

Café Narcissism

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The 1979 Cortland Conference marked a decisive shift in the adventures of *Telos* by opening up a debate on narcissism that would pave the way for later contests that, in turn, symbolize in the eyes of many, the errant swerve of Marxism and post-Marxist critical theory. In what follows we examine the vibrant theoretical community at Cortland during the late-70s and early 80s, revisit the conference itself, and reflect on the narcissism concept and its relationship to anti-capitalist struggle in a way that is both attuned to debates surrounding the 1979 conference as well as its ongoing relevance for critical theory today.

SUNY Cortland's Theoretical Community

A faculty-student project to create a “theoretical community” focused on critical theory developed at SUNY Cortland in 1978 and continued through the early 1980s. Spearheaded by sociologists Frank Hearn and John Alt, the project included an undergraduate critical theory seminar, a campus presentation by Christopher Lasch, and a conference on narcissism that featured Russell Jacoby, Stanley Aronowitz, Stuart Ewen, Joel Kovel, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Paul Piccone. The heyday of this project is documented in a review essay in *Teaching Sociology* and conference proceedings in *Telos*, as well as in articles written by students for the campus newspaper, *The Press*, during the 1978-79 and 1979-80 academic years (Alt et al. 1979; Alt and Hearn 1980; Cleary 1979; Faricellia 1978; Hilker 1980; Kattau 1979; Kattau and Faricellia 1980).

The first manifestation of Cortland's theoretical community project was a 3-credit seminar in the fall of 1978 that involved four faculty and seven undergraduate students. The faculty members were Frank Hearn and John Alt (sociology), Gerald Surette (economics) and John Marciano (education). While the faculty originally sought to create a Cortland theoretical community that consisted of their peers, the idea for a seminar that included undergraduates developed in the context of their interaction with students who revealed an unspecified discontent with the society they lived in and sought a more participatory educational experience than was typical of their courses. From the perspective of the faculty involved, the goal of the seminar was to engage students and faculty in a collaborative project to develop an objective theory of subjectivity – “a theory which specifies the dialectic of object and subject, of historical society and the self” – in contrast to a “narcissistic, subjective search for subjectivity.” From the start, Hearn and Alt posited the spread of narcissism in contemporary capitalist society as the focal point of their endeavor to transcend rational forms of domination. In their view, the narcissistic, subjective search for subjectivity blocked a true understanding of the forms of domination embedded in capitalist institutions for it prevented human beings from realizing the dialectical relationship between themselves and society. Understanding the “dialectic of object and subject, of historical society and the self” was crucial for developing a critical theory that could emancipate and allow us to transcend the reality of domination that inhibited the creation of a good society. (Alt et al. 1978: 90). Other faculty involved in the seminar and subsequent activities associated with the Cortland theoretical community were less convinced of the centrality of narcissism, as were many of the students involved. In a 2009 interview, Gerald Surette commented that the development of the Cortland theoretical community in general and the Conference on Narcissism in particular, “brought together an amalgam of different intellectual forces to discuss the culture clashes of the time.” In his view, narcissism was one of many expressions of those culture clashes in the 1970s and

served as a point of departure in efforts to understand subjective responses to capitalist crises and possibilities for transformative action.

For most of the students, the critical theory seminar had a simpler and less specific aim. As one student wrote in a reflective essay a few months after the seminar ended "...the idea of a community of rational speakers rather than another course to spoon feed students was stressed. The only prerequisites for the course were dissatisfaction with previous education and a feeling that life is worth living; odd requirements for a course, but necessary to reach an understanding of the reasons for the dissatisfaction that sometimes pervades our lives" (Kattau 1979). Accordingly, the faculty goal of "transmitting the tradition and problematic of critical theory as formulated in such classics as *Escape from Freedom* and *One Dimensional Man* and in such contemporary works as *Haven in a Heartless World* and *Social Amnesia* was combined with the joint student-faculty effort to create an "open space where theory is grounded in a community of people committed to the pursuit of knowledge and where community is guided and given meaning by theory" (Alt et al. 1979: 90-91). A review essay written by seminar participants emphasized the dual importance of "appropriation of theoretical meaning" from the four texts discussed as well as "the organizational mode of this appropriation." Following Alvin Gouldner's conceptualization of a theoretical community, the Cortland project sought to develop "a community of rational speakers committed to the impersonal code of dialectical discourse ... to allow distancing from each participant's own subjectivity in a manner comparable to the meta-theoretical idea of an objective theory of subjectivity." Acknowledging that that process was "agonizing and painful for many and the results [were] uneven and difficult to determine..." the review ended on an optimistic note.

...[M]any went through some profound changes in their understanding of their own relationship to society; in fact, it is better said that the knowledge and collective effort changed that relationship and made it more problematic. If anything, a sense of tension and conflict between self and society, once obliterated by the onset of one-dimensionality and narcissism, has been restored for a small group of people. In this sense, then, the organized system of domination is that much weaker (Alt et al. 1979: 97).

A reflective essay written for the campus newspaper by a student participant offered a similarly positive assessment of the seminar, but affirmed students' greater focus on its implications for their educational experience rather than on the substantive meaning of one-dimensionality and narcissism. Moreover, despite the excitement engendered by "a shared sense of something different happening..." this student recognized the difficulties that resulted from inequality inherent in the faculty-student relationship.

To leave behind one's personal baggage and create these conditions that allowed for free flowing conversation to uncover and excavate the basis of underlying discontent, and to find meaning in a world where myriads of meaning confuse and obfuscate issues, proved difficult.

Equally hindering [were] the academic differences between faculty and students. The former, overflowing with insight into exciting yet frightening ideas, tended to dominate the discussions, while the latter listened intently, but unable to articulate, remained silent. This situation was potentially dangerous. While leadership is necessary, so too is critical consciousness to question and clarify proposed interpretations and ideas (Kattau 1979: 9).

Student and faculty interest in maintaining the critical theory project beyond the seminar was evidenced by their efforts to expand its reach. The faculty involved in the seminar engaged more of their colleagues to join in on book discussions that formed the core activity of the community and in planning a Cortland conference on narcissism for the following academic year. Additional students joined as well. Some were encouraged to participate by faculty they took courses with and others were prompted by a series of Op-Ed pieces on socialism and capitalism that began in the fall, 1978 issues of the student newspaper and continued the following semester. The catalyst for the latter was an article titled "Is Capitalism an American Ideal?" (Fratarcangelo 1978). Three students replied with extensive articles, creating a debate among conservative and liberal students, including two from the critical theory seminar. The student authors met to discuss their different perspectives, often bringing interested friends. While most of the students involved in the critical theory seminar were sociology majors, the gatherings prompted by the newspaper exchanges brought a more diverse group of students, including majors in psychology, philosophy, biology, history, and English. The student newspaper ran a feature story on the development of these informal student gatherings, emphasizing that those involved "were not coming together to 'bicker' over theories and ideas they firmly believe in, but were meeting to share information and learn from rational discussion." The article, written by a student in the critical theory seminar, went on to explain the students' goals.

Involved in the quest for establishing 'theoretical communities' dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, these undergraduates share an unhappiness they feel other students are also experiencing. A fundamental conviction they share is that American capitalism is at a crisis stage and in need of serious assessment and change. Accordingly, they are unhappy with their fragmented education and frustrated by their college social lives, both of which ignore the development of critical thought (Faricellia 1978).

Some of the students brought into the dialogue initiated by the newspaper debate began to participate in the theoretical community headed by Hearn, Alt, and the other faculty who organized the critical theory seminar. Thus, the faculty objective, which was to create a theoretical community engaged in critical theory, dovetailed with the students' more general desire to understand the basis of their discontent with life in modern society and what they perceived to be a limited and unchallenging educational system.

The Cortland theoretical community was sustained over time by its book discussions and social gatherings, as well as its work to organize a major conference on the Cortland campus. There was a concerted effort to create opportunities for members to interact on a regular basis, including through the summer months when most regular campus activity was suspended. Participants tried to address the unequal intellectual/academic position of faculty relative to students through pot luck suppers (at faculty homes and student apartments) and other social activities (a Bob Dylan concert in Syracuse) that had the potential to level their statuses through meetings outside of the physical spaces of the campus and appealed to interests that transcended their age and status differences. Interactions thus involved a combination of the group's intellectual pursuits and other activities that provided a basis for real camaraderie and friendship. Despite the challenges faced, the group maintained a solid focus on the project and an ambitious agenda to sustain and expand it. The Cortland Conference on Narcissism in 1980 was the climax of their efforts.

The Cortland Conference

Narcissism was a central theme of the discourse that evolved within the two-year heyday of Cortland's critical theory project. As indicated earlier, Frank Hearn and John Alt, the driving forces behind the Cortland theoretical community, were firmly focused on this, with other faculty and students less solidly so and in some cases, openly rejecting it. The varied perspectives on narcissism among faculty and student participants surfaced during discussions of Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* in the critical theory seminar and during and after his February, 1979 lecture on campus titled "The Nuclear Family and Its Critics." In the review essay written about the seminar experience, participants acknowledged diverging views about Lasch's analysis as follows:

Because he critiqued feminism as part of those social forces which robbed the family of its socialization functions, some members in the project interpreted Lasch as advocating a return to the patriarchal family and the suffocating confinement of women associated with this family form. Others disagreed and felt he was concerned with a much different issue: the emergence of narcissism as the dominant personality type of late capitalism and the inability of this person to act autonomously in conformance with any set of normative standards. Narcissism is thus theorized as a new form of domination: the ideals of freedom and justice are now displaced from the one-dimensional society and equated with the amorphousness and anomie of the impulsive and sensory self. Society, with its logic of capitalism exchange and technical rationality, remains undisturbed and unchallenged. The parent, like the worker, has lost those skills necessary for control over, and relatedness to, the products of human activity. This problematic suggests not the restoration of patriarchal authority and the subjection of women, but the restoration of parental authority over the social reproduction process. And this is possible only to the extent that capitalism and its logic of technical rationality (embodied in the bureaucratic administration of the helping professions and the state) is dissolved. It must be remembered, therefore, that the modern formless family and its narcissistic children are itself the products of a broader and destructive social process. (Alt et al. 1979: 95).

Divergence of perspectives about the perceived tension between an analysis of contemporary society centered on narcissism and feminist goals for social change sharpened in the context of Lasch's campus lecture. The student newspaper's article about the lecture, written by Cathy Kattau, one of the students involved in the critical theory seminar, was titled "Lasch Defends Nuclear Family." Kattau reported that 500 people attended the lecture and highlighted what Lasch termed as his "qualified defense of the nuclear family." According to Kattau, a key question Lasch addressed was "whether history is moving inexorably in a progressive direction,' and if the individual produced by the permissive, companionate family of today is in fact more psychically fit than the individual produced by the

‘sexually repressive’ bourgeois family of the nineteenth century.” Lasch was quoted as saying that “the decline of paternal authority has not created a democratic society of autonomous self-reliant individuals, as critics of ... paternal authority had all hoped” and that narcissism, as a new personality type, reflected “the qualities wrought by a ‘decadent capitalism... oriented toward consumption, leisure, and psychic survival.’” (Kattau, 1979). Lasch’s defense of the nuclear family was interpreted by some members of the theoretical community as a rejection of feminist ideals for women’s emancipation from domination in the context of patriarchal capitalism. In the aftermath of Lasch’s visit to Cortland, a few new female students joined the theoretical community in order to express their concerns about its perceived anti-feminism. Female students who were among the original group that participated in the Fall, 1978 seminar felt similarly uneasy about what they perceived to be Lasch’s tendency to equate feminism with narcissism, a tendency revealed by some of the Cortland faculty participants as well. At a memorial service for Frank Hearn, which took place a few months after his death in 2000, former student and seminar participant Casey Cleary-Hammarstedt, gave an account of the impact of the experience (and Hearn in particular) on her life. Describing the critical theory seminar as “a kind of Boot Camp for the Mind,” she acknowledged the profound impact it had on students. (Of the six students in the seminar, four wrote tributes to Hearn for the memorial service that highlighted the significance of the theoretical community experience in their lives, acknowledging him as the driving force for its development). While emphasizing her admiration for and gratitude to Hearn, who was clearly a profound mentor and teacher, Cleary-Hammarstadt recalled the “divide” within the Cortland group, which crystallized during discussions of Lasch’s *Haven in a Heartless World*. “Frank appreciated the book a great deal and agreed with its analysis. To some of the rest of us it read as an ahistorical and idealistic analysis of families headed by men that denied the harms experienced by women and children.” She further explained the tensions she saw in the broader theoretical community project.

Our theoretical community evolved over time too. From my perspective there were two great tensions that led to it gradually dissipating. Those tensions were feminism and whether any praxis would complement our theoretical endeavors. My women friends, three of whom I also lived with, naturally began wondering about the place of women in this analysis and contributions a feminist perspective could bring to our evolving worldview (Cleary-Hammarstedt 2001).

Discussions of Lasch’s campus presentation and book, *Haven in a Heartless World*, were among the most animated and thought-provoking interactions for those who participated in the theoretical community. While the intellectual excitement that surrounded the critical theory project remained strong, differing perspectives on the significance of narcissism (and whether it was alienating or potentially liberating as a form of resistance to capitalist domination) became a salient feature of the group’s discourse leading up to and after the April, 1980 Cortland Conference on Narcissism.

The conference was conceived as an effort to explore cultural trends in the U.S. that arose in response to capitalist crises, with a focus on narcissism and its political implications. Themes that ran through the presentations included “narcissism as a psychological disorder, the relation between mass culture and narcissism, the positive and negative political implications of narcissism, and the importance of narcissism as a phenomenon with regard to possibilities for political change” (Kattau and Faricellia 1980:7). Russell Jacoby, who gave the opening lecture, emphasized the permanent and “normal” nature of capitalist crises and posited narcissism as “both continuous and discontinuous with traditional bourgeois individualism” (Alt and Hearn 1980: 49). He argued that narcissism was not a new phenomenon of the 1970s, but that what seemed new was “the widespread lack of love and interest in intimate others, reflected in extended singlehood, dissolving marriages, childless marriages, and casual relationships in general” (Alt and Hearn 1980: 50).

Stanley Aronowitz criticized Lasch’s analysis and provided a defense of the cultural version of narcissism, particularly with regard to its subversive elements within the working class. He argued that “the clinical approach to narcissism only reveals a bourgeois preoccupation with the threat to work discipline and state authority. In contrast, cultural narcissism is best understood as the ‘great refusal’: a call for sensory enjoyment in a technological universe, and the desire for an empowered self in a one-dimensional environment.” Thus Aronowitz presented narcissism as a liberating force, as seen, for example, in the spectacle and hegemony of sports such as boxing, through which “working class people are able to escape the internalized alienation of bourgeois culture” (Hearn and Alt 1980:51).

In contrast to Aronowitz’s “stress on the self-actualizing, resistance, or rebellious interpretation of mass culture, Ewen argued that mass culture is a powerful instrument of ideological hegemony.” For Ewen, narcissism and mass culture were “two sides of a project of capitalist hegemony” with a shift from “the narcissistic sensibilities of the privatized self to a ‘moral economy of war.’” While Ewen’s talk provoked discussion that revealed differing views about the effects of mass culture on possibilities for resistance, his presentation drew out possible connections

between narcissism and the nationalism fostered by mass culture, particularly advertising (Alt and Hearn 1980: 52-53; Kattau and Faricellia: 1980:7, 20).

Joel Kovel's presentation focused on the shift from "normal to pathological narcissism." Kovel supported Lasch's notion that the bourgeois family had been undermined by late capitalism, violating "the integrity of the parental object" and producing "de-sociated characters which assist in the reproduction of capitalist relations." He called for political and collective solutions that would lead to the development of an adequate intermediary between the individual and society. Discussion following Kovel's talk called for a distinction between pathological and adaptive narcissism, the latter being less a sign of "disordered individual development" than "an adaptive response to the erosion of durable relationships, meaningful standards, and consensual values."

Jean Eshtain offered a more optimistic analysis of contemporary cultural trends. She "found reconstructive forces in a variety of locations: traditional churches, the social gospel, traditional family structures, traditional definitions of femininity, the individualized but heroic search for form, the power of play and fantasy." Eshtain's presentation provoked discussion centered on the difference between identifying possibilities for transformation that are purely abstract rather than actualizable.

In the final conference presentation, Paul Piccone argued that "an analysis of contemporary capitalism must go beyond the cultural and psychological levels outline by Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (Kattau and Faricellia 1980: 7). Piccone tried to "go beyond critical theory's traditional perspective and its theories of the 'totally administered society'..." He argued, presciently, that dwelling on narcissism may "prove fatal for the Left" and that an "uncritical recycling of traditional categories becomes appropriated by the very system it attempts to criticize." Hearn and Alt explain the thrust of Piccone's talk as follows:

The narcissism thesis becomes part of that which it criticizes when its traditional categories and ideals are instrumentalized by others (e.g., Carter) to justify the restoration of the old morality in the face of the crumbling of existing social authority. Piccone sought a different theoretical articulation of the concept of the narcissistic individual. While such individuals are created by and useful for the reproduction of capitalist consumerism, they are increasingly dysfunctional for the formal efficiency of the bureaucratic apparatus. In contrast to Lasch's theory of the therapeutic and self-aggrandizing logic of bureaucracy, Piccone emphasized the bureaucracy's core principle of formal rationality. The social problem is that the hedonistic individual is incapable of reproducing the formal rationality necessary to control and regulate corporate and governmental bureaucracies. In order to function effectively, the bureaucratic apparatus needs internal as well as external "checks and balances" provided by non-narcissistic individuals. Without this, bureaucracies become clumsy, unwieldy, inefficient, and perhaps dangerous forms of social organization. And to the extent that bureaucratic authority responds to the "irresponsibility" of the narcissist (as employee or client) with more bureaucratic regulations and safeguards, it increases, rather than reduces, the contradiction between the cultural narcissist and the organizational principles of formal rationality. The cultural narcissist has no interest in bureaucratic requirements for formal rationality and human involvement and resents efforts to formally regulate every dimension of activity. This contradiction can only lead to the increase of bureaucratic management and worsening of the contradiction (Alt and Hearn 1980: 56).

Piccone emphasized the Left's need to formulate new categories to engage in meaningful critique and warned that the future cannot be built on "frank reconstruction of the recent past" (Kattau and Faricellia 1980:20).

Narcissism

Five years after the Cortland Conference Hearn continued to ruminate on the problem of narcissism:

In a world where it is difficult to care for others, each looks to care for oneself, and the result is flight from public life and search for psychic survival. Narcissists experience life as impoverished, empty, and purposeless; they find interpersonal relations cold and manipulative. The narcissistic preoccupation with the self – relating to objects as extensions of the self, defining others as objects existing to serve its self – rests on and fosters a devaluation of others. The inability to care that is characteristic of narcissism, the sense that there is no one to turn to for support in time of need, furthers the effort to create a self-absorption that will enable the person to need no one at all. Finding no meaning in relationships with others, the narcissist turns inward (1985: 118-19).

While sympathetic to Lasch's perspective that "narcissism, far from contradicting advanced capitalism, stands as one of its characteristic features" Hearn nonetheless cautioned that "the critique of modernism [of the kind put forth by both Bell and Lasch] expands to become a critique of modernity and modernization, one which often implies a rejection of the important and truly progressive achievements of each. The ambiguity which should characterize our

understanding of the dialectical character of modernity ... is lost in what frequently becomes an attempt to vilify the accomplishments of modern society in the name of some romanticized image of the past” (1985: 118, 125). The impact of Lasch’s critique of narcissism on the Cortland theoretical community and the subsequent conference and *Telos* issue continues to percolate in the work of contemporary critical theorists.

For Zizek, the question is not simply one of how narcissism relates to capitalism as a synchronic abstraction but in the historically shifting forms of capital accumulation. In his analysis of the development of the Hitchcockian cinematic universe, for example, he makes the case that each stage of capitalist development supports its own preeminent form of subjectivity: liberal capitalism and the autonomous bourgeois individualist we associate with the Protestant work ethic; imperialist state capitalism (i.e., Fordism) and “the resigned paternal figure” and “organization man”; and finally postindustrial or late capitalism (i.e., post-Fordism) and the “‘pathological narcissist’, the form of subjectivity that characterizes the so-called ‘society of consumption’” where the more we consume the less we ‘enjoy’ and the more we are punished for failure by insane maternal superego injunctions (1992: 5; 1991: 102-03).[i]

The pathological narcissist, says Zizek, “knows only the ‘rules of the (social) game’ enabling him to manipulate others; social relations constitute for him a playing field in which he assumes ‘roles,’ not proper symbolic mandates; he stays clear of any kind of binding commitment that would imply a proper symbolic identification. He is a radical conformist who paradoxically experiences himself as an outlaw” (1991: 102-03). Quoting Lasch, Zizek lays bare the ultimate tragedy of narcissism: harsh superego punishment and “submission to the rules of social intercourse” without “ground[ing] those rules in a code of moral conduct” (1991: 103). Even though critical theory has done a good job in situating narcissism within the horizon of capitalist structures and processes it has done so at the expense of situating narcissism along its social (sociological) continuum, namely, as one coordinate within the larger problem of egoism and, on top of that, the dialectical relationship between selfishness and othering.

To back up to psychology: Freud posited a dynamic theory of narcissism where libido allocation, in the normal person, is withdrawn from external objects relative to changes in ego states – the sick person, for example, withdraws libido investments in objects and, in so doing, ceases to love them (Freud [1914] 1959). In the pathological form outlined by Zizek we find not simply mundane libido disinvestments but psychosis. However, with this, we go no further than recognizing that capitalism has damaged the presumptive subject-object of history. Capitalism has made us all pathologically ill. Giving the keynote address at the Cortland conference, Jacoby conceded the permanent nature of capitalist crises and stressed that beating the crisis drum “only fosters indifference and retreat into the self ...” (Alt and Hearn 1980: 49).

If capitalism is in a ‘permanent crisis,’ then this state is normal and rational for the system. Yet, in these contexts, the individual becomes abnormal and irrational, or narcissistic. As he put it, it is possible to speak of an inverse relation wherein a ‘healthy’ capitalism fosters and is sustained by the personal crises manifested by narcissism. Jacoby sought to elaborate the historical versus the contemporary dimensions of narcissism, perhaps a reaction to the tendency to view narcissism as something emerging from the American 1970s. Narcissism, he argued, is both continuous and discontinuous with traditional bourgeois individualism” (ibid).

What most critics of capital bemoan is not diseased subjectivity per se (in fact, for orthodox Marxists, the more diseased the better – the rot of humanity was its very strength) but apathy vis-à-vis ostensibly radical, collective causes. However, if late capitalism has created armies of narcissists it is also true that narcissism (one pathological form of egoism) is never present, oddly enough, without an altruistic (othering) buried at its very core. Shifting to sociology, it was Durkheim who ingeniously worked out the paradox of egoism and altruism in *Suicide* where we find an underground tunnel running between these countervailing forces.[ii]

One ‘positive’ combination of egoism and altruism was located, according to Durkheim, among Jewish communities that exhibited both ‘primitive’ solidarity and cosmopolitan individuality ([1897] 1951: 167-68) whereas the pathological or ‘negative’ form was similar to what later would be called the ‘authoritarian personality’ – decades before the Frankfurt School’s work on social sadism Durkheim had already identified the bizarre fusion of egoism and altruism as it was manifested in the German adoration of the charismatic hero and worship of the state; he called it “will mania” or the “morbid hypertrophy of the will.”

Now what we find at the base of the mentality we have been studying is precisely a sort of attempt to rise ‘above all human forces,’ to master them and exercise full and absolute sovereignty over them.... The individual is not strong enough to realize this ideal, the essential principle of which is domination; the State can and must attain to it by gathering firmly into its hand the sum of individual energies and directing them all to this supreme end. The State is the sole concrete and historic form possible to the Superman of whom Nietzsche[iii] was the prophet and harbinger, and the German State must put

forth all its strength to become this Superman. The German State must be 'über Alles' (above all). Superior to all private wills, individual or collective, superior to the moral laws themselves, without any law save that imposed by itself, it will be able to triumph over all resistance and rule by constraint, when it cannot secure voluntary acceptance. To affirm its power more impressively, we shall even find it exciting the whole world against itself, and lightheartedly braving universal anger (Durkheim 1915: 44-45).

Nation, Superman, Folk, People, God, etc., are all paranoid constructs, binding, non-specular entities that fill empty intersubjective space, the hinge upon which turns the successful subject-object relation (Dolar 1992: 33-34; Žižek 2006). But progressive politics (however you care to define that) are founded on paranoid constructs as well, an 'Other of the Other' – "a hidden subject who pulls the strings of the great Other (the symbolic order) ... the one who speaks through us ... who controls our thoughts.... The paranoid construction enables us to escape the fact that 'the Other does not exist' ... that it does not exist as a consistent, closed order..." (Žižek 1991: 18). When the Frankfurt school undertook its study of the wartime American worker the least startling conclusion was that more or less half of the sample was hobbled to one extent or another by antisemitism. More troubling, in retrospect, is not only that fundamental Left ideological cornerstones turned out to be wishful thinking but that the reliable bulwarks against fascism turned out to be not "The Workers" in the classical sense but the "organization man" (white collar workers) and young, liberal, educated women with the least exposure to Left or Labor ideology also possessing a strong commitment to the fantasy of the 'American Dream' of possessive individualism (Worrell 2008). Here it is important to double back to the most remarkable conclusion we can draw from Durkheim's analysis of egoism and altruism: the vigorous and aggressive struggle against narcissism contains its own quantum of self-destructiveness, a desire to be relieved of the burden of being an individual, the desire to be engulfed by some object and to draw others under this moral canopy, to be absorbed and reduced to a zero point and be converted into a divine tool (cf. Fromm 1973). Aronowitz was keyed into just this paradox of narcissism at the Cortland conference: "The paranoid assertion that narcissism has become rampant in Western, particularly American, culture is not entirely false." But the critique of narcissism, especially among those where the boundary between Left and Right had become blurred, tended toward the reproduction of capitalist tensions rather than their resolution: "The attack on narcissism is the protest of those intellectuals who have been integrated into late capitalism as producers of its ideology and guardians of its moral norms.... Here are the guilty professors [Bell, Wilson, Lasch, etc.] the new moral guardians of a Victorian morality that once more receives a breath, enunciating their rage against narcissism and producing a new cannon of counterrevolution.... What is ... alarming about the recent outburst of anti-narcissism is its implication for the development of movements of workers, women, and racial and national minorities. A chief characteristic of the subaltern classes of capitalist society consists precisely in their deep respect for authority [and] their otherness..." (Aronowitz 1980: 70, 71, 72).

When the Soviet Union fell apart in the 80s the paleo-conservative dream turned out to be a catastrophe: the Evil Empire, the Enemy vanished taking with it the fantasy support for isolationist nationalism and the populist revolt against International Bankers that had, since the days of Long and Coughlin, been portrayed as entwined with the global communist movement. In short, their fantasy projection went up in smoke. In the name of individual freedom paleo-conservative/restorationist politics rests on the foundations of altruistic self-destruction and sacrifice of the self for the greater cause (America, God's Country). Marxism rested on a parallel foundation of social emancipation at the price of altruistic self-destruction. Undoubtedly, the Marxist critique of capital hits the nail on the head: egoism and narcissism render the individual and the entire working class susceptible to higher rates of exploitability in the form of longer working hours and lower wages, etc. However, to return to the Frankfurt School's labor study, it was also the unaligned individual who was most resistant to mass authoritarianism.

Society modeled on Bates Motel (Psycho) would be bad but the "pathological narcissist" is merely an ideal type, a theoretical purity and not a form of libidinal economy approximated by normal members of bourgeois or 'postmodern' society. With a tinge of resentment perhaps, Hearn notes that his critique of narcissism started with the pure form of "clinical or pathological narcissism" and that it was distinct from the "emerging narcissistic character structure which is increasingly, though certainly not exclusively, found among well-to-do, educated young adults" (1985: 119).^[iv] The upshot of this criticism, if we frame it properly, is simply this: without me/us/it/etc., you are nothing, incomplete: "Arising in the absence of durable relationships, meaningful standards and consensual values, adaptive [normal] narcissism testifies to individual impotence and inner emptiness, to the damaged self, not the ascendent self" (Hearn 1985: 120). The romantic opposition to capital posits no less a charismatic claim than that made by capital itself, they are both cases of subsumption by a third that enjoys (Simmel 1950: 154-56) at the

expense of the individual; redemption of the self makes its presence felt in the demand for abnegation of the self. In order to truly live, in other words, one must 'die' for It (whatever the It is) and be reborn under the sign of power and stalked by an alien shadow (Worrell 2009). Ultimately, the universal (Left, Right, Post) railing against narcissism, as well as their attendant truth claims, conceals a will to power: "It shall become smooth and serve the spirit as its mirror and reflection. That is your whole will, you who are wisest: a will to power – when you speak of good and evil too, and of valuations. You still want to create the world before which you can kneel: that is your ultimate hope and intoxication" (Nietzsche 1954: 225). This world constructed by the will to power is one built on top of a graveyard.

On a thousand bridges and paths they shall throng to the future, and ever more war and inequality shall divide them: thus does my great love make me speak. In their hostilities they shall become inventors of images and ghosts, and with their images and ghosts they shall yet fight the highest fight against one another. Good and evil, and rich and poor, and high and low, and all the names of values – arms shall they be and clattering signs that life must overcome itself again and again. Life wants to build itself up into the heights with pillars and steps; it wants to look into vast distances and out toward stirring beauties: therefore it requires height. And because it requires height, it requires steps and contradiction among the steps and the climbers (Nietzsche 1954: 213).

Asceticism, self-negation, othering, the conquering of the self, and the collective production of guilt: "For it is guilt that makes the world go round, that reminds us from within of our obligation to reproduce the social order even as we reject these inscriptions that are handed down from above and without" (Aronowitz 1980: 71).

The critique of narcissism veils, not very subtly, the terror of a great resignation, a world where people no longer resonate with or respond to the romantic call for subsumption under some collective illusion. Care for the self is, here, rejected as "irresponsibility" and countered by "enormous" quantities of "hard work and discipline" as well as "traditional sublimation" necessary for "counter-hegemonic struggle" (Piccone 1980: 116). Falling under the wheels of the tremendous We can make no greater claim to authenticity over any other mode of action and the demand for subsumption of the person (qua member) barely hides its own selfish and cynical intentions: "it remains to be shown how the narcissistic personality can be conned into investing the immense amount of social energy required by the construction of a 'socialist' society. Even more recalcitrant than Russian peasants, modern narcissists may be coerced into action only by a repressive bureaucratic apparatus much more efficient and ruthless than the present one – an option morally and politically inconceivable. Stalin's troubles with recalcitrant peasants will appear trivial compared to those confronted by any 'socialist' regime trying to cope with the narcissistic personality" (Piccone 1980: 117-18). Piccone was correct to question the relationship between sexual liberation, hedonism, and social emancipation and he was undoubtedly on target when he said that "For radicals to trot out the narcissistic personality as the new potential agency of social change is an embarrassing act of utmost political desperation" (1980: 118) but, as we have argued, 'narcissism' veils a will to power and is a red herring that dumps guilt on those that would shirk their responsibility toward a revitalized public sphere. Of course, few would deride the notion and necessity of a vibrant and rational public sphere but as many a perplexed reader observed, Telos was incapable of constructing a rational or plausible model of social organization or participation free of charisma and fantastic assumptions about the nature of the populace.

Endnotes

1. Direct all correspondence to Mark Worrell: worrellm@cortland.edu. Thanks to Ben Agger, Robert J. Antonio, Tim Luke, and Gerald Surette. Jamie Dangler (formerly Jamie Faricellia) was one of the students who participated in the Cortland Critical Theory Seminar and Theoretical Community.

[i] The notion of "hedonistic asceticism" neatly summarizes the paradox of narcissistic enjoyment: "today, in our allegedly permissive society ... asceticism assumes precisely the form of its opposite, of the generalized injunction 'Enjoy!'"

We are all under the spell of this injunction, with the result that our enjoyment is more hampered than ever" (Zizek 2006: 37, 38). Zizek attributes three object forms corresponding to these types of subjectivity: the objet petit a – "a pure semblance" or "gap in the center of the symbolic order"; the signifier of the barred other, an "index of the father's impotence"; and finally the Phi that "gives body to" the "enjoyment of the maternal superego" (1992: 8).

[ii] The dynamic relationship between egoism and

altruism is not unrelated, in its 'negative' form, to the relationship between sadism and masochism: "Sadism and masochism, which are invariably linked together, are opposites in behavioristic terms, but they are actually two different facets of one fundamental situation: the sense of vital impotence.... Because of the close connection between sadism and masochism it is more correct to speak of a sadomasochistic character, even though the one or the other aspect will be more dominant in a particular person" (Fromm 1973: 292).

[iii] We have to separate the actual philosophy of Nietzsche (of which Durkheim gets wrong) from the political exploitation of Nietzsche (which Durkheim gets correct).

[iv] Though we would have to place the comment on a sliding scale of affluence to account for the difference between the bourgeoisie and the typical academic, Horkheimer astutely observes: "open advocacy of egoism is unwelcome precisely to those who embody it most strongly" ([1936] 1993: 56).

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