The Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is back in the charts! In the draft version of the DSM-V (the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) NPD was eliminated together along with four others of the ten personality disorders listed in the current edition. The removal of NPD in particular met with strong reaction and criticism, and in June 2011 NPD got back its Triple A status. Should psychoanalysts be happy, or is this wavering (keeping this Freudian tidbit on board) only obfuscating the underlying political agenda of today's psy-complex? In order to answer this we shall return to Christopher Lasch's The Culture of Narcissism (1978), a seminal but not unproblematic attempt to merge the clinical and the political.

INTRODUCTION

The soon to be published Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the DSM-V, proposes a thorough break with the former edition:

You will find that the work group has recommended a significant reformulation of the approach to the assessment and diagnosis of personality assessment and diagnosis of personality psychopathology, including revised general criteria for personality disorder, the provision for clinicians to evaluate a limited set of personality disorder types according to criteria based on core impairments in personality functioning and pathological personality traits, and an overall measure of the severity of personality dysfunction.

This so-called “hybrid dimensional-categorical model for personality and personality disorder” departs from the assessment of traits. This evaluation can lead to the diagnosis of a “specific clinically salient personality disorder,” or, for patients who do not meet one of the six specific types, to the diagnosis of a “fully trait specified personality disorder.”
As the DSM IV contained ten personality disorders, the draft version of the DSM V retained (and re-defined) only five: the schizotypal, antisocial, borderline, avoidant and obsessive-compulsive Personality Disorders. The DSM IV-disorders not retained (the narcissistic, paranoid, schizoid, histrionic and dependent personality disorders) were supposed to be accounted for in the broad category of “Personality Disorder Trait Specified” (PDTS). In the reactions to the draft version of the DSM V the removal of The Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) was especially strongly contested. The result of this broad critique and protest was that, after re-evaluation, only NPD made its way back to the specific personality disorder types. The DSM V website hence stated:

The six disorders include the five originally proposed for retention in DSM-5 (Skodol et al., 2011c) and narcissistic PD, which Web site feedback suggested was the specific PD with the most clinical utility.

The clinical relevance was, by the way, also the key argument used when in 1980 the Narcissistic Personality Disorder was first introduced in the DSM III. As Levy et al. put it, NPD made it into the DSM III due to “the widespread use of the concept by clinicians, the writings of Kernberg, Kohut, and Millon, and the identification of narcissism as a personality factor in a number of psychological studies.” The clinical argument moreover is directly coupled to psychoanalysis; as it commonly held (and often lamented) that NPD largely depends on data derived from clinical psychoanalysis.

Was the proposed elimination of the above mentioned disorders thus an attempt to further cleanse the DSM of its former psychoanalytical roots? This could be the case, as the DSM V seems above all to sidetrack hysteria (the prototype of psychic suffering in the Freudian stance) and the structural differential diagnosis between psychosis and neurosis (see especially the Lacanian perspective). The only remaining clinical designation in the DSM V with a strong connection to psychoanalysis is the obsessive-compulsive one, but that might be explained by the fact that this PD today is heavily embedded in a medico-cognitive-behavioral model. Concerning the proposed expulsion of the Narcissistic personality disorder one should, moreover, point to the fact that, besides its psychoanalytical heritage, the concept is traditionally closely connected to a social and political critique. That is, the preponderance of narcissism is commonly linked to the consumerist, Me-centered and a-social timeframe we came to live in. It was especially the historian Christopher Lasch who, leaning explicitly on Freudian theory, brought a cultural and political critique into the clinical debate. Note that his influential and widely read book The Culture of Narcissism (1978) – it was even read in the White House – was published just prior to the publication of the DSM III in 1980.

Should then psychoanalysts, and especially those sympathetic to the so-called Freudian Left, be happy with the DSM eventually keeping NPD on board? As such, looking at the pleas made for maintaining NPD in the top list, one finds oneself in the somewhat awkward presence of conventional mainstream psychiatry and clinical psychology. Ronald Pies, for example, Professor of Psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University, deplored the announced removal of NPD in the DSM precisely by pointing to the relevance of Christopher Lasch’s book. However, Pies makes it immediately clear, Lasch is from a clinical point of view, only “impressionistic.” There is no doubt here: the ideological and political focus of Lasch is traded for a specific and narrowly empirical view of clinical relevance. That is, far from being understood within a true psychoanalytic or social-political framework, NPD is attributed by most clinicians to something biochemical. As Pies writes, “[The] best course of action may be to refine the narcissistic personality disorder criteria, followed by careful field testing and a search for biomark-
ers, rather than wholesale elimination of the narcissistic personality disorder category.”

In contrast to this attempt to cleanse pathological narcissism of its psychoanalytical and critical political roots we should re-assess Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* as a seminal critique at the junction of the political and the clinical. Let us therefore proceed to a closer reading of Lasch’s book in order to grasp what the true stakes are of his clinico-political reading of the phenomena of narcissism.

**LASCH IDENTIFYING THE CLINIC OF THE ME-DECADE**

In 1976 the novelist Tom Wolfe defined the post-war society as the “Me-decade,” arguing that the new alchemical dream had become “changing one’s personality – remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very self.” The historian Christopher Lasch in his turn tried to identify this alleged shift in late-modern subjectivity in terms of the Freudian concept of narcissism:

> The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. … His sexual attitudes are permissive rather than puritanical, even though his emancipation from ancient taboos brings him no sexual peace. … [The narcissist] demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire. (Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*: xvi.)

For Lasch it was beyond doubt that the post-war consumerist society had produced new clinical pictures. The new pathological Narcissus attempts to fill his existential emptiness in a hedonistic pursuit of enjoyment and by mirroring him or herself to the celebrities of the entertainment industry. Pathological narcissism entails fear of competition, deteriorating relations between men and women, a boundless repressed rage, pseudo self-insight, altered sense of time etc. (*op cit.*: 33). For Lasch, the days of classical psychology, of the good old hysterical or the firm obsesssional neurotic, were over.

But here we should carefully assess the terms in which Lasch attempts to describe the shift: he writes of “economic man” giving way to “psychological man, the final product of bourgeois individualism,” (*op.cit.*: xvi). The crucial question of course is how to understand this shift from the economical to the psychological. Lasch’s main argument here is the advent of a “therapeutic culture,” a becoming central of psychological knowledge and expertise resulting in a de-politicization. Or, if we might rephrase this in a way which immediately comes to the crux of the matter: Lasch’s cultural and political critique concerns the alleged shift from a societal focus on the economical to a focus on the psychological. For Lasch this shift had enormous repercussions on both society and – and this is crucial – also on the self: reliance on psychological expertise undermines parental and above all paternal authority and this produces the new clinical dominant: the clinical disturbance of the pathological Narcissus.

What we should not miss here is that Lasch wedds a culture critique (society’s psychologized outlook) with a general psychopathological assessment (the alleged becoming predominant of the narcissistic personality). The issue of course is that the signifier psychology is operative on both sides, at the site of society and at the site of the individual: a psychologized culture on the one hand, and a changed psychological pathology on the other hand. Here the crucial question becomes whether it is tenable to hold that the psychologization of culture and politics has particular psychological effects on the subjects living under these new circumstances. Is the problem of such an approach not that it presupposes a position above both psychologization and its clinical manifestations, that is, an Archimedean position of the psychology of psychologization?

However, as I will argue in the next section, Lasch’s somehow decentering view of therapeutic culture has this interesting move: it puts forward what I will call a critique of psychological politics. But it is precisely in his attempt to draw clinical conclusions that Lasch does not remain fully true to this in-
sight: there he works from a meta-psychological use of psychoanalysis and, threatens to be overtaken himself by the processes of psychologization.

THE CRITIQUE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL POLITICS

In order to sketch out Lasch’s critique of psychological politics, let us first discern at what point critiques of therapeutic culture almost invariably run into a deadlock and lose their potential to offer a political analysis. In an overview of today’s literature on narcissism, for example, it becomes rapidly clear that political issues are left out and that the perspective is narrowed down to empirical aspects. It is precisely here that we see, besides the psychologization of political issues in therapeutic culture, to put it a bit paradoxically, a psychologization of “clinical issues.” Let me try to explain this starting from the numerous (self-) help books on narcissism – to name two pregnant examples: Why is it Always About You?: Saving Yourself from the Narcissists in Your Life and Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited. The catch phrase of that last book is: “Learn what makes narcissists and psychopaths tick and how to cope with them.” Is this not the crux of psychologization: to induce the psychologizing gaze in the layman? You are offered psychological theory in order to cope with narcissism and narcissists. Psychologization is hence the induction, the interpellation through which the (late)modern subject is called upon not only to adopt the signifiers of psy-discourse but also to assume the position of the psy-expert to look upon him- or herself, the others and the world. Just consider how many (self)proclaimed narcisists often turn out to be true psychology-afficionados (like many people suffering from other popular disorders like ADHD, borderline, autism, et cetera).

As we will see further on, Lasch’s original take was to address the political bearings of the psychologization of clinical issues. However, it is precisely here, in the attempt to merge a political critique with a clinical analysis, that the immanent risk is that of ending up in psychologizing both the dimension of the socio-political and the dimension of the personal and subjective. Especially where Lasch resorts to psychoanalysis to overlook both psychologized society (therapeutic culture) and psychological man he is balancing on a tightrope. Here, following the (not unproblematic) tradition of the Freudian Left to amend a political analysis with a psychoanalytic one, Lasch succumbs at various points to the tendency to psychologize. Writing, for example, about the increased uneasiness in Western society with aging and death he states that this is not only the reflection of objective changes in the social position of individuals, but that it must also arise out of some inner predisposition (Lasch: CN). Arguing that love and work unite in a concern for posterity and that one should attempt to equip the younger generation to carry on the tasks of the older, Lasch clearly is psychologizing, if not moralizing “the central sorrow of old age” in a way that is not far removed from the self-help literature he criticizes, reducing societal and political issues to individual psychology.

As these attempts by Lasch to connect societal issues to the subjective level threaten to push him toward a (meta-) psychologization, Lasch nonetheless succeeds at various points in not succumbing to this temptation. In his critique of mainstream psy-theories of sexuality, for example, Lasch remarks that the promotion of sex as a “healthy” and “normal” part of life masks a desire to divest it of the emotional intensity unavoidably clinging to it:

Today men and women seek escape from emotion not only because they have suffered wounds in the wars of love but because they experience their own inner impulses as intolerably urgent and menacing. The flight from feeling originates not only in the sociology of the sex war but in the psychology that accompanies it. (op.cit.: 201)
We have to disentangle this carefully. Lasch’s view is that, primarily, there is a psychological, or better, subjective problem, and it is this itself which becomes psychologized in mainstream theories (promoting sex as healthy and normal). Here psychologization turns out to be effectively a denial of the psychic dimension, as the coercive mainstream theoretical models narrow down the subjective space. Lasch’s insight that it is the psyche which gets psychologized, furthermore opens up the perspective of a political critique. Just consider how Lasch contends that the therapeutic outlook, having displaced religion as the organizing framework of American culture, threatens also to displace politics by transforming collective grievances into personal problems amenable to therapeutic intervention (op. cit.: 1-14). Lasch strongly opposes decision making becoming the prerogative of technical expertise and deplores the loss of the ethical dimension in public life in favor of consumerism. So even if Lasch’s critique begins with the presupposition that in pre-therapeutic times there was a place for genuine politics and genuine public engagement, his analysis goes beyond this and therefore supersedes the more superficial analysis of his contemporaries such as Richard Sennett. For Lasch, subjective experiences of inner emptiness, loneliness, and inauthenticity are by no means unreal or devoid of social content. It is “the devastation of personal life” and not the retreat into privatism (claimed by Sennett) that needs to be criticized and condemned. (Lasch, CN: 27) Thus, Lasch criticizes Sennett’s romantic mourning for lost sincerity and authenticity in the realm of social exchange, which have apparently given way to more individualistic tendencies. For Lasch, the cult of intimacy originates not in the assertion of personality, but in its collapse (op. cit.: 30). His critique of mainstream forms of therapy is that they intensify the diseases they pretend to cure:

They do this, however, not by diverting attention from social problems to personal ones, from real issues to false issues, but by obscuring the social origins of the suffering – not to be confused with complacent self-absorption – that is painfully but falsely experienced as purely personal and private. (Ibid.)

Thus, for Lasch, a false psychologizing of the social origins of suffering is central and results in these problems being experienced as personal/private. This is pretty close to what Žižek considers critical theory should be about. It should assume not that we have the wrong idea of how things really are, but that we have the wrong idea of how in reality things are mystified. Therapeutic culture is not about transforming real issues into false issues, or, non-psychological issues in psychological ones. The antagonism is already present at the level of the real issue of the social itself, which is to say we are dealing with the “social origins of the suffering” and these are subsequently psychologized within therapeutic culture. Lasch thus situates the psyche and subjectivity on the axis of the social and the suffering, or, put more concisely, he understands subjectivity as the fact of being subjected to the social or, more generally, to the outside world. It is this Spaltung, to put it in Freudian terms, this dividedness of the subject, which is then illegitimately transferred to the personal and the private in the process of psychologization.

To push this further, Lasch’s “social origins of the suffering” can be given two names: subjectivity and politics. Thus, are we here not close to Marx’s Critique of Political Economy? Žižek argues that the Critique of Political Economy essentially maintains the idea that the economy is itself political. For Žižek, the political class struggle permeates the entire analysis from the very beginning. Political economy is not about objective socio-economic data, but rather it is about “data which always signal the outcome of a political struggle.” In the same way, Lasch’s “social origins of the suffering” should be
understood as indicating that the field of the social (the field of the public and the political) is itself always already “psychological.” The public realm is not exclusively concerned with objective social problems but is already infused by the dimension of the psyche and the subjective. This is Lasch’s fundamental insight; this is his critique of psychological politics. However, as said, it is a critique which Lasch did not pursue to the end, as one can argue that he merely presumed psychoanalysis as above both subjectivity and politics, without assessing how, historically, it is entangled with both. Let us try to address this in the next section.

**Psychoanalysis and the Advent of Modern Psycho-Political Subjectivity**

To begin with, it is clear that the knot between politics and subjectivity should be understood historically, for is not the modern subject of the Enlightenment essentially a political entity? Sidetracking God led to the birth of the autonomous State, on the one hand, and what is generally believed to be the autonomous Individual, on the other. The two levels appear to define each other: no State exists without the autonomous, rational Individual (the principle of democracy) and there can be no Individual without an autonomous, rational State (the principle of the rule of law). This makes the modern subject both political and psychological. This intertwining is structurally problematic: to borrow Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s terms, it inhibits the full realization of both the subject and society. The subject cannot be fully realized, cannot fully equal itself, because society is not a unified, rational whole, fully equal to itself. At the same time, society cannot attain full positive being because the individual subject never realizes full subjectivity, never equals itself. The lack of being on the one side always returns on the other.

But we have to take this line of thought still one step further, for it is at this point that academia enters as the necessary go-between. Science, claiming to belong neither to the subjective nor the political domain, is what knots the two together. And here one can argue that it is especially the psy-sciences which assume the position from which the liaison between subjectivity and the social – and in general with the outer world – can be thought. Before the advent of the modern sciences, God secured and gave form to the link of the human being to himself, to others and the world; in the Enlightenment science takes up this role. In this way we can understand Gustav Theodor Fechner’s psychophysics, for example, as an attempt to ground the physics of humanity’s being of and being in the world via psychology. Fechner’s psychology tried to reconcile humanity with the modern, rapidly technologizing, world, designing a new place for humanity to inhabit. Hence, did not Freud’s psychoanalysis come in where Fechner’s psychophysics failed? Freud tried to theorize not only the link between the modern subject and the world, but, most importantly, the structural failure of that link. As the Enlightenment showed God the door, the technology and science which arose in His place turned out to be structurally incapable of providing modern humanity with a place in the world, with a definite ontological status. It is precisely there, in the breaches of the project of modernity, that Freudian theory situated both the modern subject and the modern society. Freud’s so-called cultural or anthropological writings such as *Civilization and its Discontents* are crucial in his attempt to deal with what I call the modern psychopolitical subject. And if it is true that a full political assessment is underdeveloped if not avoided by Freud, it is clear that his coupling of the subjective *Spaltung* (the subject’s splitting) with the societal *Unbehagen* (discontents/unease) allowed the possibility of thinking a new link between the subject and its world via the subject’s unconscious and its symptoms.
Maybe this solution, of Freudian symptomatology as a coping mechanism in relation to modernity’s structural paradox, is what leaves Freud’s ideas stranded in late modernity. Lasch’s claim regarding psychopathology shifting from the traditional neuroses of the psychoanalytic clinic to the narcissistic personality disorders could then be understood in terms of a deadlock of the Freudian paradigm. Think of similar assertions today such as Paul Verhaeghe’s idea that the traditional psychotherapies (modeled on Freudian psychoanalysis) fail to answer the so-called new symptomatology,23 or of Jacques-Alain Miller’s argument that psychoanalytical discourse (i.e., know your desire) became its own victim, realizing in society a kind of perversion of itself in a consumerist-hypercapitalistic discourse (i.e., free your desire).24 This is not the place to go deeper into the relation of late-modern symptomatology and psychoanalysis itself, but the least one can say is that the narcissistic crisis Lasch was trying to describe is itself caught up in this history of the modern subject and in the history of the sciences themselves. Psychoanalysis surely played a central role in that history and, thus, is an important factor in shaping modern and late-modern culture. Hence, Lasch’s critique of psychological politics falters where he misses the place of science—and the specific position of psychoanalysis in science—within modernity as the mediator of psycho-political subjectivity. It is exactly in historicizing this constellation that one could try to account for supposed changes in the psyche of modern and late-modern humanity as these cannot be seen apart from the role psychoanalysis itself played in providing the imagery for the reflexivity of the modern subject.

Just think how, in these post-psychoanalytical times, Freudianism has been kicked off the stage to assume an almost unconscious or semi-conscious presence in advertising and entertainment, providing a cognitive mapping, as it were, for today’s commercial and cultural narratives. The Oedipus complex, the primacy of sexuality, castration, anxiety and other psychoanalytic concepts considered redundant within today’s psy-sciences and psy-praxis, are very much alive in the imagery of commercials, games, movies etcetera. Lasch, however, goes astray analyzing so called “naïve” popular culture (Lasch, CN: 95), regarding it as something that can be scientifically and, particularly, psychoanalytically deconstructed. He misses the fact that when we encounter these phallic breasts and vagina dentata, popular culture itself is drawing upon psychoanalytic imagery. Perhaps we should even consider the presence of Freudian themes in popular culture as the return of a repressed imaginary: incest, oedipal constellations, castration, and so on, these are, as it were, the after-effects, the after-images of a theory now being rejected in mainstream academia. So we should not, for example, take the vulva-eye of Sauron on its phallic tower in the movie The Lord of the Rings at its face value, as do Ruth Goldberg and Krin Gabbard,25 but instead regard it as a prime example of psychoanalytic imagery re-emerging in popular culture. As such this offers one possible response to the criticism that Lasch misused and misappropriated Freudian terminology.26 Lasch did not appropriate Freudian terminology for the analysis of the modern condition of subjectivity; Freud’s terminology was there from the beginning.

**THE SKANDALONS OF THE FREUDIAN LEFT**

It is clear that Lasch’s meta-psychologizing use of psychoanalysis threatens to compromise his understanding of the connection between the socialization of production and the socialization of reproduction. In The Culture of Narcissism for example Lasch contends that the constellation of capitalism has certain effects on the level of subjectivity but leaves unexplained why these new personality traits, almost by coincidence, serve the new production and consumption modes very well. For Lasch the peculiar (late)modern structure of the American family originates in changing modes of production;
industrial production takes the father out of the home and diminishes the role he plays in the conscious life of the child. This gives rise to psychological patterns associated with pathological narcissism, which eventually turn out to be very useful for capitalism:

[T]he American society no longer values these qualities anyway, the abdication of parental authority itself instills in the young the character traits demanded by a corrupt, permissive, hedonistic culture. (Lasch, CN: 176).

Why the effects of capitalism on the psyche turn out to serve it remain unexplained as Lasch fails to think through his original these on a psychological politics. He ends up in a meta-psychological use of psychoanalysis, believing it can furnish an essentialist approach of the clinical effects of capitalism. Remaining true to his original insight would however compelled him to look into the way that the production modes and strategies of late-capitalism not only already concern the dimension of the psyche and the subject but are also always already using the technologies of psychology.

Moreover, as many commentators missed this valuable insight too, they are lead to consider Lasch’s critique on therapeutic culture (and the critique of psychologization as such) as merely relevant for (old) European welfarism and the now practically demolished New Deal version in the U.S. What is missed here is that capitalism is not merely drawing upon therapeutic culture, but that the two are fundamentally intertwined if not two sides of the same coin. This is for example bypassed by George Scialabba in his review of Eric Miller’s biography of Lasch. According to Scialabba the waning of welfare-state liberalism has reduced the immediacy of Lasch’s critique, which was directed principally at the mid-twentieth-century liberal consensus:

The degradation of American politics will eventually bottom out, and reconstruction will begin. Americans then will need to understand the weaknesses of the society that preceded the debacle, and of its prevailing self-justifications. To these weaknesses Lasch was an incomparable guide. Eric Miller’s fine intellectual biography will help keep Lasch’s thought available as a resource against that (one hopes not too distant) day.²⁷

Is this so? Would not thinking Lasch’s insight of the psychological politics through show that the coupling of psychologization to the welfare state is false? Therapeutic culture or psychologization do not need the welfare state. Just look at Big Pharma, the self-help business, the psychotainment industry,²⁸ or how governmental and non-governmental agencies together with an as such increasingly liberalized Academia serve the neo-liberal agenda so well in reducing the welfare state precisely via a psychologizing discourse. Hence if we understand for example today’s psychologization of politics (emotionalizing, personalizing it) according to Lasch’s insight we can see that also today’s psychologization processes are fundamentally boiling down to the denial of the psychical dimension and the coercive narrowing down of both the subjective and political space. In this way Lasch is still very relevant today, despite his attempt to go beyond psychologization and to construct a meta-psychology. Both the welfare state and its collapse lean on the processes of psychologization and are to be understood from the late-capitalist production modes. In this sense, Lasch was absolutely right in psychologizing psychologization, in showing that in psychologization one should lay bare the psychological as the Spaltung as such: the modern subject is the subject of the gap between the political and the psyche. His insistence on the “social origins of the suffering” opened up, albeit momentarily, the perspective of a critique of psychological politics.

Here we can connect to Ian Parker who wrote that we need to develop “a response to social problems which works at the interface of the personal and the political instead of pretending that society is
something separate from us.”29 The unmistakable conclusion is that this link between subjectivity and politics is obscured or even neutralized by the individualizing tendencies of mainstream psychology and psychologization as its shadow. That is to say, repoliticizing this issue does not mean rejecting the question of subjectivity. Quite the opposite. It means reinvigorating it. Hence, the somehow paradoxical conclusion is that we should reject the position of anti-essentialism, claiming for example that the Freudian discursive complexes to which Lasch returned represent but only one possible modern subject position. For, an anti-essentialist conventionalism would allow the perspective of the master in again by the back door, insofar as it would claim an absolute viewpoint from which the different contingent subject positions could be discerned. In contrast, an anti-anti-essentialist input argues that Freudian theory touches the truth or, in Lacanian terms, touches the Real. That is, Freud laid bare the truth of the Enlightened subject; his conception of the unconsciousness explored the limits of the Cartesian project. But the truths of psychoanalysis are of such a nature that they refuse any usefulness.30 So for the Left, as the heir of the great emancipatory theories, psychoanalysis plays an important but problematic role. The Freudian skandalons (the unconscious, infantile sexuality, the death drive, etc.) are not amenable to positive operationalization; they stand in the way of a psychoanalytically inspired production of political alternatives. A critique of political psychology is doomed to fail as it enters the field of politics itself. The fact that Lasch balanced on the tightrope between nostalgia and conservatism is testament to this fundamental problem. Psychoanalysis and its skandalons are in this way part of the fundamental trauma of the Left. Contrary, then, to Lasch, who still reserves some positive potential for psychoanalysis to formulate visions of “good society” and “democratic citizenship,”31 it should be clear that, where the truth of the skandalons of psychoanalysis is acknowledged, psychoanalysis’s effectiveness ends, and this is precisely where politics proper should enter.

THE DSM AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF TRIVIA

In order to answer the question whether psychoanalysts should be happy with the re-incorporation of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder in the DSM-V, we have to oppose Lasch’s attempt to use psychoanalysis as the answer to the problem of psychology with a possibly more fruitful assumption: originally psychoanalysis was the problem for which psychology attempted to provide the answer. That is, the whole of the post-Freudian psy-sciences can be understood as trying to deal with the Freudian skandalons. Every psy-theory and praxis after Freud attempts to formulate an answer to the abysmal psychopolitical subjectivity which psychoanalysis articulated and is thus always in one way or another involved in amending, clarifying, criticizing, deforming, denying, or refuting the psychoanalytic Copernican turn.

A first trace of this can be found with those who deplore the new DSM-V arguing that the proposed changes boil down to a reintroduction of psychoanalytical features. For example, as James Philips writes, clinicians now have to assess and scale “empathy” and “intimacy” and this reintroduces “psychological and psychodynamic features that had been banned from DSM-III.”

He then continues:

Assessing someone’s capacity for empathy is not the same as checking for sadness or insomnia, and will take considerably more time as well as psychological sensitivity. I can ask someone if he feels sad, but I’ll have to talk to him at some length to determine his capacity for empathy.32

In short: having to spend precious time to talk with patients is interpreted as regressing to old psychoanalytical times. However, the true scandal for people like Philips is not that the DSM is psychoanalytical, the scandal is that society itself is psychoanalytical. As pointed out above, since 1900
psychoanalytical imagery is firmly and perhaps inextricably intertwined with late-modern culture so that invoking “intimacy” or “empathy” suffices to prompt the allegation of Freudianism.

But what then about the other slope, the social and political one, said to be endangered by the announced removal of NPD? Here the argument would be that the DSM wants to dismiss the idea that psychopathology could be linked to or even induced by capitalism. However, is the lure not here to think that doing away with capitalism would allow real subjectivity and real social relations to blossom? Is this essentialist view not bringing us linea recta back to the apolitical point of view? In other words: those who criticize the DSM for a depoliticized approach in the end might harbor similar depoliticized views on subjectivity and on society. For capitalism is here viewed as the obstruction or the deformation of more genuine and unmediated forms of subjectivity. It is furthermore precisely this myth of unmediatedness which is the hallmark of late-modern capitalism itself! In its claim to be the most natural system to organize society, capitalism claims to be beyond ideology, beyond politics, serving the true needs of real people. Capitalism hence claims to be aligned with the true and final sociology and psychology of the human being. Hence, the scandal is not that the DSM is apolitical (and therefore also political as it depoliticizes human subjectivity and social relations through psychologizing them), the scandal is that politics are themselves always already psychological, this was precisely what Lasch allowed us to see! Or put more simply: capitalism is in one move depoliticized and psychologized; in its claim to be above ideology it is directly engaged in the phenomena of psychologization.

It is from this that we should try to understand the main move of the DSM V to put forward a trait model, albeit, as said, still a hybrid dimensional-categorical one. For the question could be: are the days of labeling really over and have the days of scaling set in? Will this leave behind all the (self)proclaimed sufferers of ADHD, ADD, ASD, CFS, PTSD… as orphans? Luckily the NPD’s survived? To understand the move to traits a remark by the psychoanalyst Lynne Layton concerning narcissism could be useful:

While writing about narcissism was popular in the late 70s to the mid to late 80s, the whole notion of social character was somewhat eclipsed by the academic focus on aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, and race. In part, the eclipse had to do with the fact that class dropped out of these analyses as well as to the tendency, from the 70s to late 80s, to study one identity element at a time rather than their intersection – and to claim that the one element under examination, for example, gender oppression, could explain all other types of oppression. Is this not precisely what is at stake with the DSM? Also the trait idea is about taking one element at a time, and similarly to the de-politicization of identity studies, it defuses psycho-political subjectivity by claiming that examining one element at a time can produce an overall picture of the human being. Remember in this respect Žižek’s critique that the post-modern identity-politics of particular life-styles (ethnic, sexual, etc.) represent the displacement and neutralization of class struggle. Žižek for example writes on the standard approach to right-wing populism: “… the mere insistence on multiculturalist openness is the most perfidious form of anti-workers class struggle.” In the same way we can argue that the trait model of the DSM is the displacement and neutralization of the fundamental rupture in subjectivity, the Freudian Spaltung, which is as I have argued to be understood as a psycho-political rupture. Hence, in contrast to our traditional opposition against labels of all sorts in diagnostics, it is precisely the de-labeling of the DSM which should worry us!

The remaining question is how to understand the reappearance of NPD in the DSM V. Is the NPD the label which resists the scaling? This is however rapidly refuted if one reads in The Handbook of Nar-
cissism and Narcissistic “Personality Disorder” the standard of today’s mainstream view on narcissism – the following:

Twenge and Campbell (2009) diagnosed a societal epidemic of narcissism based on aggregated research findings and observations of national trends. They noted the accumulating research, which suggests increases in narcissism and ego inflation over time. Examination of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981; Raskin & Terry, 1988) in American college students from the 1980s to present has found rising rates of narcissism. In 85 samples of American college students (n = 16,475) NPI scores have increased 0.33 standard deviations (almost two thirds of recent college students score above the mean of students from 1979 to 1985). At the root of the growing rise of cultural entitlement, materialism, vanity, and antisocial behaviors, Twenge and Campbell focus on factors such as changing familial roles and practices and a shift in American values privileging self-expression and self-admiration.36

Neither psychoanalysis, nor a true socio-political dimension (only some minor value critique) is at stake in contemporary studies on narcissism; what we get instead are statistics and standard deviations, or what Lasch himself would call “the classification of trivia”:

As the workings of the modern economy and the modern social order become increasingly inaccessible to everyday intelligence, art and philosophy abdicate the task of explaining them to the allegedly objective sciences of society, which themselves have retreated from the effort to master reality into the classification of trivia. (Lasch, CN: 91).

And once the trivia are probed and classified the experts go back into the field, this time to teach us and to bombard us with the trivial data. Asked what the cure is for the narcissism epidemic the expert Jean M. Twenge answers:

Obviously, the first cure is just raising awareness that this is a problem and that it’s actually possible to have too much self-regard.37

The cure consists in the administration of knowledge, the general public has to be fed ciphers, theories, knowledge: “as we know…,” “statistics prove…,” “there’s evidence from a number of sources that…” The paradox of the message, “look at yourself, you are so self-centered,” is invariably missed. The underlying rationale moreover rapidly becomes clear, as Twenge continues:

The other thing I think we need to do, based on my conversations with students, is to dispute this notion that you have to be self-centered to succeed. Not only is it not true, but getting along well with other people, having empathy for them, and being able to take their perspective are actually more likely to lead to success. People do talk about this point, but it isn’t being emphasized nearly as much as it should be. So this is something we need to be teaching people, and we need to emphasize how truly important it is. (Ibid.)

Success, producing, consuming, making it, earning more than the others who are stuck in their unproductive narcissism, this is what is at stake! Are we here not back where we’ve started from? We should therefore be suspicious of NPD making its way back into the DSM. It is certainly far removed from being a critique of the scaling stance of the latest DSM. Of course, and this is the issue at stake, maybe we always have misunderstood the crux of the labeling in the former DSM versions. For as it becomes clear with NPD in the DSM V, labeling is only the obverse side of scaling, and this was already the case in the previous DSM versions. ADHD for example has always been a scaled disorder rather than a structural specific diagnosis. Just remember its history: ADHD is the heir of Minimal Brain Damage/Dysfunction: as neither the damage nor the dysfunction could be objectified the disorder was called
ADHD: solid in its abbreviation of merely scaled behavioral symptoms (moreover carrying in its core the ever postponed promise to find the organic base of this disturbance in some undefined future).

In these scaled-labeled diagnoses in the DSM IV one could now and then discern some cracks, some places of the return of the repressed. In the entry on Dissociative Identity Disorder, also known as Multiple Personality Disorder, one could for example read the following:

The presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self).

At least two of these identities or personality states recurrently take control of the person’s behavior.38

At least two, so if there is but one identity taking control of the person he or she is sound and healthy? Does the DSM here adhere to the idea of the Freudian Spaltung, or in the words of Goethe: “Two souls, alas, are housed within my breast, And each will wrestle for the mastery there.” The DSM V however cleaned up this unintended acknowledgment of this fundamental psychoanalytic insight, as in the new version the last specification is dropped. But I am sure that the new version will have similar “faulty acts” pointing to the repressed Freudian truths of the DSM, so rather than jubilating the rescue of the NPD some work is waiting ahead.

NOTES

1 To appear in 2013.
2 http://dsm5.org/proposedrevision/Pages/PersonalityDisorders.aspx
3 For each disorder removed the rationale given is that, “The Work Group recommends that this disorder be represented and diagnosed by a combination of core impairment in personality functioning and specific pathological personality traits, rather than as a specific type.”
7 A more vicious remark would be to point to the whole obsessive-compulsive substructure of the DSM itself.
9 The first psychoanalytic theorists of narcissism tend not to connect narcissistic personality disorder to capitalism. This was first done by The Frankfurt School and their heirs, especially Christopher Lasch who located the origins of narcissistic personality disorder in the decline of the patriarchal family. L. Layton, “Something To Do With a Girl Named Marla Singer: Capitalism, Narcissism, and Therapeutic Discourse in David Fincher’s Fight Club,” Free Associations, no. 62 (2011).
11 I will rehearse here some arguments I developed in: Jan De Vos, “Christopher Lasch’s The Culture of

Here I use the term meta-psychological in a slightly different way from what is usually done in psychoanalysis. For our purposes, meta-psychology concerns the psychology of psychology: e.g., a psychological analysis of the theory and the praxes of psychology.


19 Slavoj Žižek, “Ignorance of the Chicken, or, Why Many Lacanians Are Reactionary Liberals,” in Lecture at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (Middlesex University, London 2005).


28 See Reality TV and its focus on psy-matters: e.g. Big Brother, Survival, American Idol, Extreme Makeover...


33 As Slavoj Žižek puts it, this is ideology at its sharpest.


35 Žižek, “Against the Populist Temptation,” 552.


38 http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?trid = 57#