



## Reflections on the relation between education and the decline of paternal authority in the culture of narcissism<sup>1</sup>

Reflexões sobre a relação entre a educação e o declínio da autoridade paterna da cultura do narcisismo

Reflexiones sobre la relación entre educación y decadencia de la autoridad paterna en la cultura del narcisismo

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### Abstract

Our proposal in this article is to reflect on the relation between the social diagnosis of the decline of paternal authority and contemporary education. The investigation is based on the theoretical premises presented by the American sociologist Christopher Lasch throughout his works on the relation between the decline of authority and the emergence of a narcissistic society or culture. The central aim of the article is to show how the narcissistic mode of relating observed by Lasch in the 1970s may still be seen in contemporary society, particularly in the educational context. The aim is to analyze the impact of the decline of paternal authority on education and the school, as well as the way in which this institution deals with this issue.

**Keywords:** Decline of paternal authority; Education; Narcissism; Contemporary Schooling.

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## Resumo

Propomos neste artigo uma reflexão sobre a relação entre o diagnóstico social do declínio da autoridade paterna e a educação contemporânea. O caminho de investigação parte dos pressupostos teóricos apresentados pelo sociólogo norte-americano Christopher Lasch ao longo de suas obras sobre a relação entre o declínio da autoridade e o aparecimento de uma sociedade ou cultura narcísica. O cerne do artigo está em mostrar como o modo de relação narcísico observado por Lasch nos anos 1970 ainda pode ser verificado na sociedade contemporânea e, sobretudo, no campo da educação. A proposta é analisarmos os impactos do declínio da autoridade paterna na educação e na escola, bem como o modo como essa instituição lida com essa questão.

**Palavras-chave:** Declínio da autoridade paterna; Educação; Narcisismo; Escola Contemporânea.

## Resumen

En este artículo proponemos una reflexión sobre la relación entre el diagnóstico social de la decadencia de la autoridad paterna y la educación contemporánea. El camino de la investigación se fundamenta en los presupuestos teóricos que el sociólogo norteamericano Christopher Lasch nos presentó a lo largo de sus obras entre la relación entre la decadencia de la autoridad y el surgimiento de una sociedad o de una cultura narcisista. El punto central del artículo es mostrar cómo el modo de relación narcisista observado por Lasch en los años 1970 todavía puede verse en la sociedad contemporánea y, sobre todo, en el campo de la educación. La propuesta es pensar cómo la escuela aborda esta falta de la referencia paterna.

**Palabras clave:** Decadencia de la autoridad paterna; Educación; Narcisismo; Escuela Contemporánea.

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## Introduction

In a footnote to his 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Christopher Lasch recounts the case of an eleven-year-old student who wrote a thank-you letter to his father for providing for him, yet complained that his father never punished him for misbehaving (Lasch, 2023, p. 287). This case illustrates the historical moment in which the book was written. It was a period marked by the decline of paternal authority, a topic often discussed by authors. The student expressed this decline by demanding a coercive law that could externally impose limits on his actions.

This passage is found in Lasch's reflections on American education. His analyses are based on his observation of a deterioration in education and what he termed the "atrophy of competence." This atrophy manifests itself in the omission of history, philosophy, and politics from the curriculum because these subjects seem meaningless in a society increasingly focused on the logic of consumption and the culture industry. This deterioration has harmful effects, including ineptitude in language use, loss of historical consciousness, inability to reason logically, and loss of reading comprehension skills. At the time, some research indicated that students did not even know what their fundamental rights were.

This decline in basic intellectual abilities is the result of abandoning a humanistic education centered on the emancipation of the individual as an agent of historical change. Consequently, schools abandoned the project of forming a community of citizens who are aware of their rights and duties and capable of ethical guidance and self-governance. Instead, they produced a community of politically passive individuals.

Psychoanalytic theory can clarify the gravity of Lasch's diagnosis. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the paternal function plays a fundamental role in organizing the subject's psychic structure. According to Freudian metapsychology, the superego is a repressive and guilt-inducing aspect that stems from the Oedipus complex. Throughout their psychic development, children internalize a moral authority represented by the father figure, who guides their actions. This moralizing authority limits unconscious and socially unacceptable desires so that the individual can live in society. This is the price paid for human socialization. In this regard, Freud follows the Enlightenment ideal, as expressed by Immanuel Kant. For this reason, Freud compares the superego to Kant's categorical imperative; he equates it with a moral order that guides our actions (Freud, 2010). What would happen if this authority declined? If we create a society in which there is no limitation of unconscious desires, how should we think about the collective? Since psychoanalysis has clarified the role of the paternal function in organizing psychic structure, it is difficult to imagine how the psychic and social life of a subject would be organized without this reference point or a law that limits individual desires.

On the other hand, the decline of paternal authority presents us with a dilemma. It is difficult to imagine a society without the coercive law that restricts individual impulses. However, scientific literature often suggests that we live in an era in which this authority has declined. How would social organization be possible under these conditions? Shouldn't we be living in social chaos where everyone acts on his or her impulses without limitations? The way out of this dilemma is to consider that in the face of the weakening of paternal authority, individual defense mechanisms are formed and a specific mode of socialization emerges. Lasch analyzes this peculiar mode of socialization, which stems from the decline of paternal authority, in his work, and it can provide us with important elements for understanding contemporary socialization.

This study aims to analyze how the decline of paternal authority affects individuals' schooling and education through this mode of socialization. Lasch's analyses provide the backdrop for this work. His investigations reveal how American society dealt with the decline of paternal authority and clearly show how certain behaviors and modes of socialization from

that period—primarily the 1970s—remain striking features of contemporary society. Lasch's thesis is based on the idea that the decline of paternal authority produced a mode of socialization marked by narcissistic behaviors that permeated various spheres of social life, including education.

Lasch's analyses are not outdated; they can shed light on important contemporary educational issues. In this article, we highlight three elements that have remained relevant since the period Lasch analyzed. We argue that these elements are the legacy of a narcissistic mode of socialization: first, the removal of authority from professors and school administrators, which creates a need to negotiate norms and rules within the classroom. Second, the weakening of parental authority and the introduction of medical and therapeutic discourse in schools. Third, the replacement of parental authority by specialists in the school environment. Our analysis focuses on how schools address this absence of parental guidance. What is the status of authority within this institution? Does the school simply act as if the metonymy typical of the early 20th century between the paternal role and the professor's authoritative role still applies? This text shows that many contemporary school problems were evident in Lasch's 1970s cultural diagnosis.

### **Decline of paternal authority and education**

To understand the decline of paternal authority and the rise of narcissistic culture, it is important to analyze changes in American society. According to Lasch, the transformations that schools and the education system have undergone stem from a shift in social control recently. The sociologist claims that we have transitioned from an authoritarian and punitive mode of social control to a therapeutic mode. "This shift has transformed not only industry but also politics, schools, and the family" (Lasch, 1986, p. 38). What does this mean?

The educational model based on authority and punishment has given way to a more "humane" approach that avoids punishment and warnings, treating students as individuals who need understanding based on their developmental stages. While disciplinary control focuses on punishment and behavior correction, the therapeutic approach emphasizes resolving individual emotional issues and promoting personal satisfaction and happiness. The guiding principle of authoritarian and punitive control is maintaining the system of social rules. In contrast, the therapeutic approach focuses on the individual as a key element in the socialization process. What caused this change?

There is a more specific answer and a more general one. The more specific answer helps us understand the changes in American education that triggered this state of atrophy. A more general reflection leads us to consider the American way of life at that time.

From a specific perspective, Lasch shows how historical conditions altered the American school system. For example, he highlights how the "Americanization" model of immigrants exacerbated this process of atrophy. This model essentially imposed American culture on European immigrants to appease the legacy of social conflicts they brought with them. Americanizing culture implied erasing differences and massifying culture. In schools, content was impoverished and the educational process was simplified, with inclusion as the central element. According to Lasch, the manner in which immigrants were integrated into American society and the massification of culture negatively affected education in the country (LASCH, 2023, p. 144).

The search for a more inclusive, democratic model of education resulted in its deterioration. Schools used to train social elite, focusing on teaching knowledge and classical culture. According to the sociologist, democratized education leveled down the education of individuals. Instead of the educational model that aimed to form the whole individual, as in the Enlightenment ideal of education, schools began to focus on preparing students for life. This

process extended beyond basic education to higher education as well. Education became more technical, with an emphasis on science and mathematics. Curricula began adopting programs aimed at fostering good citizenship, including home economics and physical education. In general, schools ceased to be disciplinary institutions and became "pleasant" spaces for socializing where time could be experienced in a more "softened" way.

As early as 1979, Lasch pointed out that American education was becoming increasingly commercialized. The "softening" of the school experience mentioned above was accompanied by a shift toward facilitated education without suffering or tension, focusing on general knowledge with few reading and writing requirements. The abandonment of classical content was accompanied by the idea that education should cater to individual interests and center on the student as a consumer. Subjects would be offered as commodities that could be chosen and consumed according to the student's taste, as if in a supermarket. In this configuration, educational training resembles a mosaic of studies.

Lasch described a school system that reproduced and mimicked the logic of society itself, especially a society that prioritizes work and consumption. In this sense, just as the economic system selects labor, children were educated to operate within this framework. Lasch's description of education-involved children becoming accustomed to bureaucracy, group life demands, standardized performance evaluations, and selecting skills and competencies according to professional careers and the job market. There was also the promise that personal and professional success could be achieved through education, with the selection and exclusion of those who did not fit this model. Schools transitioned from a punitive, restrictive disciplinary model to one guided by the logic of manipulation and psychological surveillance. This new model was "based on the definition of normal behavior and the use of supposedly non-punitive psychiatric sanctions in the face of deviations" (Lasch, 1986, p. 40).

From a broader perspective, certain social changes have significantly influenced the school environment. In this context, the collapse of paternal authority is particularly evident. The decline of paternal authority is a loss of normative reference. Lasch viewed this loss as a general state of American social organization. One important point the author makes is that the loss of normative references created a vacuum of norms that was gradually filled by the figure of the expert. As norms declined, experts emerged as figures of normative social guidance. For example, Lasch shows us how the private sphere of the family is increasingly permeated by the public sphere of law. Courts increasingly interfere in family matters, determining whether a parent is responsible for their children or deciding child custody and guardianship. Lasch defined this new mode of organizing discipline as manipulative, therapeutic, pluralistic, and non-judgmental. It originated with the rise of the expert class (1986, p. 36). Social figures such as doctors, judges, and social workers tend to determine what is "best" for families, schools, and society in general (Lasch, 2023, pp. 273–274). In other words, institutions are not guided by a set of norms and rules but rather by a body of knowledge, that, in the hands of experts and competent individuals, gains the force of law.

The loss of the normative paternal reference affects people's way of life. In a school environment, for instance, professors lose their normative position, which harms the status of specialists. A dependent relationship is formed with the person who is believed to understand the educational and/or family processes.

Professors avoid confrontation with students because they are unaware of and have no authority over several new elements. Educational counselors now play the role previously played by professors, which removes their authority in the classroom.

On the other hand, when parents are stripped of their authority, they transfer responsibility to specialists, who then determine the direction of family education. Children now receive guidance from psychiatrists and doctors, who are increasingly involved in home education. Not knowing how to act, parents seek help to become good parents. In their

eagerness to avoid conflict with their children, parents end up creating another situation. They do not allow their children to experience expected frustrations. They become overly protective and emotionally distant. They form a suffocating bond with their children as if they were their "exclusive property." They fantasize about being the perfect family in an attempt to be the ideal mother or father. They create the idea that their child deserves the best of everything, which destroys the individual's ability to develop minimal self-care. Without the self-restraint and self-discipline a child should internalize, Lasch argues that the decline of parental authority reflects the decline of the superego in American society (2023, p. 284). In other words, "as the world becomes more threatening, life becomes an endless quest for health, well-being, exercise, diets, drugs, and various spiritual and psychological self-help regimes" (Lasch, 1991, p. 184).

Shortly before writing about the culture of narcissism, Lasch conducted a lengthy study on the status of the American family in 1977. In *Refuge in a Heartless World: The Family: Sanctuary or Besieged Institution?* Lasch argued that the 20th-century family was a product of human action, not some abstract social force. According to Lasch, the family structure has been disintegrating since the nineteenth century because the history of modern society is an affirmation of social control. This control has shifted from domestic production and the technical skills of workers to factory supervision and scientific management and finally to control by specialists, such as doctors, professors, child counselors, and justice officials. Thus, we are living in a new form of society in which we depend more on ruling classes and specialized professionals. We are particularly interested in how this control occurs within the family because the family is the main agent for reproducing cultural patterns in individuals. The family imparts ethical values and instructions on social rules, shapes children's characters—their way of thinking and acting—and affects every aspect of their lives.

Since the 1950s, Lasch notes that public policies and social theories, such as those developed by Talcott Parsons, have emerged that emphasize the importance of the family in shaping individuals. However, these theories tend to rationalize and instrumentalize a dynamic in which the family itself requires supervision by specialists. This is based on the idea that specialization of functions leads to increased efficiency. This concept involves transferring functions: parents would not be prepared to provide emotional comfort or address educational, economic, and protective issues for their children. Therefore, they should transfer these functions to specialists who are competent in these matters, effectively professionalizing parenthood. In other words, the logic of professionalization and specialization permeated parenthood, transforming parents into subjects dependent on the knowledge, advice, and guidance of professionals. According to these social theorists, families who raise their children without the help of specialists "cause many forms of illness without being able to cure them" (Lasch, 1991, p. 161). According to Lasch, to avoid causing suffering, families should be accompanied or replaced by specialists, rendering the traditional functions of parenthood obsolete (Lasch, 1991, p. 164).

### **Enjoying life without limits: the legacy of the decline of authority**

What would be the consequences of a society organized along these lines? One of the central points of Lasch's critique of the decline of paternal authority is the creation of a society with no barriers or limits to socialization. From a family perspective, the loss of paternal authority removes the father from his central role of guiding the child's identification processes. Without this authority, it becomes difficult for the child to identify with the father and aspire to create a family of his own. Faced with a declining effective law, the child simply wants to enjoy life without interference from any authority (LASCH, 1991, p. 166). Without an authority figure to restrain them and impose limits, children grow up wanting to free themselves from the concept of authority. If an authority figure does exist, children diminish its power and

importance while creating an exaggerated image of their own power, as if the individual could do anything. Thus, even if they know that authority exists, children do not confront it. As Lasch states: "Under these conditions, children remain slaves to pre-Oedipal impulses and the external stimuli with which they are bombarded by a culture devoted to consumption and immediate gratification" (1991, p. 167). Consequently, the individual becomes infantile, considering themselves powerful, unlimited, and independent (a typical childish sense of omnipotence) and surrounded by authorities with whom they do not identify and whose power they do not consider legitimate (LASCH, 1991, p. 167).

Young people follow negotiable standards of justice and legitimacy without identifying themselves or considering the idea of authority to be legitimate. What can and cannot be done is not established as an imperative, and laws are negotiable. This is an important point that Lasch highlights when considering school: "The distance between teacher and student diminishes. The teacher becomes an 'opinion leader,' and the curriculum emphasizes 'realism.' The child is taught to get along with others, not to think for himself" (1991, pp. 168–169). Parents and professors are at the mercy of constant, unstable negotiations, renouncing the idea of authority — as if young people were autonomous in deciding what is best for themselves rather than adults. This is supposedly more appropriate for a changing world in which young people are trained to be entrepreneurs — a flexible, unpredictable sphere that requires constant adaptation and renders any concept of predictability, rigidity, and limits obsolete. However, this logic is not without consequences.

The organized assault on the superego, which liberated pleasure only to transform it into a different kind of pain, reflects the devaluation of authority in modern society. Those in positions of authority, such as parents, professors, judges, and priests, have all experienced a loss of credibility. Unable to inspire loyalty or obtain obedience, they must grant their subordinates greater pleasures—and crimes and misdemeanors—than they could tolerate before. However, just as the apparent triumph of the pleasure principle masks a new submission to reality, permissive society has invented new forms of political repression or perfected old ones, such as force, bribery, intimidation, and blackmail. The dissolution of authority does not bring freedom but rather new forms of domination (Lasch, 1991, p. 233).

Interestingly, a society or family organized around the decline of paternal authority does not lead individuals to grow up without a superego, contrary to what one might think. This is because the superego is traditionally constituted from the paternal function. With the decline of paternal authority, children develop a punitive and cruel superego based on archaic images of their parents and their parental introjections. Lasch references Melanie Klein's (1997) psychoanalytic theory and her concept of an archaic superego. Without external coercion, individuals resort to internal archaic introjections that are rigid and based on their unconscious fantasies (Lasch, 2023, p. 285). With the aggressive and dictatorial elements of a primitive superego, the subject lives a life oscillating between self-esteem and self-contempt. The superego establishes an exalted standard of fame and success, making the ego omnipotent and grandiose. At the same time, the superego aggressively censures the person with savage violence for failing to achieve this standard.

The apparent paradox is that we live in a permissive society yet develop a stricter superego than in a coercive society. The collapse of institutionalized authority stimulates this cruel and punitive superego, which originates from psychic energies of destructive and aggressive internal impulses. This occurs precisely because the superego has nowhere to seek

a reference point. Thus, "unconscious and irrational elements of the superego come to control its functioning" (Lasch, 2023, p. 64). Without authority figures to fulfill the function of repression and lose their credibility, the individual superego derives from the child's punitive fantasies in relation to their parents: "[...] fantasies laden with sadistic rage instead of the internalized ideals of the self-formed by later experiences with beloved and respected models of social conduct" (Lasch, 2023, p. 64–65).

### **The rise of narcissistic society**

The decline of paternal authority was evident in American clinics. Lasch shows us that a growing number of patients arrived at doctors' offices with similar complaints. These patients complained of vague dissatisfaction and confusion about life. They said their existence was futile and purposeless. They experienced inner emptiness, mood swings, and low self-esteem. They associated themselves with admired figures and felt worthless due to demanding situations that caused them suffering. These patients acted out their conflicts rather than repressing or sublimating them. They were promiscuous yet avoided intimate involvement and had an excessive defense against aggression and resentment. Such patients revealed fantasies of omnipotence, where the intrapsychic world is empty and only a grandiose self exists, and where the right to exploit others is a reality. They are extremely self-critical, revealing archaic, punitive, and sadistic tendencies due to a fear of punishment. They are internally threatened by their aggressive feelings and compensate for their experiences of anger and envy with fantasies of wealth, beauty, and omnipotence. The conflict between the internal threat and the use of fantasies as a form of compensation lies at the core of a grandiose conception of the self. All these symptoms and behaviors have been labeled narcissism.

Narcissists defend themselves against the dangers around them and within themselves, especially dependence on others, with such extreme idealization. Others are disposable to them; they can be pleased, but narcissists are not interested in others. They feel independent but need to cling to others like parasites. At the same time, they do not want emotional dependence. This is why their relationships are superficial and fleeting. They seek instant intimacy for excitement, not out of interest in the other person. They do not feel dependent, yet they need the approval and attention of others. They want to be loved, but they aren't concerned about others.

These behaviors, however, are correlated with emotions that are more primitive. Fear is a prerequisite for the manifestation of "inner emptiness, loneliness, and inauthenticity" in individuals, as dangers and uncertainties about the future permeate American society. In other words, social emotions underlie individual suffering.

This does not mean that everyone is narcissistic. However, a social condition allows individuals to act, think, and desire in certain ways. "Every era develops its own peculiar forms of pathology, which exaggerate its underlying personality structure" (Lasch, 2023, p. 103). In other words, our way of life and the affections circulating in our society create a field of possibility for specific personality types. "New social forms require new personality types, new modes of socialization, and new ways of organizing experience" (Lasch, 2023, p. 115). Narcissism is one way to understand the psychological impact of changes in social affections. It is an individual's response to the tensions and anxieties of insecure American life that awakens certain personality traits to varying degrees. However, as society organizes itself in a certain way, these personality traits end up becoming naturalized and transformed into ways of life. To such an extent, we are unable to conceive of any other possible logic (Lasch, 1986, pp. 294–295).

## Narcissism and liquid modernity

Lasch's analyses paved the way for Zygmunt Bauman's (2001) later definition of a liquid society. Such a society is organized around unstable values and insecurities about an uncertain future. In a liquid society, people live as if happiness and pleasure were unlimited and as if they should not miss a single moment of the present because they do not know if they will have another opportunity to enjoy something in the future. For example: "Insecurity about how to earn a living, coupled with the absence of a reliable agent capable of alleviating this insecurity or serving as a channel for demands for greater security, is a severe blow to the very heart of life politics" (Bauman, 2000, p. 28). Each individual living in uncertainty seeks security, usually through a good job and salary, but often without a connection to the greater community or common interest. We are becoming increasingly individualistic in that we are concerned with ourselves above all else. In this mode of socialization, unity between people is blocked insofar as each person seeks only to "save themselves." Values such as meritocracy, competition, the survival of the fittest, indifference to the pain of others, fear of others, self-blame, and the encouragement of skill development prevail in an individualistic society. As Bauman (2001, p. 170) adds: "Contemporary fears, anxieties, and anguish are meant to be suffered in solitude." Thus, as social ties weaken, people feel helpless.

We live with a lack of guarantees, even for survival. We face uncertainty about the future, work, and romantic relationships. We feel insecure about violence, our bodies, our possessions, and our loved ones. People feel expendable. Unemployment becomes structural, meaning no one can feel irreplaceable. This creates a constant turnover of people, demanding constant changes of plan, constant demands for reductions in cost, personnel, and time, jobs without rights, and dismissals without prior notice. In short, everything becomes temporary. We cannot plan in this life. In the absence of long-term security, "instant gratification" seems like a reasonable strategy. Whatever life offers, let it be *hic et nunc*—in the moment. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?" (Bauman, 2001, p. 185). We no longer count on future rewards" (Bauman, 2001, pp. 186–187).

This is very close to what Lasch describes about his era. According to Lasch, modernity is viewed without confidence in the future. We experience failures in politics and intellect: the sciences of that time no longer offer satisfactory explanations of social phenomena. In fact, the human sciences are viewed as demoralizing and do not contribute to our understanding of the present (Lasch, 2023, pp. 46–47). Lasch says this was the outlook of individuals at the end of the 1970s—a vision of a hopeless future. People have no interest in the future or the past. They are losing touch with reality and attempting to dominate it. There are no laws or promises that can maintain order or guarantee future rewards. Families cannot provide a future for their children. Professors cannot promise a better future through education. Schools do not know how to maintain order without external coercion. Authorities cannot ensure tradition or future improvement in social conditions. The concept of equal opportunity becomes a collective dream (Lasch, 1986, p. 187). The exhaustion of social welfare policies (the Welfare State) is what guided the crisis of the 1970s, as pointed out by the sociologist even before the rise of neoliberalism as a political, economic, and ethical model. It's as if Lasch were describing the twilight of modern bourgeois ideals.

The collapse of historical faith, where the past seems irrelevant to the present and the future is too uncertain for reliable speculation, reveals a change in the American way of life. According to Lasch (2023), it is a society that has "long lost interest in the future" (p. 327). People therefore live searching for immediate solutions without considering history. Without a connection to the past, people lack a reference point for thinking. They view new events as unrelated to past occurrences. Even in their personal lives, they fail to apply previous experiences to new situations and instead delegate decision-making to experts.

## Narcissistic society: social crisis and individualism

At the turn of the 20th century, French sociologist Émile Durkheim predicted that the decline of social restrictions and the rise of individualism would lead to a crisis. According to Durkheim, "At every moment in history, our thirst for science, art, and well-being is defined by our appetites, and anything that exceeds this measure leaves us indifferent or causes us to suffer" (Durkheim, 1999, p. 232). Focusing his analysis on discipline, Durkheim noted that those who argue discipline is evil become impatient with limitations and nurture an appetite for the infinite. Ultimately, they argue that a free man is one without limits. For Durkheim, nothing is more painful for humans than a state of indeterminacy. Humans are happy when they set achievable, limited goals for themselves and only an authority—, which is different from authoritarianism—can limit our immoderate desires. "It is through discipline and discipline alone, that we can teach children to moderate their desires and activity. This limitation is a condition for happiness and moral health" (Durkheim, 2008, p. 57).

According to Durkheim, our current society would be pathological because it lives in a state of anomie, or a state in which there are no pre-established norms that can guarantee social recognition. This is because society has established that there is no healthy limit to contain desires. Thus, we would live in a state of indeterminacy, which would lead to a loss of meaning in life ("What should I desire?") and a symbolic loss of reference. In a society of uncertainties and risks, social ties tend to break down.

Narcissism describes this precise social logic in which there are no norms to guide intersubjective relationships or external coercion. This is why Lasch (2023, p. 58) stated that the climate of the time was therapeutic. Even in a crisis-stricken society, individuals seek help for their well-being, albeit temporarily. Concern for mental health becomes a central issue. To survive, each individual must think of themselves and strategies to stand out. These strategies must be novel and require the development of a self-image to interact with others less vulnerably. Therefore, therapies aim to maximize individual potential because there is a belief that individuals shape their futures.

## Narcissism as a psychological defense mechanism

In Lasch's view, the narcissist is, first, a survivor. In his 1984 work, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Difficult Times*, the sociologist clarifies points that were unclear in *The Culture of Narcissism*. "[...] the concern for the individual, apparently so characteristic of our time, takes the form of a concern for psychic survival" (Lasch, 1986, p. 9). In other words, American society has created conditions for survival, not living. In this case, narcissism is a defense mechanism aimed at survival. However, it is pathological and leads to suffering. Individuals take refuge in their defenses instead of creating a common purpose. *It's as if we've created conditions for individuals to save themselves, not society*. Even the idea of society is called into question because what exists are individuals. Retrospectively, narcissism is to be expected in this type of society. It is the best-suited way of life for what capitalism itself and its crises have created, since narcissism is an individual defense mechanism when society loses confidence in the future. Individuals prepare for the worst, seeking to survive the "general shipwreck." Faced with the risk of individual disintegration, they create a besieged individuality.

In an attempt to survive, the logic of narcissism is voracity toward the world. At the same time, the superego needs support for giving in to this desire. The excess of this voracity causes the support project to be experienced as denial of the voracity itself (the inability to support denies the destruction of the object), resulting in empty relationships without emotional

ties (Lasch, 2023, p. 316). Though this denial process causes psychological suffering, this logic works in the life of American society. It creates conditions for the narcissistic subject to succeed. We see an image of a man who knows how to use others' personal information to his advantage. He knows how to manipulate, make deals, and control (LASCH, 2023, p. 107). He uses interpersonal battles, intimidation, and seduction to gain advantages but depends on the fear or admiration of others for validation (since self-approval depends on recognition and acclaim from others). He creates an image of a winner (hence the absence of the ideal of hard work) and seeks success for its own sake (devoid of content). Thus, success in business, politics, or entertainment is equated (what matters is getting "there," becoming a celebrity): "The only important aspect of celebrity is the fact that it is celebrity; no one can say why" (Lasch, 2023, p. 111); "Nothing is more successful than the appearance of success" (Lasch, 2023, p. 127). He seeks exaltation not for his actions but for his attributes. He does not want esteem but admiration. He does not seek fame but the excitement of being a celebrity and being envied.

Therefore, improving yourself is not enough. You also need to talk about yourself, create an image of yourself, and present yourself to others in an authentic way that makes you stand out from the crowd. You want to be enviable and serve as a role model and goal for others. Television programs, for example, exploit the presentation of personalities: how they live, what they do daily, and how they think about life. In other words, they win over an audience by presenting curiosities. Remarkably, Lasch wrote this reflection in 1979, long before the advent of social media.

Modern life is so completely mediated by electronic images that we cannot help but react to others as if our actions were being recorded and broadcast to an invisible audience, or stored for later scrutiny. "Smile, you're on camera!" This all-seeing eye's intrusion into everyday life no longer takes us by surprise or catches us off guard. We don't need to be reminded to smile. Our faces carry permanent smiles, and we already know our best angle for photographs (Lasch, 2023, p. 112).

During this period, there was a tendency in media programs, both television and radio, to captivate the public with revelations and false confessions. People used humor to attract attention and get easy laughs. However, what most caught Lasch's attention was the reversal of the distinction between reality and illusion. What becomes real is what is shown by the television advertising industry, such as soap opera characters. With the concept of a performative self, reality becomes whatever appears, regardless of anything outside the self. Reality becomes the interpretation of roles constructed by advertising and mass culture. As a construct to be displayed, the self becomes a work of art, hence the notions of originality and creativity and of breaking with tradition. However, in doing so, the self presents itself as a commodity (LASCH, 1986, pp. 21–22). Celebrity references also become commodities, creating a gap between reality and fiction. This has consequences: the disparity between ordinary people and celebrities is so great that it compromises the desire for social change. Instead, people seek to save themselves amid the herd.

In fact, entertainment has generally turned to advertising goods that promise a good life and can be consumed immediately without worrying about the repression of desires. A commodity's exchange value becomes its ability to confer prestige (giving the illusion of prosperity and well-being). Mass advertising has created a climate of mass education that leads people to believe life can be easier, more practical, and more effective with their products. Advertisements are not only for material goods but also for experiences and personal achievements. For Lasch, the media does more than just encourage; it creates a narrative about us (LASCH, 1986, p. 120).

Consumption becomes a hegemonic way of life, mixing freedom of consumption with autonomy. However, in this context, having freedom of choice means having open, flexible, disposable options for identification. It is a deceptive freedom because it brings no significant change (LASCH, 1986, p. 29). Lasch does not argue that the market creates these conditions for narcissism, though. Narcissism is present in all of us, but it is *awakened* in a culture that makes it possible. It awakens a protective superficiality in us, a fear of definitive commitments, and a tendency to break ties as needed. It makes us anxious to keep all options open and renders us incapable of feeling gratitude or loyalty (LASCH, 2023, p. 364).

As the prospect of a sustainable world fades and fear and insecurity rise, the market attempts to serve as an intermediary between the self and the world (Lasch, 1986, pp. 177–178). Consumption becomes a kind of measure: the greater one's purchasing power, the greater one's supposed independence. People begin to evaluate themselves and others based on this purchasing power, creating an image of themselves that is more important than the experiences and skills they have acquired throughout their lives. They are judged by strangers and acquaintances based on their clothes, possessions, and image rather than their "personality." Therefore, they adopt a theatrical view of their performance, whether they are active (LASCH, 1986, p. 21). In other words, the market alters the conception of oneself and others as subjects due to the nature of its production (saleability and negotiability) and its purpose (immediate consumption). Each person becomes a commodity as if people and things exist only to be enjoyed. "The narcissist lives in a world that has no objective or independent existence and seems to exist only to gratify or contradict his desires" (Lasch, 1986, p. 22). This is similar to an adventurous man: "endowed with a relentless hunger for emotional experiences to fill an inner void, terrified of death and aging" (Lasch, 2023, p. 99). A culture organized around mass consumption is conducive to the exaltation of narcissism since it causes people to see the world as a mirror in which they project their fears and desires, such as a feeling of inner emptiness, dependence, and loneliness.

In this scenario, *Lasch criticizes the idea that individuals are not held responsible* for their actions. Their infinite desires, transgressions, and meaningless lives are not considered individual choices for which they must take responsibility. Without the internalization of external coercion, people are categorized and judged as if they don't understand why they acted the way they did. Infractions are tolerated through medical justification as disorders that must be treated rather than as crimes for which individuals are responsible. *It's as if people are victims of circumstances*. A situation has been created in which social control by experts is so strong that instead of judging a person for an act of transgression, experts assess whether the person is a victim of a pathological case (Lasch, 2023, p. 337).

This is one of Lasch's central points: *how narcissism causes people to act without responsibility out of voraciousness and without caring about others* because they are incapable of accepting others as they are. According to Lasch, the consequence is a lack of responsibility: "As therapeutic practice and viewpoint gain general acceptance, more and more people feel unqualified to perform adult responsibilities and end up becoming dependent on some form of medical authority" (Lasch, 2023, p. 354). Lasch calls this dependence narcissism.

As society becomes increasingly dominated by large bureaucratic organizations and media, families can no longer play their traditional role of transmitting culture, and people feel disconnected from the past. This is clearly reflected in schools, where students are treated as victims, cannot be held responsible, and must be referred to specialists. This is why the issue of punishment, as mentioned at the beginning of the text, is significant: students are no longer punished for their actions. Consequently, they grow up in a permissive and non-punitive environment without experiencing guilt. Additionally, narcissism encourages people to enjoy themselves at all times, seek self-fulfillment, be authentic, sell their image, and so on. People become "victims" of circumstances—ironic, detached, and confused observers (LASCH, 1986, p. 85).

Since 1977, Lasch has emphasized a movement in which doctors and criminal law experts seek to cure illness, madness, and crime by isolating and treating individuals. Similarly, parenting professionals hope to shape children's characters. In other words, a therapeutic conception of society is established, and all individuals are patients. "From the outset, thus, a medical conception of reality underlies efforts to reshape private life" (Lasch, 1991, p. 219). Insecure parents become dependent on specialists and do not act according to their values but rather follow an ideal image of good parenting. "Thus, the family struggles to conform to an ideal imposed from the outside." Lasch continues his argument:

Experts agree that parents should neither tyrannize nor overwhelm their children with overly solicitous attention. They also agree that every action is the result of a long chain of causes and those moral judgments have no place in child rearing. This proposition, central to mental health ethics, exempts children from moral responsibility, leaving parents with the same responsibilities as before. Under these circumstances, it's not surprising that many parents try to avoid this responsibility by avoiding confrontation with their children and shirking their disciplinary and character-building duties. Permissive ideologies rationalize this behavior. When parents cannot avoid disciplinary decisions entirely, they delegate them to other authorities (Lasch, 1991, p. 221).

### **What can we take from this reflection to think about contemporary education?**

In this context, we can reflect on contemporary schools. Lasch's diagnosis of a narcissistic American society in the 1970s may not be entirely applicable to the present day. It is highly questionable whether contemporary society is organized and behaves as it did in the past. However, certain traits of the narcissistic society Lasch described with precision and detail reappear in contemporary modes of socialization. These traits permeate our society and produce effects in diverse fields of social life. However, such behaviors can be best observed and felt within schools.

Lasch's reflections raise questions currently being discussed in education. First, let us acknowledge that contemporary education reflects the characteristics and effects of our narcissistic society, such as the negotiation of rules and laws. The decline of parental authority is evident in the classroom when professors, school coordinators, and administrators have difficulty enforcing the rules and norms established by the institution. Theorist Paula Sibilia points out that there is now a greater tendency to negotiate these rules as a strategy to achieve a minimum consensus in the classroom. "In today's school and family environments, however, the full force of this norm is no longer evident. It has become necessary to constantly negotiate the rules that should prevail in each situation" (Sibilia, 2012, p. 96). This is because nothing is assured by prior definition. There is no teaching authority to ensure the classroom runs according to established parameters. Professors and students must agree on transitional rules to maintain a bond. Thus, whereas we previously had a non-negotiable, coercive norm, today no norm has that power. Without the concept of authority, students assume a hegemony of opinion. Even professors' knowledge is questioned, becoming just one opinion among others since there is no longer a symbolic code organizing social relations. Without a shared, unifying coercive norm, educational institutions need to create rules that can produce dialogue, even if they are temporary and precarious, such as rules about the use of cell phones and other gadgets (Sibilia, 2012, p. 99).

Another interesting point appears in the January 2021 (No. 172) issue of the magazine *Tribuna da Educação* in an article entitled "It Looks Like Revolution, But It's Just Neoliberalism: The University Professor Caught Between the Crusades of the Right and the Left," written by a professor at a public university in São Paulo under the pseudonym Benamê Kamu Almudras due to the article's controversial nature. The text recounts a situation in which a university professor faces a mutiny in the classroom. The students claimed that the course required excessive reading. For the professor, however, it was a reasonable amount. To solve the problem, the students suggested that each of them be allowed to choose what they wanted to read. They would rather not negotiate with the professor; they demanded that their preference be established. Stunned, the professor said he would think about it and then negotiate a solution that would satisfy everyone. Nevertheless, one student retorted, "No, professor. You always want to negotiate. What we want is to break down hierarchies and question your power" (Almudras, 2021, p. 2).

In this case, we see how students deconstruct the idea of authority and the professor's role to establish a new social relationship. This new model eliminates the scope of the norm and its power, introducing market logic where consumers determine what they will or will not consume. Similar to a market where you choose the products you want to buy, students have established a market relationship with knowledge; they only consume what they like. They demand things from professors as consumers demand things from products. This passage clearly shows a market attitude, individualistic ethics, and a consumerist spirit in the student community, as if it were obvious that professors should submit to their students' demands. Almudras presents several other similar cases in his intriguing text. He describes cases in which students demand guarantees that they will successfully complete their postgraduate studies and receive their diplomas, even if they do not submit their final work. Students demand to pass subjects without submitting work, choose the topics of speakers, and give themselves the privilege of participating in meetings at their discretion. They also criticize texts without reading them. Overall, we see the logic of the market and consumption operating within the teaching process. In all cases, the professor is treated as a service provider rather than a professional educator.

From the students' perspective, the professor would be considered authoritarian if he would rather not discuss the course content, the chosen texts, how many texts should be read, and the form of assessment. From the professor's perspective, he would feel as if he were performing a "service" by meeting students' demands about what they think is most important to study, how much time they should spend studying, and how they should be evaluated. Almudras argues that students miss the mark when they portray professors as oppressors. In his view, professors defend students the most by focusing on their education. This point reminds us of how Lasch described the atrophy of competence when he made the university a kind of bouquet of individual choices.

Another point to highlight is the introduction of medical knowledge in contemporary schools. Indeed, schools have become devices that regulate the entry of this knowledge by mediating the relationship between parents and psychiatrists and referring students based on a perception or "suspicion" that something is "wrong" with them.

Since the 1996 study *Preconceitos no Cotidiano Escolar – Ensino e Medicinação* (Prejudice in Everyday School Life: Teaching and Medicalization) by Cecília A. L. Collares and M. Aparecida A. Moysés, there has been an attempt in Brazil to question the association between academic failure and health problems. This reveals how normative medical discourse has been incorporated into not only everyday life but also educational discourse. Collares and Moysés indicate that education professionals "pass the problem" on to health professionals because they do not see the problem in school or in the teaching-learning process. Through this transfer, it is as if the problem were solved. By diagnosing a disorder, professors, and

administrators are absolved of blame for students who do not learn. Responsibility is transferred through pathologization. By biologizing the problem, the advantage is that it can be shifted away from the school or society and placed on the victim. The authors call this the *pathologization of the teaching-learning process* (Collares & Moysés, 1996, p. 28).

Throughout her work, Marilena Chaui defines and criticizes what she calls the *ideology of competence*. According to her, it is the belief that some people are competent (experts) because they possess scientific and technological knowledge, while others are discredited for performing tasks commanded by experts. According to Chaui, "Not just anyone is entitled to say anything to anyone else, anywhere, or in any circumstance" (2016, p. 57). This discourse can only be uttered by experts who occupy the position of knowledge. Those who have not had access to knowledge must simply obey.

This becomes clearer when we realize that the discourse of competence determines how we should act, think, and value things, as if we had no knowledge of our worthiness of trust in the sphere of private life. Therefore, we would need an expert to tell us how to act at all times. Chaui points out a *discourse of privatized competence* in this case: "[...] it teaches each of us, as privatized individuals, how to relate to the world and to others. This teaching is done by experts who teach us how to live" (CHAUI, 2016, p. 57). As competent beings, we are invalidated, so we must be taught by experts. In doing so, we internalize the rules and values expected of us by society and absorbed by the cultural industry.

In terms of education, the discourse of specialists has entered contemporary schools, particularly regarding the concept of normality. There is an intersection between pedagogical discourse and medical-psychiatric intervention that forms a network involving the family, school, and specialists. This intersection delegates to specialists the responsibility of standardizing students. One consequence of this medical intervention in families and schools is a shift in authority from parents, who supposedly know what is best for their children, to experts, who claim to know what is best for children. In other words, a psychiatric diagnosis causes a shift in parental authority; parents are no longer considered the best people to care for their child, and specialists should assume this role instead. According to Vorcaro (2011), "For the sake of the child and in light of the specialist's scientific arguments, parents have no alternative but to be guided by the anonymous knowledge of scientific truth, since they can no longer be guided by their desires" (p. 227). Alternatively, parents become "employees of medical discourse," erasing themselves as subjects and strictly following the prescriptions of this discourse (Kamers, 2020, p. 223–224). This is validated by society and the state, disseminated in the media, and naturalized as valid by everyone (Kamers, 2021, p. 272).

Therefore, in everyday school life, it is common for specialists to prescribe medication to "solve" problems such as restlessness. In other words, the focus is on what is biologically "wrong" with the child who prevents them from learning rather than on the factors that cause the child to lose interest and fail to concentrate on what is being presented. From the first perspective, it would be a disorder; from the second, it would be a social or pedagogical problem linked to existential issues that may be disturbing the student.

In her 2011 text, "*Therapeutic Education for Children with Global Developmental Disorders: An Alternative to the Medicalization of Education*," M. Cristina M. Kupfer argues that education is being medicalized and that "in this medicalizing action, it is also possible to see the dismissal of educators and the consequent medical appropriation of education" (Kupfer, 2011, p. 143). Instead of addressing problems that often fall within the realm of existential issues, such as internal conflicts; we may suspect that they are remedied at school with the help of professionals from other fields and under the influence of drugs. In a sense, this allows those responsible, such as teachers and principals, to "wash their hands" of the problem. – At school. We must face this problem, as Renata Guarido writes.

On the one hand, education professionals are deprived of their ability to work with children due to the dominance of specialized discourse. On the other hand, pedagogy continues to perpetuate this practice by adopting and validating medical-psychological discourses, thereby relieving schools of responsibility and blaming children and their families for failures (Guarido, 2007, p. 157).

## Conclusion

Since at least the 1970s, the scientific community has diagnosed the decline of paternal authority. This diagnosis is still evident in contemporary society. However, Lasch's analyses of American society cannot be transposed entirely to the present day, especially the Brazilian scenario. However, it is undeniable that some elements reappear in contemporary socialization, particularly within schools.

Lasch's description of a narcissistic society and culture has helped us understand that contemporary educational issues have deeper roots. It is as if we are updating modes of socialization as social relations change, producing effects of this change within schools and the educational process. Although it is difficult to imagine that we live in a completely narcissistic society, it is reasonable to assume that narcissistic behaviors exist in many areas of social life.

The decline of parental authority has resulted in three elements being present in contemporary schools: first, norms and rules are negotiated. Second, medical and therapeutic discourse is present in the school environment. Third, specialists are present, and authority is removed from professors and parents. The decline in authority created an opening for experts to take the place previously occupied by social norms. Therefore, this decline did not only imply a weakening of norms or rules in the socialization process of individuals. It also allowed social figures supported by a discourse of competence to emerge and insert themselves into social life. Thus, the decline of parental authority paved the way for specialized knowledge to become a force of law. Social norms gave way to expert knowledge.

The direct consequence of the decline of social norms and the emergence of experts is the loss of social references for individuals. This phenomenon, which has been observed since the time of Durkheim, significantly alters the individual's relationship with the norm and with the concept of the collective, elevating the individual to the status of a social atom. As Durkheim, demonstrated, social atomization has dangerous consequences for socialization, producing anomic states of social life.

The decline of norms and boundaries has exacerbated individualism, causing the traditional nuclear family, centered on paternal authority, to decline. This forces parents and guardians to transfer their authority to figures of power and knowledge that have risen to fill the void left by paternal authority. In this new system, parents have lost their traditional power and are now viewed with suspicion regarding the upbringing and education of their children. In turn, children are treated as individuals who must be understood based on their specific characteristics because they are at the center of the socialization and education process.

The cultural industry and the logic of the consumer market have invaded education and the classroom. The disciplinary power exercised by schools gives way to consumers' power to determine the objects of their desire and enjoy their impulses without limits. Educational training gives way to image production. The curriculum and theoretical training yield to the immediacy of information and the usefulness of knowledge. In this context, how should we think about education? What paths can schools take in the face of such a scenario? These open questions constitute immediate challenges.

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