“Penislessness” is an odd word, one that fairly leaps off the page when it appears in Elizabeth Lunbeck’s new book, *The Americanization of Narcissism*. A professor of the history of psychiatry at Vanderbilt, Lunbeck is quoting something the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik said about the feminine condition in 1957. One would hardly have paused over such a word back then. The theories of Sigmund Freud used to provide American intellectuals with their main language for understanding human character. Freud’s hypotheses about infantile sexual traumas and their repression, his theories of erotic drives and the way civilization is built on “sublimating” them, his complexes and cathexes, his phallic symbols and Oedipal conflicts, penis envy and castration anxiety...most of these concepts have stood up very poorly against the contemporary scientific study of the brain, and all of them today sound quaint and slightly ridiculous. Except in France and Argentina, Freudian psychoanalysis is a dead religion.

But in the middle of the last century, almost every year a new book would be hailed and showered with awards for translating Western wisdom into Freudian language, or shining the Freudian searchlight onto some previously obscure corner of our culture. The classicist Norman O. Brown made a psychoanalytic reckoning with destruction and war in *Life Against Death* (1959). Anthropologist Ernest Becker won a Pulitzer Prize in 1974 for the way he applied Freud and Otto Rank to the problem of evil in *The Denial of Death*. And in 1979, the University of Rochester professor Christopher Lasch, a skeptical populist historian of progressivism, used the concept of “narcissism,” first hinted at by Freud in a series of essays written on the eve of the First World War, to capture the emptiness of American life in the aftermath of the 1960s.

Narcissism, for Lasch, was the besetting vice of a counterculture that, in Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell’s words, “produced little culture and countered nothing.” It also happened to fit in with his two main political preoccupations, which sat uncomfortably together even at the time. Lasch was both a ferocious opponent of capitalism and an uncompromising defender of the family. Narcissism allowed him to tie together Wonder Bread and hot tubs, air pollution and no-fault divorce. It summed up a culture in which people cared more about money and glitzy cars and having interesting experiences than about honor and duty and raising their children. Book-buyers across the country recognized in his sophisticated critique the United States of their quotidian nightmares, and this work of speculative sociology turned into a national bestseller. Its insights look truer with every passing year. In contrast to other Freudian books of the time and to Freudianism itself, *The Culture of Narcissism* has only grown in influence.

*Elizabeth Lunbeck does not seem terribly happy about this. Psychoanalysis still has a lot to teach us, in her view. So does the concept of ‘narcissism,’ and*
she objects to the way Lasch handled it. The 1970s were actually a time when innovative clinical psychologists, tacking away from the Freudian mainstream, were broadening our understanding of narcissism, showing that it could be a healthy thing. The "self-psychologist" Heinz Kohut saw narcissism as a source not only of self-centeredness but also of creativity. His rival Otto Kernberg saw it as seductive and dangerous—more the way Lasch did—but also as relatively rare. Lasch and other social critics who wrote bitterly about narcissism in the 1970s, Lunbeck believes, drowned out or misrepresented the message of Kohut and Kernberg. As a young scholar, she had a close-up view of these battles, since she had been hired by Lasch at the University of Rochester—a connection that goes unmentioned in the book. The Americanization of Narcissism is not confined to examining the 1970s. It is a much, much larger project that ranges across the 20th century. It addresses the views on narcissism of Philip Rieff of the University of Pennsylvania, Daniel Bell, and the journalist Tom Wolfe. But it is always Lasch for whom Lunbeck reserves her harshest words.

Lasch's canvas is remarkably broad: empty ambition (there is a section called "Changing Modes of Making It: From Horatio Alger to the Happy Hooker"), new therapies (the weekend therapy meetings known as "est," Scientology, and something called "rolfing," a kind of soft-tissue massage that Lasch enjoyed making fun of), the meaning of the big and (back then) relatively outmoded ideas of love and duty, and that this was a catastrophe. Lasch thought that the counterculture had managed "to liberate humanity from...outmoded ideas of love and duty," and that this was a catastrophe.
writes, “testifies to how decisively the conversation around it had changed.”

There is a tone-deafness in Lunbeck’s work. You would think, to read her, that Lasch was a Viennese shrink rather than a Nebraskan historian and that The Culture of Narcissism was a monograph on Kohut and Kernberg, to whom he devotes barely a half-dozen pages each. Narcissism, for Lasch, is a slangy term, a metaphor. Lunbeck sees it as a dumbing-down and complains of the way, in Lasch’s and others’ hands, “narcissism was transformed from a clinical concept signaling emotional impoverishment to a very different cultural indictment of an unseemly material plenitude.” But in using the word narcissism, the “culture” (i.e., Lasch) was only reappropriating what the “clinic” (i.e., Freud) had taken from it in the first place. Lasch owes the reader no more apology for borrowing from Freud than Freud does for borrowing from the Greeks.

There was really no one like Lasch. Lunbeck—whether despite having known him or because of it—seems less attentive than she might be to his ideology’s distinctiveness. Keen to cast him in an anti-feminist light, she notes that “Lasch’s tendentious take on consumption” had its roots in a tradition which “divided economic activity between a highly valued and well-disciplined sphere of productive activity and a devalued, suspect, and impossible-to-control sphere of consumption associated with women”—a tradition she identifies with Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations. But there is nothing Lasch laments more than capitalism’s tendency to produce specialization (or the division of labor) over time. A passage at the start of Haven in a Heartless World (1977), the book Lasch wrote before The Culture of Narcissism, hints that the free market is little more than a figment of Smith’s imagination. Similarly, Lasch’s contention that prostitution tells us a lot about American life is not as “bitter” as Lunbeck would have it. At the end of the Carter Administration, those who wanted to liberate the bedroom tended to want to crack down on the boardroom, and vice versa. Lasch saw corruption in both places. Prostitution, like narcissism, was to him a concept, a place for discussing his two preoccupations—empty sex and empty consumption.

In the end, Lunbeck is more interested in psychoanalysis than in Lasch, and rather early in the book her mind begins to wander from the fight she has picked. A hundred pages in, we are following her along on her
The purpose of most universities today is to produce committed leftists.
subject for polemics. Freud himself hinted in his pre-World War I papers that he was interested in something that went far beyond the tightly defined condition of narcissism. He spoke of Selbstgefühl or “self-regard,” although it is unlikely he would have made much of it. But soon Freud found himself clashing with colleagues who wanted to put such considerations at the center of clinical treatment. Freud felt that in a rigorous course of treatment there were grounds for withholding consolation even from desperately hurting patients. His protégé Sandór Ferenczi professed to want to draw out the patient’s secrets like “an affectionate mother.”

Over time, this school triumphed, because as the 20th century progressed and certitudes waned, the kind of person who came to psychoanalysis looking for help changed. The center of gravity of the psychoanalytic movement shifted from Central Europe to urban America, and the conflicts that society spurred on opposite sides of the Atlantic had much less in common than one might have assumed. The German refugee analyst Erik Erikson, who settled in Massachusetts in the 1930s, saw this most clearly. He was fascinated by Americans’ “strangely adolescent style of adulthood.” The New World ego, Erikson said, was “a fashionable and vain ‘ego’ which is its own originator and arbiter.” This brought more freedom than the continental shrinks were used to seeing in their patients, but it brought wholly unheard-of problems, too.

Early Freudian psychiatry had been about adjusting patients to norms that almost everyone would agree were good. Modern life undermined this aim. “The patient of today,” according to Erikson, “suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should—or, indeed, might—be or become.” These were problems of identity, or what Erikson called “ego-identity.” Lunbeck believes that this search for identity has much in common with what Lasch and others derided as narcissism. Thus it is not such a surprise that narcissism was both discovered and derided at the same time in the 1970s. Narcissism was not just a club to beat the counterculture with; it was—for its defenders—a route into both the “self-esteem” movement and what we now call identity politics.

The strange thing about this book is that Lunbeck gives next to no acknowledgment that she is standing in the Ozymandian ruins of a vanished cult. She notes that Erikson and Kohut, in their prime, were both dimly viewed by the Freudian establishment, and that both succeeded nonetheless. For her this is a sign of liberation and new beginnings, of “mainstream classical psychoanalysis on the eve of its 1970s reorientation around narcissism.” But it may also show the waning authority of psychoanalysis more generally. Cultures collapse as systems. Remedies for alienation collapse along with alienation. Perestroika felt like a “reorientation,” too. The approaching agony of an institution can often present itself to reformers as a joyous liberation or new beginning. In 1979, when psychoanalysis was reaching certain exceptionally acute conclusions about dying institutions, it was a dying institution itself.

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