

The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times. Christopher Lasch.
New York: W.W. Norton, 1984, 317 pages, \$7.95.

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Christopher Lasch's *The Minimal Self* seeks to clarify what his earlier book (*The Culture of Narcissism*) apparently left unclear or ambiguous: "that the concern with the self, which seems so characteristic of our time, takes the form of concern with its psychic survival." Professor Lasch's thesis is that contemporary Americans live as if they were expecting (however unconsciously) the Apocalypse. In popular consciousness, nuclear war seems much more probable now, and almost every feature of our contemporary world is terrifying: the escalating arms race, the increase in terrorism, ecological crises, sexual diseases, and the prospect of long-term economic decline (college students are becoming painfully aware of their "downward mobility"). Quite understandably, people are terrified by the future. Our beleaguered citizens can no longer afford, Lasch argues, the "imperial self" which they enjoyed developing and expressing in the recent past, for the humanistic cultivation of selfhood presupposes an orderly, semi-permanent world. Instead, our citizens have pared down that self to the bare essentials, concerned, much like inmates in a concentration camp, with bare survival. To ensure emotional stability, the self must be simple, indeed "minimal."

In his first three chapters Lasch impressively marshals evidence from a multitude of sources to support his assertion that Americans—often unconsciously—view themselves as barely surviving in a state of siege. Terms like "Holocaust" and "survivalism" are becoming staples of our vocabulary, promoted by the media. So pervasive is this stream of imagery that at Yale a "Rescue Committee" urges parents to send their children a "survival kit" (nourishing snack foods in a humorously packaged box). In sources as diverse as articles in *Mother Jones* and drama reviews in *The New York Times*, the events of everyday life are increasingly interpreted in the light of extreme situations.

This terror of the future is not always confronted openly, however; for many people manage to push this awareness below the threshold of consciousness, simply ignoring bad news in the media (they joke about taking it for granted), lumping together all new events, never distinguishing between news that threatens the world and news that threatens them personally. Since the apocalypse is almost upon us, and since we refuse to hold ourselves accountable, it follows that we view ourselves as victims, a status which has been recently elevated in our society. Doomsayers may be unpopular (and lose elections); but, at the semi-conscious level, they are not doubted.

After discussing the impact of the sense of doom on individual psyches, Lasch goes on to describe its effect on the arts and on political ideology. Students of contemporary literature will find little of interest in the fourth chapter ("The Minimalist Aesthetic"). Literature has moved from self-assertion to self-effacement, achieved mostly

through grotesque, mutilated images. Contemporary literature turns horrible events into images, tears these images out of context and rearranges them in new combinations. The emotional impact of all events, even the most horrible, is deadened and criticism neutralized.

The fifth chapter ("The Inner History of Selfhood") reviews, very efficiently, some basic Freudian concepts relating to the ego, with some interesting observations on childhood in a narcissistic culture. (Some of these points were absent in Lasch's earlier book.) Lasch denies that America has created a child-centered culture; and he asserts (much more clearly than in his earlier book) that a narcissistic culture is not necessarily a culture in which restraints on selfishness have collapsed or a world in which people have abandoned themselves to hedonistic self-indulgence. What has weakened is "the belief in a world that survives its inhabitants."

The author's most intriguing point in this chapter is that a society situated in a world apparently destined for doom quickly loses its sense of reality. Hence the need for illusions becomes more intense than ever.

The constructs defined in this chapter are applied to the political scene in the sixth chapter ("The Politics of the Psyche"). Lasch describes three groups, all of which seek to restore order and meaning to our culture. The first group (the Party of the Superego) sees the crisis of our culture as the collapse of the superego. To restore cultural stability we must strengthen parental authority and in all possible ways buttress the social superego. The best spokespersons, however, are too sophisticated to rely chiefly on the constant threat of punishment. Instead, they want to encourage the youth to internalize moral standards so deeply that they will voluntarily respect and obey all forms of legitimate authority and even monitor themselves. Thus the Party of the Superego should not be equated with the political right (although many "right-wingers" belong to the Party of the Superego). Many people on the right, Lasch correctly observes, do not believe in the superego at all; they rely entirely on terror and compulsion. Lasch respects the Party of the Superego but dismisses it because of its overestimation of the superego. His assessment of the superego as an agent of social discipline is one of the most incisive I have read. The superego is finally unreliable because it "bears too close a kinship to the very impulses it seeks to repress," and its "relentless condemnation of the ego breeds a spirit of sullen resentment and insubordination." Lasch observes (correctly, I think) that our culture's notorious fascination with violence results directly from the severity with which violent impulses are condemned.

The second group (The Party of the Ego) believes it is the rational ego which must be fortified. Our society needs people with inner strength, capable of making sensible, rational decisions even when confronted with a myriad of options. This group originates in the nineteenth-century liberal traditions. The ego must be fortified to withstand both the savage impulses of the *id* and the quickly antiquated, inherited moral doctrines of the superego. In this way, the rational, problem-solving faculty facilitates survival in a rapidly evolving culture. Hopefully, our capacity for rational, prudent self-control will eventually enable us to reduce, very greatly, external social controls and authoritative moral codes. This premise, however, is much more difficult to maintain now, for the crumbling of ancient creeds and traditional restraints seems to have released powerful impulses of acquisitiveness and aggression. To hold these in check, some propose a return to a new system of scientific controls (behaviorism). Many readers will be shocked to find the school of B.F. Skinner discussed under the heading of "The Party of the Ego" along with the Rogerian tradition, but Lasch maintains that Skinner has carried liberal assumptions to a logical—and unacceptable—conclusion. The therapeutic, environmentalist morality developed by

twentieth-century liberalism destroys the very basis of moral responsibility in which it originates, and it ends by allowing experts to monopolize knowledge and power (social engineering).

The third group (the discussion of which comprises the entire final chapter, entitled "The Ideological Assault on the Ego") rejects all earlier solutions. Indeed, all the standard political categories are "superannuated" (Norman O. Brown's term). This group, which Lasch calls "The New Left" and "The Party of Narcissus" has either rejected Marx or has radically reinterpreted him: Its spokespersons advocate a cultural revolution to oppose not only capitalism but also industrialism. This revolt against domination by technocrats, Lasch believes, often leans toward nihilism and subjectivity—but at least it does strive to construct new forms of community, and it addresses issues ignored by rival traditions, the most important of which are the limits of reason and "the unconscious origins of the desire for domination," a desire embodied in industrial technology, the highest product of the rational intelligence.

The New Left often turns to Freud; but unlike earlier Freudians, like Erich Fromm and Gregory Zilboorg, Brown and Marcuse have dramatically reaffirmed Freud's biological determinism—precisely the concept that the earlier Freudian revisionists tried to strip away. This is not to say, however, that the New Left has adopted Freudian thought in its entirety. Rather, Marcuse has "historicized" Freud much as Marx "historicized" Adam Smith and Ricardo. Thus, Marcuse insists that repression originates not in the "struggle for existence" but only in its "oppressive organization." Both Marcuse and Brown condemn purposeful, goal-oriented activity. While admiring the quality of Brown's thought, Lasch rejects his "reduction of culture to a massive conspiracy against human nature and happiness." This final chapter reminds us how difficult it is to base a theory of cultural revolution on psychoanalysis; nevertheless, as Lasch acknowledges, the rival traditions fail to explain adequately the horrible destructiveness which has characterized the twentieth-century.

The advocates of cultural revolution—the New Left—attribute this destructiveness neither to the undermining of the superego nor to the weakening of the rational ego. They point, instead, to the destructiveness of reason itself and strive to achieve a sense of unity with the world. They reject the ideal of the autonomous person, making what Lasch himself calls a superficially persuasive case for narcissism. Lasch argues, however, that although narcissism originates in the infant's symbiotic union with the mother and generates a desire to return to that blissful togetherness, it also generates a desire for autonomy, for self-sufficiency. Hence Lasch rejects the contemporary fashion of labeling the dream of technological mastery "masculine" and the urge to achieve a loving relationship with nature "feminine." Both, the author argues, originate in "the undifferentiated equilibrium of the prenatal state" and both "reject psychological maturation in favor of regression." Obviously, these impulses are contradictory, but it is precisely the conscious awareness of the tension and conflict inherent in selfhood that must form the nucleus of any successful solution to humanity's current predicament. To deny the tormenting division in our nature (as both the champion and the critics of the rational ego seek to do) leads either to the dangerous attempt to impose human will on nature through technology or to an ecstatic surrender of human will to the enticements of the *id*.

Lasch's own solution is too complex for adequate summary; but essentially it consists of an ingenious application of an Aristotelian notion almost forgotten in modern political theory. Lasch agrees with the Party of Narcissus (members of the New Left who advocate cultural revolution) in condemning "instrumental reason"—the regarding of the relationship of ends and means as purely external. However, this cold-blooded amorality must be replaced not by some form of mysticism but with "practical reason"

(Aristotle's *phronesis*). This kind of reason is concerned not merely with economic prosperity or physical survival but—even more—with the moral perfection of life. Unlike *technique* (Aristotle's word for "instrumental reason"), *phronesis* ("practical reason") insists that the means conform to the standards of excellence designed to promote human capacities for self-understanding and self-mastery. How hard it must be for the modern reader to believe that Aristotle actually recommends the practice of politics as one of the most effective means for the formation of character! But then Aristotle insists that government should seek to promote not merely physical survival or economic prosperity but also the "good life" by conferring on all citizens equal rights and by encouraging them to achieve excellence—physical, intellectual, moral.

It is to these standards of excellence that we must return to combat the amoral instrumentalism which the advocates of cultural revolution rightly condemn. But by repudiating all forms of purposeful activity in favor of play, the Party of Narcissus merely reverses the industrial ideology which it attacks, ignoring the important task of redeeming the "intermediate world which binds man to nature in the capacity of a loving caretaker and cultivator."

The Minimal Self is a timely book which raises many questions. Why, for example, is the "pared down" self not so evident in Western Europe today? Should not the French and Germans be as troubled as we? Lasch argues that contemporary Americans cannot afford nostalgia, for it is too debilitating. And yet many observers of contemporary culture describe the Reagan phenomenon as "America's supreme nostalgia trip." Surely the early eighties have seen some effort—however ineffectual—to return to earlier values. At this very moment I myself detect interesting signs of a nascent nostalgia for the sixties; that period, of course, witnessed the exaltation of the "imperial self." One wonders how much longer Americans can sustain their "minimal selves." After all, Americans are a notoriously impatient people, allegedly undisciplined and lacking in perseverance, with little tolerance for prolonged boredom. Paradoxically, the sustaining of the minimal self, as Lasch describes it, requires considerable discipline, even a degree of stoicism. Above all, it is boring. Can we not expect many Americans to seek relief from this tedium through sensational experiences like whiskey or cocaine? And again paradoxically, do not sensational experiences, even the low-grade ones, threaten eventually to open up the self, to excite an unwelcome burgeoning of insights? I foresee a tug-of-war between two conflicting impulses.

Many readers will wish that Lasch's remarkable book were longer. A more detailed description of the pared down self would be welcome. But above all, one longs for a fuller explanation of Lasch's own proposal. For instance, how do we distinguish between an Aristotelian state which actively encourages its citizens to strive for excellence from the behavioristic social engineering which Lasch rejects? Some important differences are clearly implied, but more exposition is necessary. And finally, to what ethical tradition shall we turn in search of social standards? Presumably to Aristotelian humanism—but can we achieve a consensus?

My objections, however, quickly yield to praise as I recall that Lasch's erudite, carefully researched study illuminates some important social phenomena which it does not even mention. America of the early eighties has been singularly lacking in energy, in élan; ours is a period of devitalization. The dearth of creativity and innovativeness is apparent even in popular culture; in fact, I can think of no period in our past when popular art forms were so purely derivative. From the explosion of ebullient humanism and Dionysian ecstasy of the late sixties we have sunk into the doldrums of the eighties. However, ours is not a period of complacency like the fifties but a time of extreme caution, of quiet anxiety. Lasch's thesis helps explain the popularity of President Reagan—the promise to reinvigorate the American dream. *The Minimal Self* also il-

lumines the most distressing characteristic of our times—that air of unreality which pervades the whole culture, manifested, in part, by aversion to fact and by reversion to primitive modes of thought—wishful thinking and faith in the power of images. Americans have never been noted for the strength of their reality principle. Unfortunately, in scaling down the self, many people are also stripping away that little sense of reality they might once have possessed. Lasch hints that the contemporary scene reminds him of a concentration camp. It reminds me of that Wonderland which Alice once visited.

INQUIRY

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