

Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*

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*Christopher Lasch,
Basic Books, Inc., New
York, 1979.

This book describes and criticizes . . . a tradition of sociological study. . . shows how it both reflected and influenced social policy and analyses the shattering impact of policy—the impact of the so-called helping professions—on the family. (p. xx)

The result of this impact is the crisis of authority where, as Arendt (1961, Chap. 3) remarked, the very area that is the model for the classic treatment of authority in public life (i.e., the family, where authority was considered necessary out of natural necessity) has been infected with a failure of confidence. For Lasch, this as a process is the story of the evolutionary separation of love and discipline. It is the story of the enervation of familial authority, from the untenable version that the late 19th century bourgeois form maintained to its complete absence in the permissive relations that characterize most of modern child-rearing theory and practice. In this process, parenting has changed from a training and nurturance, which both protected family members and endowed them with the resources to sustain the harsh rigors of outside industrial life (Berger & Kellner, 1970),¹ to a companionship of friendliness and openness, which echoes the kind of relations that infect life outside the home. As a result the tension between outside and inside, embodied in the unity of love and discipline, is lost. This, in turn, means that the impulse to question and change our situation and self is lost.

Lasch argues that this degenerative process is directly due to the intervention of the helping professions in family life. The nature and, at the same time, justification of the intervention arises from an investment of everyday practices with a magnitude of consequences. This creates a climate of guilt and distrust which undermines the naturally confident relation between parents and children. Parents, in turn, seek to absolve themselves of this burdensome and self-defeating responsibility by delegating “discipline to someone else so that they themselves can pose as friendly helpers” (p. 185). Because the therapeutic paradigm reigns, authority can only be legitimized technically.

The problem with this as a practical curriculum is not that children “painlessly escape the crippling entanglements with their parents,” as the permissive ideologies rationalize, but that by removing themselves as objects of resistance, they remove the problem of authority from the conscious level. When authority is justified in terms of a therapeutic efficaciousness which understands its task technically, and thus seems not to be in need of conscious accountability, the perverse result is a confident passivity. The scenario we are left with is a bland, suburban exterior which shields a highly individualized and often horrifying fantasy life—the theme of many recent horror movies and the setting of a number of Canadian homicides. Authority, as a problem of legitimacy in itself, is comfortably but dangerously ignored.

Lasch seeks to enforce this argument through a critical review of the historical development of the sociology of the family and its uncritical relation with the conditions and times within which this development takes place. In so doing, he gives a picture of relations in modern society which inverts that of the naively optimistic social sciences he critiques. While they are uncritically cheerful, he is critically gloomy; while they are assertively positive, he is aggressively negative; and while they are forgetful of history, he is exercised by it. This raises the book's pre-eminent quality which is also its limit: He displays great scholarly passion for intervening in a discourse to defend the need for authoritative relations but shows a lack of social discourse which could develop the nature of that need as a particular problem.

Essentially, the relation Lasch has with his interlocutor is antagonistic. He understands his conversational alter as a force that mystifies inquiry on family issues. Therefore, in his critical exposition of this process, he sets for himself, as author, a limited aim:

I hope to convince the reader that the contemporary family is the product of human agency, not of abstract social "forces." (p. xx)

That is, he posits a reader who is a victim of the obscurantism of his interlocutor, and his task is the liberation of this reader. But this is essentially a therapeutic goal and thus a feature (though a livelier one) of the order he sets out to critique. Because of this confusion, his reader is brought face to face with a contradiction of modern life that does not seem to offer an even implicit dialectical solution. A reader who is so convinced has yet to be offered the possibility of an authoritative alternative. Such an alternative could only be supplied by a self-critical relation to what authorizes the argument for authority, i.e., a constructively critical relation to that which grounds his interest, rather than an interactionally critical relationship to those who undermine or oppose this interest.

That an authoritative alternative does not ground his argument now makes the confused and misunderstood responses which he acknowledges in the preface to this edition understandable. When human action is understood as agency, the distinctions between teachers, legislators, doctors, social scientists, judges, etc., lose their distinct force. They are now all collapsible as agents of social control, intervening and undermining familial authority. What is lost in this collapse is the authority of the distinction as referencing a particular experience. This is due to the absence of a version of public life which creates the space that makes the experience of these distinctions possible. The particular content of the activities indicated by the distinctions is transformed into a form of social control that emasculates their necessary contribution (Arendt, 1961). So Lasch can superficially interpret Durkheim's *Moral Education* (p. 13) as exemplifying the interest in educational reform and the school as another agency expropriating the functions of the family. The problem here, is that this trades on the very sociological perspective he sets out to critique. More importantly, this instances his denial of the opportunity for a productive discourse with a text that works on the issue crucial to his problem (i.e., the need for school to develop an authoritative rather than welfare relation to morality).

This leads us to the deep flaw in his argument—the authority of his argument and his version of authority is constituted as private and familial rather than public. What he circumvents is that the mere unity of love and discipline is not enough. The authority produced by that unity is accidental when its power is understood as force. Lasch's adherence to a strict Freudianism gives rise to this problem. Here authority is understood as the power to possess what is significant. So the father is authoritative in the family because of his monopoly over the source. The question of having authority now becomes the question of having the power to possess what the father possesses (the mother), or to possess what this possession represents (culture).² This is to constitute the family as the source of authority. But the familial relation is a welfare relation which, as Lasch sets out to show, undermines rather than exemplifies authority.

Thus the argument that privacy and authority in privacy have been undermined is seriously misplaced. This is the source of the problem and not any kind of solution to it. The emasculation of authority is due not to the mere invasion of privacy by public agencies. Rather, it is a feature of the increasing debilitation of public life where, as Arendt argues, welfare and domesticity rather than true necessity and excellence are the only concerns left (Arendt, 1958, especially Book II). If authority was oriented to in terms of origin rather than firstness, the issue and purpose would be one of exemplification rather than possession (Blum, 1978, especially Chap. 1).

Lasch raises an important issue with passion and liveliness. But his argument fails because of his unreflective and unambitious version of human action. This limit constricts the movement of the argument to one of strategy, generates an interlocutor who is to be opposed rather than one who provides positive resistance to his interest, and this makes for his polemical rather than discursive narrative.

Notes

1. For an accessible, if insularly rationalistic, description of this as the world view of marriages, see Berger & Kellner, 1970.
2. Peter McHugh first raised this analytic point for me in a graduate course on Education at York University entitled "Selected Topics in the Study of Analytic Theory."
3. See Alan Blum, 1978, especially Chapter I on the difference between orienting to one as an example and orienting to one as a first.

References

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