

Cornelius Castoriadis and Christopher Lasch

# Beating the retreat into private life

Michael Ignatieff discusses 'The Culture of Narcissism' with psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis and cultural critic Christopher Lasch.

IGNATIEFF: Perhaps the most painful cost of modernity is the loss of community and neighbourhood. In a world of strangers, we seem to withdraw more and more to the family and home, our haven from a heartless world. Yet our oldest political traditions tell us that a sense of community is a human necessity, that we can only become full human beings when we belong to each other as citizens and neighbours. Without such a public life, our selves begin to shrink to a hollow private core. What is modernity doing to our identities? Are we becoming more selfish, less capable of political commitment, readier to pull up the drawbridge on our neighbours? Cornelius, how would you describe the change in our public lives?

CASTORIADIS: For me, the problem arose for the first time at the end of the 1950s with the crumbling of the working-class movement and of the revolutionary project which had been linked with this movement. I was forced to observe a change in capitalist society which was at the same time a change in the type of individuals which this society was more and more producing. The change in individuals was caused by the bankruptcy of traditional working-class organisations—trade unions, parties and so on—by disgust with what was happening, but also by the ability during this period of capitalism to grant a rising standard of living and to enter the period of consumerism. People were turning their back, so to speak, on common interests, common activities, public activities—refusing to take responsibility. In effect, they were retrenching—retreating into a sort of, in quotation marks, 'private' world, that is, family and a very few relations. I say within quotation marks because we ought to avoid misunderstandings there.

IGNATIEFF: What misunderstandings?

CASTORIADIS: Well, nothing is ever fully private. Even when you dream, you have words, and these words you have borrowed from the English language. And what we call the individual is in a certain sense a social construct.

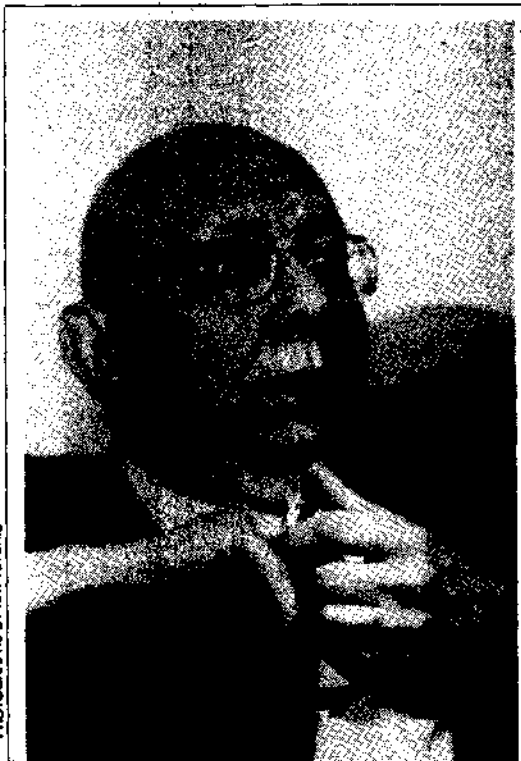
IGNATIEFF: A sceptic would say that the critique of selfishness and individualism in capitalist society is just as old as capitalist society itself. So what do you say to that sceptic? How do you convince them that the modern self, the modern postwar self of consumer capitalist society, is a different kind of self, that there's a new kind of individualism, a new kind of selfishness even?

LASCH: What we have is not so much old-fashioned self-aggrandisement and acquisitive

individualism, which, as you say, has been subject to criticism from the moment this new kind of individualist personality came into being in the 17th and 18th centuries. But this kind of individualism seems to have given way to the retrenchment Cornelius spoke of a minute ago. I've talked of a minimal self. Or again, of a narcissistic self, as a self that's increasingly emptied of any kind of content and which has to find the goals of life in the narrowest possible terms. I think, increasingly, in terms of raw survival, daily survival, as if daily life were so problematic, as if the world were so threatening and uncertain that the best you could hope to do was simply to get by. To live one day at a time. And indeed, this is the therapeutic advice, in the worst sense, that people are given in our world.

IGNATIEFF: But 'survival', Christopher—aren't you going a little far there? I mean, some people might not recognise that, they might think survival applies to the victims of some terrible tragedy. But you're talking about daily life in the richest society in the world. Why survival?

LASCH: That's one way of defining what's new, I think. While survival has always been a preoccupation, an overriding preoccupation for



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most people, it's only in our time to have acquired almost a kind of... If one were to go back to the Greeks one could see very clearly the difference. Greeks, for Aristotle in particular. Tradition of moral life, of a fully lived freedom from material necessities. Moreover, the Greeks associated with the private realm, with the household, which is subject to biological and constraints. It's only when you get that you can really, in any sense, a sense of self, a personal identity or moral life is a life that's lived in public.

IGNATIEFF: So we don't have life in public domain. We have a life stripped bare essentials, to survival. Now you're a practising analyst. Does the the modern self ring a bell to you who meet the modern self on the day though Friday?

CASTORIADIS: I think what is implied is various things. 'One day at a time' this is a very expression, is what I of a person—in both the individual itself. Twenty years ago, 60 years ago the Left would talk to you about the night of the revolution, and people would talk to you about in great detail and so forth. And I dare to propose a grandiose or even reasonable project which goes beyond the next elections. So the horizon. Now in this respect 'at a time' you may criticise, course, everybody thinks about his pension and thinks also about his education. But this time horizon. Nobody participates in a public time the same way as nobody participates in space. I mean, we always participate in space, but take the Place de la Piccolini Circus during rush-hour. We have one million people who are doing occasions of social things, who are together and they are absolutely isolated, each one, and if they could clear out neutralising the cars in front of it world. Public space today is what? In every home with TV. But what is space?

IGNATIEFF: It's empty.

CASTORIADIS: It's empty, or worse, space empty for publicity, for post and I don't mean only straightforward pornography. I mean there are philosophers and pornographers.

IGNATIEFF: Is this a cause or a consequence of the breakdown of the public realm, relationship here between the public realm in its crisis?

LASCH: It strikes me that we don't live in a solid world. It's often said that our society surrounds us with things and we pay too much attention to them. The way I think that's also misleading. The world that seems to be extremely constant of fleeting images. A world that's increasingly, thanks in part, I think, to the technology of mass communications, a world of quite a kind of hallucinatory character of fantastic world of images, as opposed to a world of solid objects that can be

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most people, it's only in our time that it seems to have acquired almost a kind of moral status. If one were to go back to the Greeks, I think one could see very clearly the difference for the Greeks, for Aristotle in particular. The precondition of moral life, of a fully lived life, is freedom from material necessity. Which, moreover, the Greeks associated with the private realm, with the household, the realm which is subject to biological and material constraints. It's only when you get beyond that that you can really, in any sense, talk about a sense of self, a personal identity or civic life. A moral life is a life that's lived in public.

IGNATIEFF: So we don't have life lived in a public domain. We have a life stripped down to bare essentials, to survival. Now, Cornelius, you're a practising analyst. Does this portrait of the modern self ring a bell to you as a man who meets the modern self on the couch Monday through Friday?

CASTORIADIS: I think what is implied in all this is various things. 'One day at a time', if I take this very nice expression, is what I call the lack of a project—in both the individual and society itself. Thirty years ago, 60 years ago, people on the Left would talk to you about the glorious night of the revolution, and people on the Right would talk to you about indefinite progress and so and so forth. And now nobody dares express a grandiose or even moderately reasonable project which goes beyond the budget or the next elections. So there is a time horizon. Now in this respect 'survival' is an expression you may criticise, because, of course, everybody thinks about his retirement pension and thinks also about his children's education. But this time horizon is private. Nobody participates in a public time horizon, in the same way as nobody participates in a public space. I mean, we always participate in public space, but take the Place de la Concorde or Piccadilly Circus during rush-hour. There you have one million people who are drowned in an ocean of social things, who are social beings, and they are absolutely isolated. They hate each other, and if they could clear their way by neutralising the cars in front of them, they would. Public space today is what? It is within every home with TV. But what is this public space?

IGNATIEFF: It's empty.

CASTORIADIS: It's empty, or worse. It's public space mostly for publicity, for pornography—and I don't mean only straightforward pornography, I mean there are philosophers who are in fact pornographers.

IGNATIEFF: Is this a cause or a consequence of the breakdown of the public realm? What's the relationship here between the self and the public realm in its crisis?

LASCH: It strikes me that we don't live in a solid world. It's often said that consumer society surrounds us with things and encourages us to pay too much attention to things, but in a way I think that's also misleading. We live in a world that seems to be extremely unstable, to consist of fleeting images. A world that increasingly, thanks in part, I think, to the technology of mass communications, seems to acquire a kind of hallucinatory character. A kind of fantastic world of images, as opposed to a world of solid objects that can be expected to

outlast one's own lifetime. What has waned, perhaps, is the sense of living in a world that existed before one's self and will outlast one's self. That sense of historical continuity which is provided by, among other things, simply a solid sense of palpable material things seems to be increasingly mediated by this onslaught of images, often ones that appeal by design to our fantasies. Even science, I think, which was assumed in an earlier period to be one of the principal means of promoting a more rational and commonsensical view of the world, appears to us in daily life as a succession of technological miracles that make everything possible. In a world where everything is possible, in a sense nothing is possible.

IGNATIEFF: What I hear you saying there is almost a definition of the public realm. One of the things you're saying is that the public realm is the domain of historical continuity. In fact, in our culture it's very much the domain now of the media. The media give us the public domain, a world of hallucinating images whose time-frames are very short. They come and go. Their correspondence to reality is very problematic and public life looks like a kind of fantasy, a kind of dreamworld. But that doesn't get to the question I asked, which has to do with this business of causes and consequences.

CASTORIADIS: I think it is not proper to search for a cause and a consequence. I think that the two things go together. Development or changes in society are *ipso facto* changes in the structure of individuals, the way they act, the way they behave. After all, everything is social. But society as such has no address. I mean, you can't meet it. It's in you, in me, in the language, in the books, and so on. But I would say there is one thing which one ought to stress in this respect and that is the disappearance of social and political conflict and struggle.

IGNATIEFF: Why disappearance? That would strike me as wrong.

CASTORIADIS: I don't see any. I see what happened in the States, where, to take the classical example, young blacks in the 1960s would enter the centre of the cities and burn the stores and so on. But then at the end of the 1970s, the beginning of the Reagan era, you have ten per cent general unemployment, which means 20 per cent for the blacks and 48 per cent for young blacks, and these young blacks stay quiet. You have the situation in France now where people are thrown out of their job, they stay quiet. In Britain you have the tragedy of the miners—the last flame of something which is obviously dying. And it is not difficult to understand, I think, because people feel, and rightly so, that political ideas which are in the political market as it exists now are not worth fighting for. And they also think that trade unions are more or less self-serving bureaucracies or lobby organisations. It's as if people were drawing the conclusion that nothing is to be done, therefore we retrench ourselves. And this corresponds to the intrinsic movement of capitalism—expanding markets, consumerism, built-in obsolescence and so on, and, more generally, the expansion of control over people, not only as producers, but also as consumers.

LASCH: Under these conditions, politics becomes increasingly a question of interest groups, each presenting its rival claims to a share in the

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r these conditions, politics becom- ly a question of interest groups, ng its rival claims to a share in the

welfare state, defining its interests in the narrowest possible terms and deliberately eschewing any larger claims, the attempt to state the claims of a group in universal terms. One of the examples that you mentioned earlier, Cornelius, the black struggle in the United States, offers a good example of this, and also an example of the way in which often seemingly radical, militant, revolutionary ideologies in our recent times have actually contributed to this process. The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s was in many ways a throwback to an earlier conception of democracy. It articulated the goals of blacks in a way that appealed to everybody. It attacked racism. Not just white racism, but racism. The black power movement, starting in the mid-1960s, which seemed to be much more militant and attacked Martin Luther King and other leaders of the early stage of this movement as bourgeois reactionaries, actually redefined the goals of the black movement, black power, as an attack on white racism, as if racism was only a white phenomenon, in ways that made it much easier in the long run to redefine blacks in America as essentially another interest group claiming its share in the pie and not making any larger claims at all. I think that's one reason for the decline of militancy among American blacks.

IGNATIEFF: Christopher has been expressing the feeling that politics has fractured into interest groups, and if we're talking about a crisis of the public realm, that's what we mean. Why is this happening?

LASCH: Well, it has something to do with the waning of any kind of public language. Part of this, I think, has to do with the kind of moral elevation of the victim and the increasing tendency to appeal to victimisation as the only recognisable standard of justice. If you can



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prove that you've been victimised, discriminated against—the longer the better—that becomes the basis of claims made by very specific groups which assume that their own history is highly specific, has little reference to that of other groups or to the society as a whole, which doesn't figure in this language at all, and which, furthermore, cannot even be understood by other groups. Again the illustration of the black movement is instructive, because, not to date this too precisely, beginning in the mid-1960s, blacks and their spokesmen in America began to insist as a kind of article of faith that nobody else could even understand their history.

CASTORIADIS: Feminists, too.

LASCH: Yes, that's a fairly exact parallel, it seems to me. And when this happens, the possibility of a language that is understood by everybody and constitutes the basis of public life and political conversation is almost by definition ruled out.

CASTORIADIS: Aristotle in his *Politics* mentions a wonderful, to my mind, Athenian law, which was that whenever the discussion in the assembly was about questions which could entail war with a neighbouring city, the inhabitants of the respective frontier zone were excluded from the vote. Now, this is the Greek conception of politics, and this I still stand for, in principle.

IGNATIEFF: One of the consequences of the kind of debates that have been going on, at least since the early 1960s, is a very intense discussion about how far freedom to choose yourself, to make yourself, to choose your own values, can go, at what point that has to give way to a sense of collective social obligations, to a sense of what it is that human beings ought to have.

CASTORIADIS: Freedom is not an easy thing and not an easy concept. If you are speaking about true freedom, it is, I would say, a tragic concept. As democracy is a tragic system. Because there are no external limits and there are no mathematical theorems which tell you where to stop. Democracy is a system where we say: 'We make our own laws on the basis of our own mind, our common morality.' But this morality, even if it were to coincide with the laws of Moses, or with the Gospel, does not exist because it is in the laws of Gospel, it exists because we, as a polity, accept it, endorse it and say thou shalt not kill. Even if 90 per cent of the society are believers and believe that the authority of the commandment comes from God, for the political society the authority does not come from God. It comes from the decision of the citizens. The British Parliament could decide tomorrow that blond people have no right of vote. Nothing to stop them doing that. There are no external limits, and that's why democracy can perish and has perished at times in history, like a tragic hero. A tragic hero in Greek tragedy does not perish because there was a limit and he transgressed it. This is sin. This is the Christian sin. The tragic hero perishes out of hubris. That is, because he transgresses in a field where there are no foreknown limits. And that's our plight.

An edited extract from 'Voices' (CA, Thursdays). Next week: Daniel Bell, Emma Rothschild and Ulrich Briefs.