OF CHRISTOPHER LASCH IN THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM

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Introduction

Lamenting the loss of resolve and the diminishing confidence found in contemporary American life in the aftermath of the 1960's, Christopher Lasch unleashed strong criticism of American culture and the self-preoccupation, loss of individualism, and the growing therapeutic climate he observed. Lasch, along with other critics, such as Tom Wolfe and Jim Hougan, identified this self-serving tendency that was rapidly permeating society as "'collective narcissism.'"[1] In *The Culture of Narcissism* Lasch persuasively pointed to loss of family authority and traditional skills, reliance on others to guide and manage family life, and the changing roles of women as contributors to and outcomes of the "malaise" that gripped Americans.[2]

The debate over Lasch's assertions has persisted, especially among liberals, over the decades since the publishing of his book in 1979 and has remained alive well beyond his death in early 1994. Intellectuals, social critics, and historians have commended and condemned his role as a social critic, criticized his notions, and applauded his efforts to explain the problems of a declining American culture. Many felt he took a bold stance and praised his refusal to succumb to the indignant left with their wounded pride and insulted self-righteousness.[3] Others accused him of nostalgia for an imagined "heroic strength of character" in his

description of nineteenth century bourgeois patriarchy.[4] And some feminists expressed concern that Lasch possessed a masculine viewpoint, avoided the oppression women had experienced in the patriarchal family structure, and supported a return to the domination of men over women.[5]

This paper will describe Christopher Lasch's assertions regarding the loss of family authority, the rise of therapeutic controls in relation to the family, and the role of feminism and its connection to the decline of the family as well as the debates surrounding Lasch's role as a social critic. Discussion of Lasch's viewpoints will also include critique and debates found among historians that will demonstrate the insight and validity of Lasch's notions and that will also expose some of the problems found with clarity and interpretation that created much controversy. Despite the differences in interpretation that left *The Culture of Narcissism* wide open for criticism, Lasch successfully illustrated what he observed as a declining society and the many ways that this decline was evident. Lasch's warning to and chastising of the American public is clear and as will be shown, his criticisms and concerns were valid and relevant notwithstanding the variety of interpretations; his main premise of a society deteriorating into destructive narcissism.

Narcissism Defined

Lasch explained that Americans had become "pessimistic" and had lost confidence as a result of the loss of the Vietnam War, the slowed economic situation, and fear of depletion of natural resources as well as being generally fatigued after the tribulation of the sixties and that this pessimism brought forth a loss of resilience and creativity to confront problems of contemporary life.[6] Lasch defined "narcissism" as the "psychological dimension" of reliance on experts resulting from

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[1]Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979; Norton, 1991), 6.

[2]Ibid., 10.

[3]Robert Erwin, "The Critic of Progress," *Massachusetts Review* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 291.

[4] Fred Siegel, "The Agony of Christopher Lasch" in *Reviews in American History,* 8 no.3 (Sept. 1980): 285.

[5]Michele Barrett & Mary McIntosh, "Narcissism and the Family: a Critique of Lasch," *The New Left Review* no.135 (Sept.-Oct. 1982): 43.

[6] Lasch, *Narcissism*, xiii.

the loss of "productive" and "reproductive functions" of the family.[7] By "productive functions," Lasch was referring to skills required to meet material needs and "reproductive functions" to having and raising children.[8] Confidence in leadership had waned and with the lack of solutions to the nation's problems, the American public had lost the resolve to overcome this pessimistic outlook.[9]

Narcissism presented as a way to overcome the "repressive conditions of the past," to forget the past, and as a means to find some level of happiness in a hopeless world, according to Lasch.[10] Americans resorted to self-centered preoccupations with an emphasis on "psychic self-awareness," recoiled from political involvement and concern for social issues, immersed themselves in material consumption, and divorced themselves from the sense of belonging to the past and the future instead, "living for the moment."[11] Lasch provided radicalism as a more extreme example of narcissism that, for some, was a means to fill emptiness, provide a sense of importance, and to feel significant by being associated with others deemed of some magnitude. Despite the outward appearance of social concern and political interest, Lasch contended that radicals, too, were mired in self-centeredness and the need for validation by their group leaders.[12] Lasch described the longings of Susan Stern, of the radical group the Weathermen as an example of narcissism in radical attire.

Early in his book, Lasch elaborated on narcissism from a clinical perspective and used descriptions found typically in the arenas of psychology and sociology to describe this phenomenon. He suggested that in order to fully comprehend narcissism as a "social and cultural phenomenon" it was necessary to look at the expanding corpus of writing that

addressed it.[13] In *The Culture of Narcissism* Lasch offered detail regarding clinical narcissism found in contemporary clinical literature and studies, and imparted a description of Freud's work and research into human personality and behavior. However, for the purposes of this paper, the discussion will center on the disintegration of family life, the therapeutic climate, and the changing relationships and roles between and of men and women, as well as Lasch's role as an historian cum social critic.

Family Authority and Its Demise

Lasch explained that having and caring for children was historically a function of the family who provided the training needed to live independently in the world and that this function had slowly eroded in contemporary America. This training included basic and essential skills; work, domestic duties, manners and morals, and sex education.[14] Children's lives were conducted in close proximity to adults where valuable guidance and modeling of work behaviors and social skills would aid in their maturing into productive citizens. Strong parent-child relationships helped to provide a firm foundation from which children would grow and develop.[15]

The problem of family authority developed, according to Lasch, with the advent of industrialization and its subsequent "invasion" of family life.[16] The factory system took work out of the sight of children, thus separating them from the adult world and the instruction they had previously received from parents. The "deterioration of child care" (or "transfer of functions" as Lasch chided using a sociological term that he considered "jargon") occurred as the primary care of children left the home and was taken over by assorted institutions.[17]

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[7]Ibid., 10.
[8]Ibid.
[9]Ibid., xiii.
[10]Ibid., xv.
[11]Ibid., 12, 5.
[12]Ibid., 7.

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[13]Ibid., 35.
[14]Ibid., 154.
[15]Ibid., 169.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Ibid., 169.

As the rearing of children left the home, other agencies, such as schools, assumed roles previously held by parents and other family members and with the loss of traditional parental roles, parents found themselves uneasy about their ability to skillfully raise their own children.[18] Out of this came the "helping professions"; experts who advertised themselves as essential to the well-being of the family and inferring that families were incapable of taking care of themselves.[19]

Convinced by these experts that they had fallen short of the "ideal of perfect parenthood," parents grew increasingly dependent on the expanding social service industry.[20] Lasch saw this as a catalyst in the deteriorating parent-child connection already being experienced in families from industrialization coupled with the narcissistic tendencies that were emerging. Gone was the confident mother who possessed skills passed down through the generations, who understood her children and had strong emotional bonds with them, and who displayed fearless belief in her own judgment.[21] She now wallowed anxiously in ever-changing advice from child development specialists and pediatricians and teachers giving up her own authority and passing it off to others.

Aiding in the deterioration of family authority, fathers became enmeshed in the corporate world, striving for wealth and comfort, selling themselves to achieve material success, and assuming an image of social and corporate savvy.[22] They, too, relied on the experts and designers of programs to find success becoming more dependent on agencies outside the family for a sense of competence and importance thereby relinquishing their authority in the family and the family's loss of individualism, influence, and indeed, accountability.[23]

Deprived of the fathers influence and smothered by insecure yet increasingly distant mothers, children were unable to develop psychologically and, Lasch says, what occurred was "the development of a harsh and punitive superego based largely on archaic images of the parents, fused with grandiose self-images."[24] This set up children to enter adulthood in an already ailing society with, as Lasch credited Henry and Yela Lowenfeld for describing, "'restlessness, discontent, depressive moods, craving for substitute satisfaction.'"[25]

Thus, the family of the nineteenth century, with its independence, individualism, and strength of character, slowly disintegrated as the socialization of children left the authority of the home and was scattered amongst experts and agencies that assumed control of all aspects of the children's lives. That which remained under the auspices of the mother was coerced by experts, science and technology, leaving the floundering and confused mother doting on her children, while at the same time preoccupied with her own performance and how it appeared to others.[26]

The Rise of the Therapeutic Climate

As the authority of the family wasted away, Lasch observed and described the emerging power of a new industry that supplanted the lost functions previously contained inside of nineteenth century family structure; the social service industry. Parents now either willingly relegated or were forced to give up their roles as primary caregivers and decision makers for their children. Schools, child advocacy organizations, the juvenile court system, and agencies providing parent education became the regulators of all aspects of child welfare with parents becoming subordinates.[27]

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[18]Ibid., 154-155.
[19]Ibid., 155.
[20]Ibid., 169-170.
[21]Ibid., 170.
[22]Ibid., 58-59.
[23]Ibid., 167.

[24]Ibid., 178.
[25]Ibid., 179.
[26]Ibid., 154.
[27]Ibid., 156.

Especially vulnerable to social service agencies were working class and immigrant families as it was assumed by many of these agencies that the family structure was quite limited in its ability to promote "sociability and cooperation" and that outside interference was essential in order to preserve the integrity of the family.[28] Lasch asserted that there was the assumption among experts that poor immigrant families "exploited" their children, if given the opportunity, to escape poverty by sending them to work to help provide for the family.[29] In the guise of advocacy, child welfare agencies used their systems to "Americanize" or "civilize" these families and impose their agendas upon these unwitting newcomers.[30] Child labor laws were proposed to protect these children but in addition to this advocates called for the schools to assume custody of these alleged at-risk children.[31]

Lasch charged many of these obtrusive systems with actually creating the needs they supposed to relieve by playing on fears, creating "jargon," and mocking self-help.[32] Already ripe for accepting these notions, parents, especially mothers, sought out the experts for either their own narcissistic compulsions or in an attempt to blend in with the pervasive American trend toward submission to the latest fad in child rearing.[33]

So strong was the prevailing belief by many in social service agencies that parents would somehow inadvertently hurt their children, child advocates pushed for addressing children's mental health concerns to the schools as this was a more accessible arena to reach children as opposed to their homes. The juvenile court system was another example Lasch offered that was also used as a means to replicate what was believed parents should be providing for children who were in trouble or at risk of being in trouble.[34] Lasch believed that this system in particular was a good example of how "altruism," or the state as therapist, had usurped family functions.[35]

The power of social services meant to preserve the family ultimately served to diminish its authority, in Lasch's view, and by this helped to reinforce the growing narcissism seen in American life. In its wake was left weakness, insecurity, and anxiety among parents that promoted reliance and dependence upon others for basic family functions and was where individualism and the parent-child relationship suffered its demise.

Feminism and Its Impact

Lasch found in his observations that not only had the parent-child relationship suffered in contemporary American life but that the relationship between men and women had begun to "crumble" as women began to assert independence from their domestic roles and as they had begun to detach from maternal inclinations.[36] Changes in the functions of the family indeed had lead to the "marriage contract having lost its binding character."[37] Managerial style controls imposed by bureaucracy coupled with the removal of the familial model freed women from "many of its former constraints" and created tensions in the form of troublesome reactions and responses by men.[38] Women were no longer content to live under the protective subordination of men with both its benefits and outrages and "rejected their confining position on the pedestal of masculine adoration, and demanded the demystification of female sexuality."[39] Lasch suggested that with this change, men, no longer in a position of dominance and chivalry, responded with

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[28]Ibid.
[29]Ibid., 155.
[30]Ibid., 160.
[31]Ibid., 155.
[32]Ibid., 228.
[33]Ibid., 161.

[34]Ibid., 156.
[35]Ibid.
[36]Ibid., 188.
[37]Ibid.
[38]Ibid., 189.
[39]Ibid., 190.

increased violence and aggression towards women in both "fantasies and occasionally in acts of raw violence."[40]

As women's demands for satisfaction in relationships both emotionally and sexually grew, men's responses varied from feeling emasculated and threatened, to that of possessing the expectation of sexual favors from liberated women as if that was what liberation meant.[41] Women, on the other hand, with their increasing demands for equality in the relationship and responsiveness by men to emotional, intellectual, and sexual needs, were angered if men did not respond in the desired manner.[42] The impact this had on the family also served to undermine it as divorce became more common when compromise was not achieved and children were exposed to the aftermath of disintegrating families.

Lasch, however, commend feminism as the movement in which sexual stereotypes were "discredited," that allowed women to break out of submission to and domination by men, and that also created a situation that "made it possible to acknowledge sexual antagonism without raising it to the level of all-out warfare."[43] But this had its problems as well. Lasch noted that as women began to view men from a position of equal footing, they lost the safety that was found in their previous situations. Now, although feeling that men were "human beings," forgiving their shortcomings had become increasingly difficult.[44] In the feminist view, settling for less implied surrender and that could not be tolerated.[45]

According to Lasch, the primary concern with feminism was not so much the movement itself, but some of the problems it spawned. He stated that feminism created an institutionalization of women's activities that resulted in avoidance of confronting challenge and competition with men. Instead of waiting for men

to catch up with feminist viewpoints, women worked to create a world without men thereby further separating them from men.[46] In turn, this produced a whole new set of experts whose goal it was to generate dependence rather than inspire the independence of women. This helped to set up a "protective enclave" similar to what women had experienced before in the patriarchal family structure that they so despised.[47]

Lasch particularly criticized "radical lesbians" accusing them of "withdrawing at every level from the struggle against male domination while directing a steady stream of abuse against men and against women who refuse to acknowledge their homosexual proclivities."[48] He suggested that this brand of thought served primarily to separate women from men when the dream of a cohesive relationship was difficult to achieve and served as "only one of many strategies for controlling or escaping from strong feeling."[49] Lasch argued that this escape convinced women that their needs would not be met in heterosexual relationships or perhaps in any other way that this promoted retreat from "intense emotional encounters."[50]

Men, therefore, were left with the belief that women were impossible to satisfy, which fortified "early fantasies of a possessive, suffocating, devouring, and castrating mother," and reinforced dichotomous responses to women.[51] In a narcissistic society, this furthered self-preoccupation, emotional detachment, dependence on experts, and propagated loss of individualism and the breakdown of family life.

General Impressions of Lasch and his Work

Not surprisingly, Lasch provoked a barrage of debate with his assertions in *The Culture of Narcissism,* as might be expected with any work of this nature, with discussions that ranged from

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[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid., 191-192.
[42]Ibid., 196.
[43]Ibid., 195.
[44]Ibid., 196.
[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid., 199.
[47]Ibid., 199.
[48]Ibid.
[49]Ibid.
[50]Ibid., 202.
[51]Ibid., 203.

Lasch's role as a social critic, to what he asserted, to assorted interpretations of what he meant. The critique of Lasch's work frequently began with his role as an historian and social critic, his method of imparting his criticisms, and the validity of his work.

In his article in *American Studies*, Steven Watts explained that Lasch left "academic scholarship" and entered the "realm of social criticism," becoming a "public intellectual" rather than a "professional historian" as most were familiar with.[52] He suggested that the problems with Lasch's approach were his intellectual proclivities and the unfamiliarity many had with his resources that made following his line of thinking quite difficult. Watts noted that throughout Lasch's work he often appeared as a "disembodied intellectual historian at work."[53] Michael Heale agreed with Watts characterization of Lasch being somewhat detached, but found Lasch to be "engaged" despite this detachment which created the insistence that "society confront itself."[54]

Apparently, the problem with detachment, according to Watts and Heale, was that it made Lasch suspect in the eyes of the public as if looking down from on high. Still, Robert Westbrook noted that Lasch sought to maintain "intellectual independence" and that he felt it important to have a variety of perspectives available, one of which would be a view from the outside.[55] The question then would be, must one be immersed in that which he or she seeks to criticize? Lasch, like most historians, was familiar with looking at culture from an outside perspective to whatever degree that is possible. In what ways should or could Lasch have been engaged with contemporary

American life that he was not? To be completely detached from American culture would have required an almost monastic existence and while Lasch may have had some level of detachment he certainly did not lead the life of a monk.

Criticizing Lasch in harsher terms than being somewhat detached, Fred Siegel, in "The Agony of Christopher Lasch," renounced Lasch strongly suggesting that Lasch was "cut off from the intellectual authority from the past even as he echoes its ideas."[56] Siegel argued that Lasch was separated from society and that his separation also distanced him from the past. In Siegel's opinion, those who are so isolated tend to crave acceptance by others and in that way Lasch was actually displaying the very notions he was criticizing and questioned why Lasch's work had received so much attention.[57]

When looking at Siegel's criticisms, their strength is lost with his accusations of Lasch's isolation and the narcissistic tendencies that Siegel seems to believe are on display. He decries Lasch's use of psychology and sociology and appears to be of the mindset that this somehow diminishes Lasch's observations. Siegel becomes lost in his anger at how Lasch has interpreted intellectual history but does not offer his views on the problems of contemporary American culture. Rather, he chooses to disagree with Lasch at every turn and seems to miss the point of what Lasch proffered thereby nullifying the entire body of work.

Jeremy Beer, Kevin Mattson, and Steven Watts all agreed that Lasch's work was of great value as he opened up the awareness of how the narcissistic personality was created by "contemporary social conditions" and was willing to anger all sides without allegiance to the Left or the Right.[58] Robert Erwin suggested that much of the criticism directed toward Lasch was because he "antagonized" radicals and wounded their "source of esteem."[59] Lasch's friend Jean Elshtain noted that he "courted

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[52]Steven Watts, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Critic: Christopher Lasch's Struggle with Progressive America," *American Studies*, 33, no.2 (Fall 1992): 114.

[53]Ibid., 119.

[54]Michael J. Heale, "The Revolting American Elites: Christopher Lasch and his Enemies," *Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 1 (April 1997): 102.

[55]Robert B. Westbrook, "Christopher Lasch, The New Radicalism, and the Vocation of Intellectuals," *Reviews in American History* 23, no.1 (1995): 187.

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[56]Fred Siegel, "The Agony of Christopher Lasch," *Reviews in American History* 8, no. 3 (Sept. 1980): 295.

[57]Ibid., 285, 295.

[58]Jeremy Beer, "On Christopher Lasch," in *Modern Age* 47, 4 (Fall 2005): 336.

[59]Robert Erwin, *The Critic of Progress,* 291.

controversy" which opened him up to much of the criticism offered, especially from liberal factions.[60]

Many critics did not find Lasch's transition from historian to social critic problematic rather gave merit to the broad perspective it offered social criticism by incorporating an historical perspective. And most were impressed by Lasch's willingness to swim against the current of popular liberal thought despite the outrage hurled against him and, as Robert Erwin wrote, made Lasch "unforgivable" in the eyes of postmoderns.[61] Jeremy Beer offered this; "His [Lasch's] work confirms the truth of T.J. Jackson Lears's observation that 'the most profound radicalism is often the most profound conservatism.'"[62]

Lasch's willingness to open himself up to the fury of the Left along with his ability to incorporate psychology, sociology, and history gives his work as a social critic distinct credibility. Whether or not his peers or those reading his book were familiar with his resources in no way minimizes his observations. By moving away from the Leftist enclave and his aversion to submitting himself to any single discipline's authority suggested a freedom and flexibility of thought so necessary to engage in social criticism. Lasch also placed himself in the public eye, a place he was never comfortable with, to offer insight into what he was observing in American culture and engage in the conversation and problem-solving efforts that might help move the country forward.

Lasch and the President

A pollster and adviser to President Jimmy Carter, Patrick Caddell was moved by *The Culture of Narcissism,* and with the encouragement of First Lady Rosalynn Carter wrote a seventy five page memo to the President discussing the diminishing

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[60]Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Life and Work of Christopher Lasch: An American Story," *Salmagundi* nos. 106-107 (Spring-Summer 1995): 146.

[61]Erwin, *The Critic of Progress,* 291.

[62]Beer, *On Christopher Lasch,* 331.

confidence of the American people in their government and leaders.[63] Caddell provided a summary of Lasch's book and suggested to the President that restoring the nation's confidence and unity by returning to more traditional values would solve the nation's serious economic and energy problems.[64] Communications adviser Gerald Rafshoon suggested a domestic summit at Camp David to work on resolving the nation's problems.[65]

Christopher Lasch was one of 150 people from a variety of disciplines invited to Camp David to meet with the President and his staff to discuss policy issues and the crises faced by Americans, in particular, the spiritual crisis. Following this summit, President Carter prepared his speech on the energy crisis based on his discussions with those attending. Much of this speech was based on what Caddell had summarized from Lasch's book highlighting loss of confidence, of traditional values such as hard work and consumer restraint, and the pessimism that had rendered Americans spiritually deficient and helpless.[66]

The angry Fred Siegel criticized Lasch's inclusion in Carter's summit and suggested that the "celebrity" Lasch gained from this was another example of the desire of "isolated intellectuals" to find political esteem that, in Siegel's mind, minimized the value of Lasch's work.[67] Jeremy Beer acknowledged that Lasch did find "national stature as a social critic" with the call to the White House summit, but noted that Lasch was primarily concerned with the way Carter and Caddell had interpreted *The Culture of Narcissism.*[68] Siegel's critique seems to stem more from

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[63]Daniel Horowitz, *Jimmy Carter and the Energy Crisis of the 1970's: The "Crisis of Confidence" Speech of July 15, 1979. A Brief History with Documents"* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 16-17.

[64]Ibid., 18-19.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid., 24.

[67]Siegel, *The Agony of Christopher Lasch,* 294.

[68]Jermey Beer, "On Christopher Lasch," in *Modern Age* 47, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 338.

Lasch being asked to participate along with many others rather than how his work was viewed by Carter and appears quick to dismiss the importance of the event itself. President Carter's willingness to engage in conversation with such a diverse and inclusive assembly that included the historian and social critic Lasch certainly must be considered of greater significance than notoriety as a consequence of participation in the summit.

Kevin Mattson noted that Lasch's work "struck a chord" and that the resulting fame was something that Lasch was quite uncomfortable with.[69] He applauded Lasch for his ability to maintain his role as a social critic despite newfound fame and also credited Lasch for possessing the resolve to argue with power—as Lasch did in a letter to Patrick Caddell regarding the tone of Carter's speech as well as the interpretation of the book.[70] Siegel's insistence that Lasch craved the celebrity he experienced would suggest that the White House invitation left Lasch starry-eyed with his inclusion in the band of notable people although evidence of this is not apparent. As noted by Robert Erwin, Lasch shouldered criticism from liberals, conservatives, and radicals and stayed firm in his convictions, refusing to acquiesce to what fame or the influences of fame might bring.[71]

Arguments Surrounding Family Authority

The overwhelming argument against Lasch's comments on the demise of family authority as an indicator of the decline of American culture was that Lasch was nostalgic for a way of life considered outdated and irrelevant in modern society. Fred Siegel accused Lasch of a "Victorian longing" and that he presented himself as "a guardian of tradition" suggesting that Lasch's arguments stood on shaky ground.[72] Siegel asserted that what Lasch tried to present was not cohesive, as it appeared that

he, on one hand, suggested a conservative return to patriarchal authority and on the other supported a more radical inclination.[73]

Feminist writers Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh criticized the reliance of Lasch on nineteenth century families as a guide and suggested that this model was representative of the "mythology of the 'real' family."[74] They observed that Lasch's discussion of this family model did not provide the time that it existed and that class and cultural conditions had been ignored, which, they asserted, created a historical vagueness.

Barrett and McIntosh provided the most valid critique of Lasch's discussion of family authority and while offering criticism, did not completely dismiss his notions as Siegel did. Rather, Barrett and McIntosh succinctly described the confusion surrounding what Lasch was asserting and it is apparent how it was possible to miss the point or misinterpret what Lasch was attempting to represent. Siegel opted to limit his exploration to complaints of nostalgia and a lack of cohesion that creates a hole in his argument.

Steven Watts did not interpret Lasch's reference to authority as meaning the power to control, rather he referred to a larger definition that included "loyalty by a moral consensus of a community" and the "self-restraints of character to which it [authority] is linked."[75] Kevin Mattson, in *Polity*, suggested that Lasch's concern was for "internalization," not nostalgia, and that this was simply praise for the working class without the assumption that it was somehow better.[76] Mattson, despite his opinion that the accusations of others that Lasch was nostalgic were not fair, did note that it was not clear how to understand the positive attributes of history regarding the family but still dismissed this as merely problematic.[77]

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[69]Kevin Mattson, "The Historian as a Social Critic: Christopher Lasch and the Uses of History," *History Teacher* 36, no.3 (May 2003), Database available online from Academic Search Primer no. 10011259: paragraph 24.

[70]Ibid. paragraph 25.

[71]Robert Erwin, *The Critic of Progress,* 289.

[72]Siegel, *The Agony of Christopher Lasch,* 285-286.

[73]Ibid., 286.

[74]Barrett & McIntosh, *Narcissism and the Family,* 39.

[75]Watts, *Sinners in the Hands,* 116-117.

[76]Kevin Mattson, "Christopher Lasch and the Possibilities of Chastened Liberalism," *Polity* 36, no. 3 (April 2004): 428, 442.

[77]Kevin Mattson, "The Historian As a Social Critic," paragraph 35.

Steven Watts elaborated on the nature of the criticism lodged against Lasch when he was damned as "upholding traditional values," as "authoritarian," and as romanticizing the "bourgeois family, patriarchal power, and bourgeois character of self-control."[78] Explaining that Lasch's viewpoint was not understood, Watts noted that what actually came out of the demise of the family was decreased freedom, increased conformity and repression as individualism was lost. Watts felt that these attacks, primarily from the Left, were out of a sense of betrayal and that they simply missed the point Lasch was trying to make.[79]

Agreeing with Watts, Jean Elshtain echoed that Lasch was often misunderstood and that he was better at asking questions than coming up with answers. She also noted that Lasch's "insistence" on self-restraint that was characteristic of nineteenth century family and an important part of its teaching demonstrated his understanding of human weakness and the need for authority.[80]

Barrett and McIntosh were in support of Lasch in that he questioned why family life had become difficult and alluded to the implications of materialism along with the "idiocy and hypocrisy of much contemporary thinking."[81] They were also in agreement with Lasch that with the "degeneration of the family and individual integrity" a new class was created that benefited from this.[82] Lasch's "concern for real needs" and his study of family disintegration and its causes addressed what tended to be missing in most studies, according to Barrett and McIntosh, and for this they praised Lasch highly.[83]

Clarity was ultimately the most significant problem with Lasch's discussion of the decline of family authority and, in particular, his use of the nineteenth century family as a way to

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[78]Watts, *Sinners in the Hands,* 117.
[79]Ibid.
[80]Elshtain, *The Life and Work of Christopher Lasch,* 152.
[81]Ibid., 38.
[82]Barrett and McIntosh, *Narcissism and the Family,* 39.
[83]Ibid., 38.

present this decline. Had he provided a variety of models that represented a cross section of American culture, less confusion and disagreement might have resulted. Still, Lasch's assertion that the family unit slowly collapsed under the weight of industrialization and corporate control and that parental influence was subsequently undermined is easily surmised as are the problems that grew out of the loss of individualism, especially in an ever increasing narcissistic society. Lasch did not presuppose a return to the bourgeois family as a means to correct an ailing society but merely presented this model to note the advance of corporate controls and the subsequent loss of skills in parenting as well as healthy child development inside of the family structure that was previously brought about by the lessons found in family relationships.

The strength in Lasch's observation with regard to the loss of family authority clearly lies in his exploration of what facilitated its disintegration, sustained the downward spiral, and resulted in significant deskilling of parents in many household functions, in particular, childrearing. Although this comes through, some of his notions are perhaps lost with the distraction of the nineteenth century family model that detracted from the more important aspects of his discussion. This distraction may have resulted in some of the difficulties found with interpretation and focus on the main issues concerning the family as well as the numerous interpretations that can be found among reviewers of Lasch's work.

Family and the State

Lasch lost a considerable amount of his support in his assertions that social service agencies had taken over parental authority and had lead to the deskilling of parents. Jean Elshtain explained that Lasch's criticism of the "helping professions" as he called them revolved around the harm they inflicted because of their desire to "reform."[84] Kevin Mattson suggested that what Lasch was criticizing included therapeutic manipulation and a

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[84]Barrett and McIntosh, *Narcissism and the Family,* 156.

desire for dominion over the natural and human world. What Lasch had forgotten, though, was that many Modernists had asserted the view that there was a need to see the limitations in what therapy proposed. Mattson noted that Lasch often ignored pragmatism and that reform could take many paths. He believed that Lasch, in this instance, had a "one-sided perspective" and did not consider the "potentials of modern reform."[85]

Barrett and McIntosh offered a significant amount of criticism of Lasch's assertions as they applied to social services stating that Lasch had assumed that "collective responsibility" for child rearing was "*necessarily* invasive and totalitarian."[86] Agreeing with Lasch that a capitalist state and many agencies concerned with welfare did exert a significant amount of social control and encouraged consumerism, they accused him of setting aside the importance of the welfare state as an outcome of the "struggle of the working class and some collectivization of care."[87] Social services are valuable even if flawed, as Barrett and McIntosh surmised, in order to avoid the family needing to assume full responsibility for those needing assistance with women usually providing the care.[88]

Among those critiquing Lasch, this area of his work was not subject to the level of criticism as that of his discussion of the family. It is possible, as explained by Kevin Mattson, that concern of state control and the manipulation found in some therapeutic institutions were not lost on liberals and Modernists and therefore did not warrant argument.[89] Barrett and McIntosh provided sufficient and compelling arguments alone to bring Lasch's concern into question although they considered his questioning valid.

Lasch does cause some concern in his critique of social service agencies as he is not clear on where they do fit in and at first glance it appears that he does not believe that they fit in at all. However, if viewed from the perspective of how the family has lost authority and that much of this authority has been virtually abducted, it is possible to understand Lasch's disquietude. One of the problems that emerges is the sizable gap between what might be helpful and what is coercive and authoritarian, which is completely missing from Lasch's discussion. Again, with a more meticulous explanation of how social agencies might provide some benefit and how and where their role should be, Lasch's criticism would have been better received. The absolute control and the creation of an industry was certainly well described by Lasch and this alone was strong enough to garner at least some level of support of his viewpoint and a minimum of suspicion regarding the social service industry as a whole. Lasch's questioning of the social service industry was indeed valid but the discussion seemed incomplete and thus easy to misinterpret the main points.

The Problem with Feminism

Lasch ended up with considerable criticism regarding his remarks that the feminist movement presented a significant problem for women and that family and relationships had been strongly affected. Agreeing that much of the feminist movement had "been caught up in the dominant-culture discourse of self-fulfillment and gratification," Steven Watts found that the problem in Lasch's work was that he did not talk about where the feminine place *should* be.[90] He believed that this presented a serious problem for Lasch in his critique of feminism.

The objections of Barrett and McIntosh revolved around what they saw as Lasch's masculine viewpoint. His failure to adequately mention the oppression of women in the patriarchal family and his focus on the benefits only presented a serious problem.[91] They also took issue with the impression that Lasch left, that feminism attacked the family and that he seemed to

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[85]Mattson, *Christopher Lasch and the Possibilities*, 443.
[86]Barrett & McIntosh, *Narcissism and the Family*, 42.
[87]Ibid., 41.
[88]Ibid.
[89]Mattson, *Christopher Lasch and the Possibilities*, 443.

[90]Watts, *Sinners in the Hands*, 119.
[91]Barrett & McIntosh, *Narcissism and the Family*, 43.

mourn the loss of the bourgeois patriarchal family despite its oppression of women.[92]

Barrett and McIntosh vehemently disagreed with Lasch's suggestion that feminism was included with drug use and suicide as a way to avoid deep emotion. That women should somehow learn to live with "sexual antagonism" was further proof of his masculine point of view.[93] Agreeing with Lasch's assertions that marriage had become more fragile and "full of hostility and recrimination," they would not agree that the feminist movement should assume responsibility, but rather underlying social conditions confronting both women and men in contemporary America.[94]

Opposing this point of view, Kevin Mattson suggested that Lasch was not longing for a traditional past where men where men were dominant.[95] He supported the notion that Lasch was actually of the belief that feminists could reshape the frame of the family and that the public had actually misinterpreted Lasch's commentary on feminism as selfishness.[96] Jean Elshtain explained that Lasch felt women were lost in the battle for progressive versus traditional knowledge and were being managed by the feminist movement.[97]

Lasch's critique of feminism does in some ways appear to revolve around the creation of a new form of control over the lives of families by establishing yet another way to relinquish individualism and relegate authority to another body, in this case, the feminist movement. He certainly provided compelling observations of the more radical elements found in some lesbian and militant feminist enclaves where conformity is insisted. This portion of his observation is easily supported and appears to have validity. The problem here, though, is that he limited his discussion to what he surmised as radical and escapist and

missed the highly emotional nature of and real problems encountered in lesbian relationships. Grouping lesbianism with the feminist movement is also problematic and presupposed a common goal that does not necessarily exist. And although the increase in the failure of many marriages warranted exploration of the role of feminism especially when coupled with narcissistic tendencies, he does not include the role of men in the equation, merely stating that men were confused and unclear about how they should respond to the new demands of women. .

Another problem with Lasch's criticism of feminism comes with the omission of the progress afforded women through the movement and that feminists' demands for equal pay and opportunities would benefit not only women, but also the family as a whole. He either was not able to see, or opted not to mention that economic independence had the potential to liberate women and release them from subordinate roles outside the family unit. It is possible, however, that Lasch concerned himself primarily with the disintegrating family and loss of individualism and that this consumed him to the point of neglecting to find or seek out the positive elements of the feminist movement as it was at the time but this limitation caused considerable problems in this portion of his criticism.

Conclusion

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch was able to uncover the problems of twentieth century American life stemming from the pessimistic outlook found in the aftermath of the turbulent 1960's and the narcissistic tendencies born of this pessimism that expanded with industrialization and corporate control of all aspects of family life. Many critics and reviewers of Lasch and his book found his work to be "both democratic and anti-liberal" in the words of Jeremy Beer; "an independent intelligence resistant to intellectual fashions," by Michael Heale; a call to "toughen liberalism," offered by Kevin Mattson, as well as his suggestion that Lasch demonstrated how historians are

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[92]Ibid., 38.
[93]Ibid., 44.
[94]Ibid.
[95]Mattson, *Christopher Lasch and the Possibilities,* 428-429.
[96]Ibid., 429.
[97]Elshtain, *The Life and Work of Christopher Lasch,* 158.

relevant in debate.[98] Lasch effectively drew upon a scholarly background and added to that his skill as an intellectual with the result being a very comprehensive work that crossed disciplines and party lines.

Lasch was able to explore the problems of the social services industry and the feminist movement and look beyond his own socialist and leftist inclinations to issue strong criticism at the risk of alienating those he was typically affiliated with. Willing to place himself in a very public position that caused him great discomfort, Lasch agreed to engage in discourse with others at the invitation of President Carter and endured the brief moment of fame that resulted without abandoning his role as a social critic. He remained an independent observer of culture with all the praise and criticism that entailed.

The primary problem found in *The Culture of Narcissism* was the occasional lack of clarity that gave rise to a variety of interpretations especially in his use of the nineteenth century family as a marker to determine the level of deterioration experienced by the contemporary American family. He did not elaborate on his choice of the middle class family as a sort of model and it was assumed by many that he held up this model as an ideal. This caused great consternation among the Left and among feminists, as Lasch seemed to be favoring a return to conservative patriarchal mores of the previous century. There were those who were able to see what Lasch was aiming at, however they too felt that Lasch might have been more explicit in his discussion of the changes he observed in the family and how he viewed what had been lost and what could be gained from looking at the family structure of earlier times.

Likewise, Lasch provided little in the way of positive attributes of social service agencies and the feminist movement and this coupled with the problem of the nineteenth century family authority model created significant misunderstanding of what Lasch proffered. The narrowness of his viewpoint in these areas negated the benefits that could be found in his critique and minimized his arguments. It was not with ease that one was able to see that what Lasch was actually criticizing was the pressure to conform and the loss of independence and individualism found in the firm embrace of some social service agencies, schools, and feminist groups.

Christopher Lasch, regardless of the problems of interpretation, did provide a persuasive and compelling look at the decline of American culture following a particularly difficult and transforming time and how this decline was perpetuated by self-preoccupation, submission to outside controls, and the deskilling of Americans by corporate controls and reliance on technology. His warnings of the dangers of a narcissistic society and the demise of culture were meant not just as criticism, but also as a wake-up call.

At the close of *The Culture of Narcissism* Christopher Lasch states, "In a dying culture, narcissism appears to embody—in the guise of personal 'growth' and 'awareness'—the highest attainment of spiritual enlightenment. The custodians of culture hope, at bottom, merely to survive its collapse. The will to a better society, however, survives. Along with traditions of localism, self-help, and community action that only need the vision of a new society, a decent society, to give them new vigor." [99] This statement probably best sums Lasch's concerns and his motivation to engage in social criticism and where his willingness to extend beyond his own world as an academic into the harsher world of social critic shows courage and strength as he opened himself up reluctantly in a very public way to the trials and tribulations of the dual roles of historian and social critic.

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[98]Beer, *On Christopher Lasch,* 331; Heale, *The Revolting American Elites,* 102; Mattson, *The Historian As a Social Critic*, paragraph 39.

[99]Lasch, *Narcissism*, 234.