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Haven in a Heartless World

By Christopher Lasch.

(New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977. 230 pp.)

Review by Arnold Richards and Stephen Richards

This work by Lasch is an ambitious, always thoughtful, and at times brilliant delineation of a half-century of thought about a subject of great interest to psychoanalysts: the family. The book, an intellectual history, surveys American family studies by social scientists from the early twenties to the present. Lasch feels that the American tradition of family study has limited itself through its neglect of psychoanalytic concepts. He feels further that these studies, through their influence upon social workers, marriage counselors, and others, have contributed to the demise of the family in American society.

Implicit in this critique and perhaps far more interesting than the critique itself is Lasch's view that the family was formerly a haven, but now fails to shield its members from the storms raging in the society. Writing from a Marxist perspective, Lasch rejects the view, commonly held by social scientists, that the family provides its members the privacy and emotional solace so sorely needed in a harsh and competitive world. He maintains that the intrusion of corporate capital and the state into spheres of life—production, education, and recreation—that were once the private preserve of the family has impaired its ability to perform its life-enhancing functions. Lasch believes that social scientists have either ignored, glossed over, or glorified the decline in the influence of the family and, moreover, have entirely missed the impact of this decline on the psychic development of individuals.

The book starts with the sociological studies of the family written in the twenties by Burgess, Folsom, Locke, and others; continues with the anthropologists of the thirties, Mead, Benedict, and Gorer; and then focuses on the revisionist sociology of Talcott Parsons and his followers, developed during the forties and fifties, before moving on to the sixties and seventies—decades Lasch characterizes as a time of profoundly ahistorical eclecticism. From the vantage point of history Lasch demonstrates that there is little new in most of the recent theories of the family. In fact he goes so far as to suggest that much of this "social science" is simply common sense, continually forgotten, rediscovered, and repackaged. Its conclusions, even when true, are obvious and superficial in comparison to the basic, yet disturbing hypotheses of psychoanalysis.

The sociological studies of the twenties, for example, reduced the study of the family to the study of marriage and then trivialized that investigation by concentrating on the burning question of the choice of marital partner. The studies of this decade presented the finding that "like marries like" as novel and surprising, ignoring the effect of the family on socialization and child development.

The anthropologists of the thirties fare somewhat better in Lasch's view; he readily admits that their descriptions of the American family are often remarkably accurate. He argues, however, that these workers were handicapped by relying only upon the observation of consciously acknowledged attitudes. They often enough turn to the theoretical perspective of psychoanalysis, but only to rebut its findings in regard to infantile sexuality, for example, or the Oedipus complex, without availing themselves of Freud's theories concerning the unconscious determinants of human motivation. Lasch points out that although the anthropologists study culture they tend to forget that "psychoanalysis offers a theory about the way in which culture is

assimilated." Lasch's critique of anthropological studies of the family is of particular interest because many of the conclusions of the so-called neo-Freudian revisionists—Horney, Sullivan, Thompson, and Fromm—were explicitly based on these studies.

Talcott Parsons was one of the few social scientists of the past half century to take Freud seriously. He recognized that to understand the mechanism of socialization one had to have the deepest understanding of the psychology of the individual. Unlike his predecessors, Parsons studied the family and not just marriage. In contrast to the anthropological schools, he recognized that culture is transmitted unconsciously, through the internalization of parental imagos, rather than through anything so apparently simple as superficial and unmediated imitation. However, Lasch notes that Parsons, in his zeal to translate psychoanalytic concepts into sociological ones, weakened and distorted the core of psychoanalytic theory. For example, he viewed the oedipus complex as a process by which the child, in imitation of the father, is pried loose from excessive dependence on the mother. He based his conclusion on data from the experimental study of small groups rather than from psychoanalytic studies of individuals or studies of actual families. In assuming that the family's role in socialization was to serve as a model for the child's later participation in small groups, Parsons was, as he said of Freud, on the right track; but when he based his model of the family on the small group itself, he lost sight of the crucial differences between the two, differences which make socialization problematic and society itself very fragile. The strength of unconscious drives, both aggressive and sexual, is missed by Parsons, since these are perhaps less immediately apparent in small groups or society at large. Lasch feels that this deficiency limits the value of Parson's empirical insights into the development of the family.

All in all, I think the psychoanalytic reader will find Lasch's critique of fifty years of social science family study incisive and convincing. But the reader hopes for a clearer formulation of the author's own view of the American family today. Lasch does make it clear that he finds the present-day American family under siege from without, fractured and under tension within. He has scattered throughout the book a hypothesis which asserts that the development of modern capitalist society has caused changes in the relations of parents to children and these in turn have affected basic psychic structure within the individual. Lasch believes that the family has been profoundly affected by the failure of modern capitalist society to provide fulfilling, satisfying work for many of its members. The metamorphosis of the father, once the head of the productive household, now a cog in a large industrial wheel, unable to pass on significant skills to his children, has had profound consequences on the psyches of his children. The child's primitive fantasies of the vengeful father are neither challenged nor modified through realistic interactions. Beneath the often easygoing surface relations between modern fathers and their children smolder hostility, fear, and guilt. According to Lasch, "precisely because the father's absence allows early fantasies to persist unmodified by later experience, the child fears the terrible vengeance that the father can inflict even while he scorns the everyday father who never inflicts it" (pp. 188-189).

Although one might expect that the fall of the father in the family might enhance the power of the mother, Lasch maintains that her greater power is more apparent than real; that the reduction of the family from a producing to a consuming and child-rearing unit does not, as one might expect, increase the influence of the mother. Rather, her traditional knowledge is undercut by advertising and the mechanization of the home, and her authority is coopted by an army of experts who tell her how to raise her children. As with the father, childhood fantasies are

unmodified by everyday experience, and primitive oral-aggressive and devouring images of her remain powerful in unconscious representations.

To demonstrate convincingly that there has occurred a profound change in the psychological makeup of individuals during the past fifty years and that this change has been caused by economic changes mediated through the family would require studies probably at present beyond the methodological limits of either social science or psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, Lasch's formulation seems to us more plausible than, for instance, the idea put forward by some psychoanalysts, the so-called self-theorists, that the shift from family emotional overcloseness to emotional distance and understimulation has led to the diminution of structural conflict, the waning of the oedipus complex, and the replacement of neurotic disorders by disorders of the self. We would tend to agree with Lasch that in the fractured family the intensity of the drives becomes more, rather than less critical as a factor in stirring anxiety of individuals. In any event, his caveat to psychoanalysts who would use the findings of social science to buttress their arguments must be taken seriously. There are analysts who maintain that the next assignment for psychoanalysis is to reach out to the social scientists for new concepts in order to develop a broad, integrated psychoanalytic theory of society, social relations, and group processes. Particularly in relation to family study, Lasch's book should warn psychoanalysts of the danger of accepting the "scientific" findings of social science.

Despite its shortcomings Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* points the way to the kind of collaboration between psychoanalysts and historians that could be fruitful to both disciplines. In another context Lasch has argued that both psychohistory and historical treatments of psychoanalysis have, until now, been unproductive. Psychoanalytic explorations of historical developments have often reduced historical movements to their supposed psychic origins while ignoring the social and political contexts in which the movements developed. On the other hand, many accounts of the origins of Freudian psychoanalysis single out, as exhaustively explanatory, the historical context of bourgeois Vienna in the late nineteenth century to argue against the validity of psychoanalytic insights. The first tendency is reductionistic, the second simplistic or—as Freud put it more bluntly himself—"exceptionally stupid."* If we accept Lasch's contention that social organization, family structure, and individual psychology are connected, the family becomes the common ground of study of sociologists and psychoanalysts alike.

Dense and elliptical in style, Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* is not easy going. Encountering work which owes as much to Marx as to Freud, which is cast in the form of intellectual history and surveys the work of social scientists unfamiliar to most psychoanalysts and forgotten even by many contemporary social scientists, may well tax the psychoanalytic reader. Nevertheless, Lasch's psychologically informed and sophisticated overview of the literature of family studies should be rewarding reading for both disciplines.

* Freud: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*. Standard Edition, XIV, p. 39.

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