

VOLUME XIV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2014

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

William
Voegeli:
**Redskins
&
Thin Skins**

Gabriel
Schoenfeld:
**Whistle-
blowers
& Traitors**

Steven F.
Hayward:
**Campus
Authoritarians**

John J.
Miller:
**The Horror,
the Horror**

Christopher
Flannery:
**Shakespeare
in America**



Christopher
Caldwell:
**Our
Narcissism**

Jean M.
Yarbrough:
**T.R., Taft, &
Doris Kearns
Goodwin**

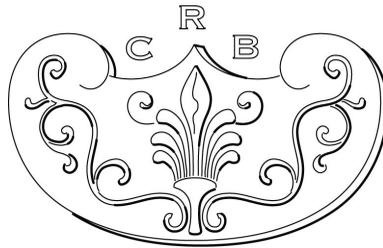
Algis
Valiunas:
**Bach the
Transcendent**

Anthony
Paletta:
**Allan
Greenberg,
Classical
Architect**

Martha
Bayles:
**House
of
Cards**

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95
IN CANADA: \$7.95



Book Review by Christopher Caldwell

FREUDIAN SLIP

The Americanization of Narcissism, by Elizabeth Lunbeck.
Harvard University Press, 384 pages, \$35

“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 hap-

pened 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.

THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM WAS not just a disruptive argument in psychoanalytic circles. It became a political scandal. Jimmy Carter read the book—thanks, he said, to his having “mastered the art of speed reading”—and invited Lasch to the White House to discuss it over dinner, in the company of Bell, Jesse Jackson, and Bill Moyers. According to the historian Eric Miller, author of a splendid biography of Lasch called *Hope in a Scattering Time* (2010), Lasch was uncomfortable that evening, but stayed in touch with Carter aide Jody Powell. Carter’s speechwriters would pillage the *Narcissism* book for a few turns of phrase to use in the president’s much-ridiculed address to the nation on July 15, 1979—later known as the “malaise speech.” Lasch was disappointed to see his words used to berate the American people. He later wrote to Carter’s pollster Patrick Caddell that his book condemned “above all the culture of...the managerial and professional elite that gets most of the social and economic advantages.” That places Lasch in a curious position, as both the most insightful critic of the Carter Administration’s disconnection from American society and the inspiration for its single most disconnected moment.

Lasch wound up publishing the book at W.W. Norton because his editors at Alfred A. Knopf feared it would be little more than

a ragbag of essays. They were wrong. Even so, *The Culture of Narcissism* is hard to summarize pithily, even for those (including the present reviewer) who revere it. It is a remarkably thorough description of American culture in the aftermath of the dismantling of institutions and constituted authority that took place in the ’60s. Lasch thought that the counterculture had managed “to liberate humanity from...outmoded ideas of love and duty,” and that this was a catastrophe. Without such ideas, people would have no way of devoting themselves to larger purposes or making the connections with fellow citizens the way they used to. They could only focus on their own comfort, titillation, and self-esteem—they could only be narcissists.

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

Lasch thought that the
counterculture had managed
“to liberate humanity from...
outmoded ideas of love and
duty,” and that this was a
catastrophe.

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 new role of professional sports in American life, the impossibility of carrying out education when authority has collapsed, sex and the family, and—most ominously of all—Americans’ fear of aging, the source of some of the profoundest writing in the book. In breaking Americans’ relation to their own history, Lasch argued, the counterculture broke the American personality type. It turned us into narcissists. The narcissist, he writes, “takes no interest in the future and does nothing to provide himself with the traditional consolations of old age, the most important of which is the belief that future generations will in some sense carry on his life’s work.... When the generational link begins to fray, such consolations no longer obtain.”

When Lasch writes in this vein, it is evident that he is thinking less about Freud than about the Narcissus of Greek mythol-

ogy. That is why the book has become canonical. One reads Lasch for his factual analysis, for his strong sense of right and wrong, and—as in all his books—his sense of the sociology of intellectual fashion. One tends to skate past the Freudian vocabulary, when it appears, as a source of obscurity linked to the fads of the time. When he writes that the narcissist is “[u]nable to achieve satisfying sublimations,” one understands him to be saying clumsily that the narcissist values trivial, fleeting things over important, lasting ones. The book has nonetheless been persistently misunderstood, even by the author himself. Lasch thought he was unfurling a probing critique of capitalism—for example, confining his critique of feminism to the way feminists insisted on bringing the capitalist division of labor into the household. Others saw him turning into a conservative grump.

LUNBECK IS LESS INTERESTED IN ASSOCIATING him with a hidebound school of politics than with a hidebound school of psychoanalysis. Lasch fits with Freud’s more conservative, tradition-defending side, the side that, as mentioned above, Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg were hoping to emancipate themselves from in the 1970s. Because Freud spoke openly and graphically about sex, Americans have a tendency to assume his ideas about social order were radical, but they were not. What Freud’s therapy aimed to produce, after the patient had identified and “worked through” his complexes, was independence—the ability to stand on one’s own two feet. Lasch was alarmed to see this ethic dissolving. Lasch’s biographer Miller also sees Lasch using Freud cleverly (but probably not consciously) to make traditionalist points in a not-so-traditionalist-sounding way. Kohut, by contrast, was speaking as a real man of the 1960s and 1970s when he told an interviewer: “Values of independence are phony, really. There is no such thing.”

Modern Americans will also consider Freud conservative for his belief in essential differences between men and women—a belief that strikes Lunbeck as “retrograde.” Although sexism is not an accusation that can easily be leveled at Lasch (whose mother held a doctorate in philosophy), he, too, had an “essentialist” view of the family. Lunbeck is reluctant to give Lasch any credit for his difference with Freud on such questions as, say, penis envy. “That women’s defining anatomical disability is nowhere to be found in Christopher Lasch’s critique of vanity, and that he did not see it as a specifically female disposition,” she

“Essential reading.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“This **brilliant** book will surely change forever the way we think about human conflict and what we should attempt to do about it in the future.”

—Anthony Pagden, author of *Worlds at War*

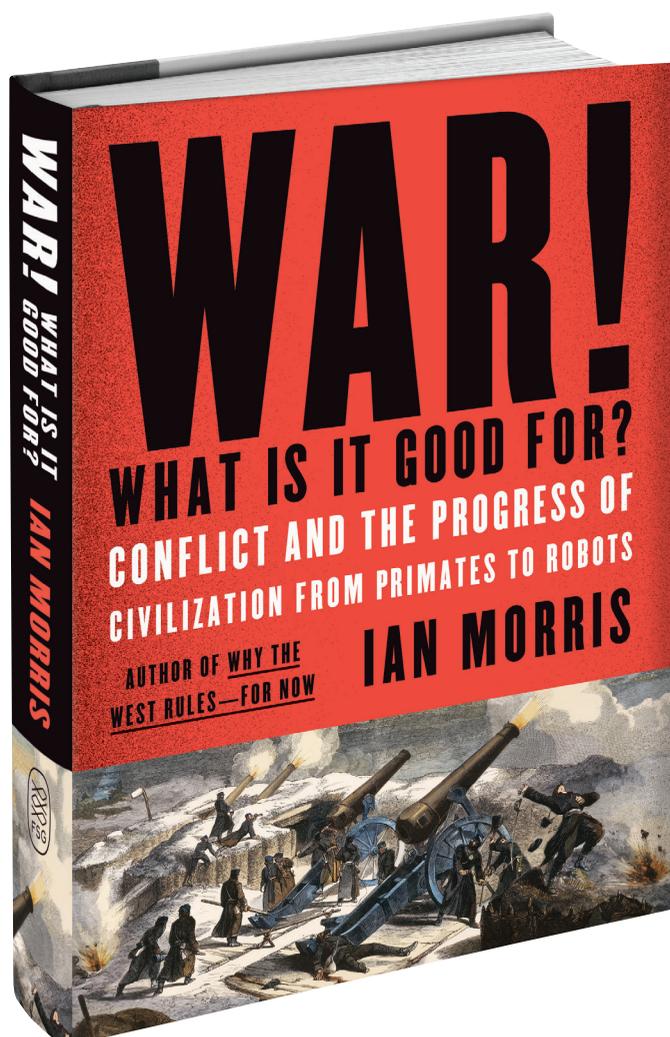
“**Compulsively readable [and] fascinating . . . [A] rare** mixture of scholarship, stunning insight, and wit.”

—Mark Levine, *Booklist* (starred review)

“**Thought-provoking . . . Morris** has established himself as a leader in making big history interesting and understandable.” —Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*

“You will be **surprised, informed, entertained, and,** most important, **challenged** by this book.”

—Daron Acemoglu, coauthor of *Why Nations Fail*



“**Provocative, compelling, and fearless.**”

—Richard Wrangham,
author of
Demonic Males

“An ambitious, epoch-spanning study.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
www.fsgbooks.com



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

Today's politics seen through the lens of the Founders' philosophy

THE AMERICAN MIND

with Charles R. Kesler



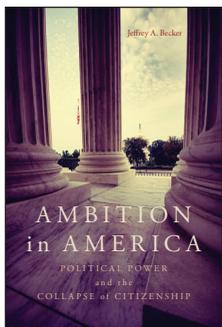
www.theamericanmind-claremont.org

**HISTORY, POLITICAL SCIENCE,
AND POPULAR CULTURE**



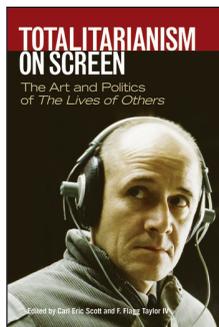
UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

www.kentuckypress.com • 1 (800) 537-5487



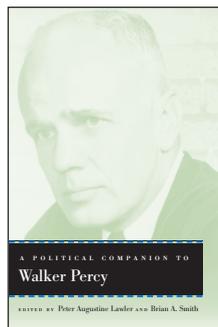
NEW

AMBITION IN AMERICA
Political Power and the Collapse of Citizenship
Jeffrey A. Becker
\$50.00 hardcover & Ebook
Coming May 2014

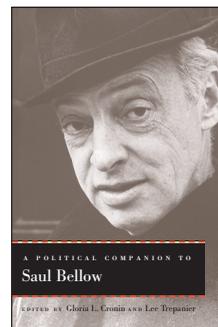


NEW

TOTALITARIANISM ON SCREEN
The Art and Politics of The Lives of Others
Edited by Carl Eric Scott and F. Flagg Taylor IV
\$60.00 hardcover & Ebook
Coming July 2014



A POLITICAL COMPANION TO WALKER PERCY
Edited by Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian A. Smith
\$40.00 hardcover
Ebook available



A POLITICAL COMPANION TO SAUL BELLOW
Edited by Gloria L. Cronin and Lee Trepanier
\$40.00 hardcover
Ebook available



THE INVISIBLE HAND IN POPULAR CULTURE
Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV
Paul A. Cantor
\$35.00 hardcover
Ebook available

**UPK is now offering more than
450 ebooks FREE
to our loyal customers!**



Do you own a print copy of a University Press of Kentucky title and wish you had the ebook too? Send us a digital photo of you holding the book to receive the electronic edition for free!

Visit www.upkebooks.tumblr.com for details, terms, and conditions.



real project: a psychoanalytic history of certain ideas of the self over the last century, narcissism among them. If her book is not immediately recognizable as such a survey, it is because she (or her editor) has taken the last three chapters, chronologically speaking, and shuffled them to the front. The first quarter of the book gives us a narrative of the 1970s while the last three quarters carry us from World War I into the 1960s. The polemic against Lasch's handling of narcissism disappears for long passages. By the time the reader closes *The Americanization of Narcissism*, Lasch's work seems a half-remembered hobby horse or a news hook.

LUNBECK WINDS UP USING NARCISSISM as Lasch did. It is a concept, a symbol, a very convenient—because very broad—

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.

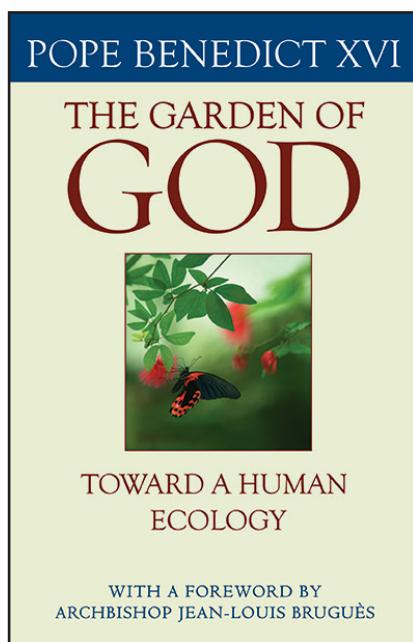
Early Freudian psychiatry had been about adjusting patients to norms that almost everyone would agree were good. Modern life undermined this aim. “The patient of today,” according to Erikson, “suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should—or, indeed, might—be or become.” 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.

Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at the Weekly Standard.

A collection of Pope Benedict XVI's speeches on the environment

Pope Benedict XVI



The Garden of God Toward a Human Ecology

Foreword by Archbishop Jean-Louis Bruguès

Now Available
Paper • \$24.95 • 978-0-8132-2579-1
ebook • \$24.95 • 978-0-8132-2580-7



THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA PRESS
c/o Hopkins Fulfillment Service • PO Box 50370 • Baltimore, MD 21211 • cuapress.cua.edu • 1-800-537-5487

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to
the *Claremont Review of Books*

*“The Claremont Review of Books
is serious, lively, always sound
yet delightfully unpredictable, a
model of intellectual journalism
as a source of education and of
pleasure.”*

—Joseph Epstein

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25%
off the newsstand price. A one-year
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier
conservative book review, visit
www.claremont.org/crb
or call (909) 621-6825.

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS
937 W. FOOTHILL BLVD.
SUITE E
CLAREMONT, CA.
91711

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 504
CLAREMONT, CA