Discontent and its Civilizations. What is Cultural Narcissism?

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Abstract

The article reviews the literature related to the phenomenon of the so-called "cultural narcissism". In particular, it focuses on the relationship between the spread of new forms of psychological suffering and the socio-economic and cultural changes which have occurred since the second half of the last century (primarily the transition from a paradigm centered on guilt to one centered on the *lack of self-esteem* and *shame*). While indicating the manifestation, at the collective level, of traits recognizable as narcissistic, the article aims to highlight how there is no agreement on the existence of a direct relationship between cultural narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder. It will then seek to clarify and deepen the relationship between the pathology of culture and of the individual, as well as the scientific value of an expression such as a "society of narcissism".

Keywords: narcissism; society; envy; shame; grandiosity; vulnerability.

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Introduction

The present exposition has a psychodynamic orientation, so the expression "narcissistic personality disorder" is intended to indicate not a simple sum of symptoms such as those described in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) but rather a pathology of internalized object relations associated with various factors. These include the presence of a grandiose Self, the dominance of envy and shame, defense mechanisms of idealization, primitive devaluation and the deterioration of the Superego (es. Kernberg, 1984). In this sense, narcissistic disorder turns out to be a particular expression of the borderline organization described by Otto F. Kernberg. In the following I intend to highlight – based on the observations of the major scholars on the subject – how the main features of pathological narcissism are established in consumer society. The aim will be to shed light on a topic often addressed inaccurately (if not even moralistically), highlighting the terms in which it is possible to use an expression derived from the clinical evolution of cultural processes. There will be a particular focus on the *defensive character of grandiosity* with respect to the spread of depressive tendencies generally overlooked in studies on cultural narcissism.

The decline of the paternal function

There has been a significant change in the organization of collective life in western societies since the second half of the last century. Such a change can be summarized in a formula by Jacques Lacan (1968): the *evaporation of the Father*.

With the end of the patriarchal model centered on sacrifice, discipline and duty, the place of the Father "has been occupied by the individual Self: it is he who commands, who sanctions what is just and what is unjust" (Recalcati, 2019, p. 9, author's translation). Self-realization has become the pivot of society. The individual's rights have risen to the forefront over collective duty, as have family or community interests been overtaken by individual aspirations. (Bauman, 2000).

It is a "paradigm shift", to borrow a formula from Thomas Khun (1962), which has had an effect on collective psychology and on the way interpersonal relationships are managed. Heinz Kohut (1977, 1982) has identified it as a shift from the *Guilty Man* model, described by Freudian drive theory, to the *Tragic Man* model, described by the Psychology of the Self, subject to problems with self-esteem and fulfillment.

In fact, what many have pointed out is that the Western man is significantly different from the one investigated by early psychoanalysis (es. Lowen, 1983). The mutation of the social and cultural context is now accompanied by the spread of symptomatic pictures different from those treated at the beginning of psychoanalytic history.

As Nancy McWilliams (1999) notes, since the 1950s, therapists have been increasingly confronted with patients who did not describe the conventional problems of the Freudian tradition, but complained of a chronic perception of emptiness, a meaningless life, and strong personal insecurity. The observation that the most common personality was "organized according to a narcissistic economy" (Vegetti Finzi, 1990, p. 348, tda) has favored, especially in the context of the United States, the development of a broad debate on narcissistic disorders, which has seen both Heinz Kohut (1971, 1976, 1978, 1979) and Otto F. Kernberg (1975, 1976, 1984,

1992, 2018)[1] as protagonists. Some scholars (es. Fromm, 1964; Slater, 1970; Hendin, 1975; Lasch, 1979) have therefore hypothesized a relationship between the narcissism of individuals and cultural dynamics. There are many contemporary authors (es. Burgo, 2016; Keohane, 2016; Richards, 2018; Vater et al., 2018; Campbell & Crist, 2020; Miller et al., 2021) who see narcissism as a pathology emblematic of contemporary society.

The following will examine how the decline of the paternal function, also extensively examined by Luigi Zoja (2016), has had the effect of transitioning the West from a paradigm centered on *guilt* to one hinged on a *lack of self-esteem* and *shame*.

The Superego's crisis

As Gustavo Pietropolli Charmet (2019) points out, up until the 1950s the educational model shared by the family and the school presented the child as the "perverse polymorph" of which Freud spoke. The child – it was believed – would soon be guilty of moral faults, would want to give vent to his sexual and aggressive impulses, and should therefore be formed through rules and punishments. All this contributed, through the internalization of parental and social expectations, to the development of the Superego.

The conflict between the moral expectations of the Superego and the natural language expressed through the drives of the Id was the intrapsychic drama that characterized patriarchal society. The simple instance of sexual desire and aggressive tendencies became, by the mere fact of inhabiting the mind of the subject, a factor of *transgression* with respect to the rigid moral order of the Superego. Man always found himself being in the wrong, always "guilty": an internal monitor constantly accused the distance that separated his impulses from his duties.

Today, according to Pietropolli Charmet (2019), we are witnessing a weakening, in the individual psyche and of the moral and normative values which together constitute the Superego. In his opinion, this could be due to a change in the educational model. The child is no longer judged as a "perverse polymorph" dominated by drives irreconcilable with the social group. On the contrary: he is considered *naturally innocent*. His desires, once seen as a source of guilt, have become rights which must be protected from the dangerous normative intervention of institutions. In this context – for Pietropolli Charmet – it is not nature which is homologated to culture. In fact, the opposite appears to be true.

In his opinion nowadays *individual realization* appears at the forefront of the educational process, with the consequent rejection of rules and limits. What forces drive renunciation, causing a severe narcissistic wound in the subject, is condemned as an obstacle to natural development. Everyone – the new paradigm argues – should in fact be left free to follow their own nature, so that it is affirmed in terms of power, visibility, admiration. *Success*.

Shame and envy

With the decline of the Superego, the problem of collective expectations emerges,

[1] The psychoanalytic investigation on the phenomenon of "narcissism" was inaugurated by Sigmund Freud's work *Introduction to Narcissism* (1914). From the theoretical point of view, Freud had distinguished a "primary narcissism", typical of early childhood, from a "secondary narcissism", characteristic of psychosis.

extrinsic and perhaps transient, to which the individual must adapt if he wants to achieve the success and admiration to which he has been destined since the cradle. Raised in the perspective of *individual fulfillment*, he clashes with the existence of cultural models (promoted by the mass media and the internet) that colonize the collective imagination[2].

Pietropolli Charmet maintains that these models work on the adolescent's mind, highlighting the difference between how he should be and how he sees himself in the mirror; between the weight he should be and what he weighs on the scales; between the respect he should get and what he actually experiences; between the enjoyment he should feel and what he is allowed to. The severity of the Superego is replaced by the despotism of cultural stereotypes, of the images produced by marketing and entertainment societies, which contribute to the collective expectations of the subject.

From a psychodynamic point of view there is therefore, in response to the weakening of the Superego, the centrality of the Ego Ideal (*Ich Ideal*), identified in these cultural stereotypes (Rosci, 2003; Pietropolli Charmet, 2019; Russell, 2021). In his *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Freud (1914) defined the Ego Ideal as the instance toward which the subject turns to create the self-love experienced by the real Ego in childhood. If the conflict between Ego and Superego generates *guilt*, the conflict between Ego and Ego Ideal is associated with the emotion of *shame* (Suttora & Benzi, 2020). Guilt and shame are quite different psychic conditions: guilt, in fact, is a form of *internal* judgment, while shame is generated by the perception of an *external* evaluation. Guilt involves the feeling of *being bad*; shame, on the other hand, of *being considered bad*, and therefore inadequate to the context (McWilliams, 2011).

According to Pietropolli Charmet, shame constitutes a central emotion for understanding the psychology of younger people. In contrast to the studies that signal the disappearance of this emotion (es. Pandolfi, 2002), a phenomenon more appropriately theorized as a process of "publicizing the intimate" that accompanies the crisis of the traditional sense of modesty in consumerist society (Galimberti, 2010), Pietropolli Charmet (2019) reiterates the fundamental role played today by shame. It could also manifest itself as a fear of being exposed to social pillory; the fear, that is, that the difference between the model in which one has identified oneself and what one actually is will be highlighted.

The spread of shame as a dominant emotion should also be considered in relation to an affective symmetrical state: *envy*. The anxiety of being "unmasked" leads, in fact, to envy – as McWilliams points out (2011) – towards those who do not seem to suffer from these shortcomings. The stronger the envy the more shameful it is. Those who envy can respond to the fear of shame through a devaluation of what the other seems to enjoy; that is, through the *denigration* of the condition of the envied or contempt for what is at the origin of the perception of their own inferiority.

In addition to shame, the experiences lived in the current historical moment therefore lead to a strong entrenchment of envy (Ciaramelli, 2000). With this we can begin to

[2]The danger of social conformity is cited by Freud as "mass psychological misery" in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929). Freud associates it primarily with American society, although he explicitly decides not to explore the issue further.

identify what has been defined as "cultural narcissism". Corruption of the Superego and the centrality of shame and envy are not only characteristic aspects of our time, but also central elements in narcissistic psychopathology (Gabbard & Crisp, 2018; Madeddu, 2021).

Grandiosity as a defense against depression

The shift from the society of guilt to the society of shame and envy can therefore explain the particular phenomenology of contemporary malaise, very different from that of the first half of the last century.

Benasayag and Schmit (2003) have highlighted the spread of an obsession with independence, due to a conception of freedom based on the denial of the fragilities connected to relational dynamics. Bauman (2003) has also observed a progressive deterioration of interpersonal ties. In certain social contexts, this can be associated with the attempt to adhere to the "performance principle" already described by Herbert Marcuse (1964) and, in a different way, by Günther Anders (1956). In this regard, it has been referred to as a "performance society" (es. Colamedici & Gancitano, 2018), highlighting the continuous effort to increase one's reputation and visibility.

All of these aspects are strongly intertwined: at the core, in fact, is the subject's need to maintain *identity* with the cultural models of the performance society. But this manifestation of *grandiosity* – of independence, of strength, of sexual freedom or of performative capacity – seems to possess a *defensive function* with respect to widespread *depressive tendencies.* Reference has already been made to the spread of problems related to a lack of self-esteem, deep-rooted feelings of shame and envy, as well as intense needs for mirroring. These are the "sad passions" mentioned by Benasayag and Schmit (2003), whose intensity can give rise to inflated manifestations of the self then identified as "narcissistic". A similar dialectic between *grandiosity* and *depression* is indeed typical of narcissistic pathology (Miller, 1996).

Although this does not directly imply – as will be seen later – a cultural etiology of narcissistic personality disorder, it is nevertheless evident how the need to be recognized in one's own "winning" image, often in response to strong personal insecurities, seems to possess a certain centrality in contemporary psychological distress. In adolescent psychopathology, for example, the fear of being "unmasked" as socially inadequate can contribute to the development of eating disorders, antisocial behavior or suicide attempts (Lancini & Cirillo, 2021). In turn, the constant threat of a narcissistic wound capable of "revealing" the subject's inadequacy fosters a strong hypersensitivity in relationships (Pietropolli Charmet, 2019). In the professional field in particular, a significant theme is that of the so-called "*impostor phenomenon*", recognized by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978) initially in relation to successful women, but which today appears increasingly widespread (Palmer, 2021).

The phenomenon of social withdrawal deserves separate consideration. Social withdrawal, according to Pietropolli Charmet (2019), takes on a role of *protest* against excessive expectations. The so-called *hikikomori* – a term coined in the eighties by the Japanese psychiatrist Saito Tamaki to indicate a syndrome that soon spread throughout the West – are in fact adolescents, predominantly males, dominated by the shame of not being able to respect the imposed canons of virility,

and for this reason are willing to isolate themselves by escaping into the virtual world (Pietropolli Charmet, 2019).

The end of the society of guilt poses new problems to the collective attention, new contradictions and new suffering, rendering it impossible to limit any impact on narcissistic disorders.

The culture of narcissism

There is a further element that has not yet been pointed out: the spread of social media and the impact of new media. Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell (2009) have spoken, with regard to this, of an "epidemic of narcissism" enabled by the spread of complacent educational styles and the widespread use of social media in the generation of *millennials*. This "epidemic", in their opinion, is first and foremost a social phenomenon. That is, it cannot be defined as the spread of diagnosable narcissistic disorders, but an exponential growth in the manifestation of rigid narcissistic traits in the latest generations, quantified through the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. Twenge (2014, 2017) developed the concept of *generational narcissism* to refer to those born after 1982.

Gabbard and Crisp (2018) also highlight the close relationship between the spread of narcissistic distress and the digitization of interpersonal communications, increasingly structured through forms of quantitative confirmation of one's image (such as the *like*) or the immediate response to messages forwarded and displayed. Not surprisingly, today, it is the so-called *ghosting* – the act of ceasing an exchange of messages without warning – which represents a punitive tool in creating narcissistic wounds, as is the habit of monitoring the number of *followers* on social media to verify one's degree of social desirability (Akkoz & Erbaş, 2020; Lingiardi, 2021).

In light of what has been pointed out in the previous chapters, however, it is clear that "cultural narcissism" cannot be reduced to the simple search for resonance through new media or to a self-referential idea of personal and social relationships (notions dangerously at risk of moralism). These manifestations, as mentioned, can be interpreted as grandiose reactions to increasingly deep-rooted depressive tendencies. Moreover, it is necessary to frame them within the particular historical evolution of capitalism in the last century. It may therefore be interesting to examine the position of the person who first thematized the issue of "cultural narcissism": Christopher Lasch.

In his essay *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1979) described the overall disposition of Western society on the eve of the collapse of patriarchy. Even though, Lasch argues, there are many today who lead their heartfelt protest against the authoritarian family, repressive sexual morality, the ethic of duty, and so on, in reality these institutions "have been weakened or brought down by advanced capitalism itself" (p. 14, tda).

Having been developed in the shadow of the Father figure, capitalism has now abandoned the authoritarianism of the past, substituting sexual freedom for Puritanism, tolerance for identity closure, the marketplace of sensations and experiences for the Protestant work ethic. One can rejoice in all of this, Lasch argues, "but it is also necessary to grasp the problematic aspects." By emancipating women and children from the dominion of the Father, capitalism has in fact subjected them to the authority of the advertising industry and economic power groups, transforming their

attained freedom into a question of consumption (we find, as we can see, the themes of Pietropolli Charmet's reflection).

The psychological man, contrary to the economic man of the liberal model, is in fact, for Lasch (1979), “persecuted by anxiety and not by guilt” (p. 98, tda). The need to conform to an internalized moral code, the product of the Father's normative desire, has been replaced by the demand for approval and external recognition, the need for reassurance of one's own value, the hunger for identity. By placing his own center of gravity in the approval of others, contemporary man – says Lasch – is thus devoured by anxiety and shame, by a general dissatisfaction and by an intense sense of emptiness.

This inner emptiness becomes tolerable only if it is counterbalanced by the hope of achieving, sooner or later, the much hoped-for success. To emerge from the collective mediocrity, from the meaningless squalor of an anonymous existence, is an indispensable expectation to bear a reality so distressingly lacking in confirmation. This dynamic is also fed by the society of entertainment, which encourages ordinary men and women to identify with the celebrity of the moment, hating the “mass”. Everyday life, devoid of exceptional experiences, ends up being unbearable (Lasch, 1979).

In this battle for the achievement of success, the Ego is alone. With the decline of class consciousness, which placed the subject in the context of its relative status in society, people tend to experience their own social position – if considered unsatisfactory according to culturally shared canons – as a personal failure (Lasch, 1979). Relationships are increasingly oriented towards the logic of individual competition, a fact that feeds the dynamics of envy and shame, the idealization and devaluation of others and grandiosity as a defense against potential threats of narcissistic injury.

Narcissism as a new disease of civilization

This is, of course, a question of the diffusion of characteristic aspects of pathological narcissism. Ours – Lasch argues (1979) – is a narcissistic society, that is “a society that increasingly emphasizes and encourages narcissistic characteristics” (p. 15, tda). Obviously – for the sociologist – the etiology of narcissistic personality disorder is deeply rooted in the personal history of the subject; however, in his opinion, the characteristic traits associated with pathological narcissism occur in a more attenuated form even in a large part of the population who have sufficiently adapted.

There are numerous ways through which society accentuates narcissistic personality traits. The bombardment of advertising propaganda, in which many generations have grown up, could, for example, stimulate both the chronicity of the sense of emptiness and the multiplication of envy for profit. Imagination is colonized either by unrealistic fantasies of achievement or by exotic experiences, romantic escapes and exceptional experiences, all elements that contribute to the devaluation of everyday life and generate suffering for the obvious distance that such escapades possess with respect to reality (Lasch, 1979).

In addition, this discomfort is also nourished through the promotion of “winning” narcissistic models, for example in the work environment. It takes root through the spectacularization of private life; or – a fact not at all negligible – it is stabilized thanks to

the *defensive* function that narcissistic grandiosity itself seems to have, representing the best way to cope with the continuous tensions of modern life. The world is a threat, life is a competition; and this is how narcissistic traits become *indispensable* to survive, and each person is called upon to enhance their own (Lasch, 1979).

Pathological narcissism – says Lasch (1979) – is the equivalent of what, in Freud's time, were hysteria and obsessive neurosis. Undoubtedly only in specific circumstances, due to the particular events of the "family novel" of the individual, there is mental pathology in the proper sense. However, just as in Freud's time the hysteric or the obsessive neurotic expressed the repressive conflicts of patriarchal society, at the present time pathological narcissism manifests in a more profound way the same sufferings which, "in a more attenuated form, have become so common in everyday living" (p. 120, tda). If the discomfort of civilization a century ago was a form of "mass neurosis" the current one manifests, rather, the traits of a personality disorder.

Narcissism of culture and narcissism of the individual: a complex relationship

It is therefore necessary to address the following problem: what relationship exists between cultural narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder?

The positions outlined above may in fact suggest that the diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder represents an "amplified" form among those of "ordinary" narcissism that creep into Western culture (this is, after all, Lasch's opinion). The shared weakening of the superego, the widespread fear of being humiliated or "unmasked", the domination of shame and envy, the construction of grandiose images of oneself, centered on success and power, in a defensive function with respect to the anguish of "being worth nothing" and "being nobody": these are traits that possess an analogy with the clinical picture of narcissistic disorder.

This direct relationship between the pathology of the individual and the pathology of culture, however, does not reconcile the scholars. For Otto F. Kernberg (1975), for example, there can be no continuity between disease and culture. Pathological narcissism – as he understands it – is a pathology of internalized object relations, not an "excessive" form of ordinary narcissism. For Kernberg, in fact, it is necessary to clearly distinguish between narcissistic reactions – even pathological – and pathological narcissism in the proper sense.

We all have narcissistic reactions, but that does not make us narcissists. There are also cases, as in borderline organizations, in which pathological narcissistic reactions occur, without this necessarily implying a narcissistic personality disorder. Sometimes there are, as in hysterical (or histrionic) personalities, narcissistic reactions suggesting a regression or fixation to physiological infantile narcissism. But even in this case, for Kernberg (1975), there is no pathological narcissism, only narcissistic reactions, which may eventually be pathological.

To evaluate cultural narcissism, in his view, we should therefore start from this distinction. There is – for Kernberg (Lütz, 2020) – no real continuity between the phenomenon of cultural narcissism and pathological narcissism: the former, in fact, originates in childhood and cannot be directly influenced by the

latter. It can certainly be assumed that the society based on image accentuates narcissistic personality traits, compromising good self-esteem and encouraging the multiplication of dysfunctional narcissistic reactions. But one cannot attribute to it the increase in narcissistic personality disorders, namely pathological narcissism in the proper sense.

There are, of course – according to Kernberg (Lütz, 2020) – social phenomena that can devastate family structures and thus contribute to the development of personality disorders. Wars, floods, and earthquakes, for example, fuel the multiplication of these disorders because they undermine the stability that early childhood bonds require. These events, however, contribute not only to the spread of narcissistic disorders, but of all pathologies that are explained on the basis of internalized object relations.

According to Kernberg, (Lütz, 2020) beyond these extreme cases, one can hardly argue in favour of the influence of culture on the spread of personality disorders. The idea, for example, that social abuse fuels pathological narcissism is, for the psychoanalyst, totally wrong. Personality disorders – in his opinion – originate in early childhood, while social communication intervenes mainly in adolescents and adults, and can not have a direct impact on our first internalized object relations.

With this the matter would seem to be concluded. By distinguishing a certain *pathology of culture*, capable of accentuating individual narcissistic traits, from the *pathology of the individual*, sometimes even capable of producing socially adapted subjects, one preserves, in fact, the “significant difference between a person's narcissism and that of 'his' socio-cultural stereotype” (Lingiardi, 2021, p. 112, tda).

However, not everyone shares this position. Heinz Kohut (1982), as has previously been said, is much more open to the possibility that the social context has undergone such cultural transformations as to change the object of psychoanalysis. The Guilty Man of Freudian psychoanalysis has given way to the Tragic Man, whose problems are primarily centered on the need for recognition, on self-esteem issues and the desire to realize oneself in a complex and competitive world. It is therefore not surprising that Lasch (1979), while arguing about the developments of capitalism, offers psychodynamic reasons taken from Kohut's Psychology of the Self when he intends to talk about the changes in family relationships that can contribute to the spread of pathological narcissism. For Kohut, as for Lasch, the change in society has changed the microfamilial dynamics: for this reason it is possible to establish a direct relationship between the narcissistic drift in culture and that of the individual.

Even more explicit is Alexander Lowen. For Lowen (1983), narcissism is a direct product of social alienation generated by consumerist developments of Western society: according to him, it is the pathology of culture which promotes the emergence of narcissistic pathology in the individual. Lowen's thesis can perhaps be considered a development of the contribution of Wilhelm Reich (1930-36), who – in an attempt to unite the experience of psychoanalysis to that of Marxism, as later did the authors of the Frankfurt School – thought of psychic illness primarily within the framework of a specific economic system, that of capitalism. If, however, Reich's struggle was against repressive bourgeois morality, Lowen's struggle, in line with

the evolution of society, highlights the problematic implications of the new consumerist morality.

On the other hand, there has been no shortage of those who have celebrated cultural narcissism as a positive element in its own way. This phenomenon –in the exaltation of Narcissus, and of some traits that today would be called narcissistic, within the neo-romantic movement (Ellenberger, 1970) – sees in narcissism the possibility of a life freed from the Freudian discomfort of civilization. This is the case, for example, of Herbert Marcuse (1955), who makes Narcissus the archetype of the revolt against the practice of alienated labor and against the obligation to drive renunciation. Narcissus, in this case, becomes the image of desire finally emancipated from the ideological cage of society.

Far from these polemical objections, today there are still those who admit a certain compatibility between narcissism and personal affirmation. The DSM-5 itself reports how many highly successful individuals express personality traits that could be considered narcissistic. According to the manual, only when these traits are dysfunctional, i.e. impairing the individual's adaptation to its environment, can one speak of narcissistic personality disorder (APA, 2013). This raises the problem of assessing those who demonstrate functional adaptation to a context pathologically connoted in narcissistic terms, and who therefore might share a set of behaviors similar to those in the clinical picture. The APA assessment, among other things, also ignores the possibility of "highly functioning narcissists" such as those described by Drew Westen (1990); individuals frequently characterized by an excellent level of adaptation, and in whom narcissism is at the service of professional achievements and ambitions for power

As can be seen, there has been no agreement at all on this issue. For its part, PDM-2 does not even mention the possibility of a relationship between the social and individual aspects regarding narcissism (Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017). In other publications, the handbook's editors, while accepting that the dynamics of contemporary life accentuate narcissistic issues, nevertheless keep the two levels separate (es. Lingiardi, 2021; McWilliams 2011).

Although there is, therefore, a general consensus on the existence of a "narcissistic" orientation of society, the debate on the relationship between the individual and society around narcissism is by no means concluded, given that – as Fabio Madeddu (2021) writes – "we are too internal to our present to be able to reflect without falling into temptations that are simultaneously obvious, moralistic [...] or judgmental" (pp. 12-13, tda).

Conclusions

As noted above, the idea of a "cultural narcissism" is closely associated with a highly successful book by Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*,1979. In this work, Lasch argued that the rise of the entertainment society and the consumer market had fostered widespread narcissistic discomfort.

However, the concept is not lacking in ambiguity. Authors at the top of psychoanalytic reflection on narcissism have shown that the incidence of this disorder does not have a social etiology. For Otto F. Kernberg, for example, society is certainly able to feed some narcissistic traits, but it cannot promote the onset of a personality disorder.

In light of what has been exposed in this article, we can conclude some significant aspects. First of all, how the so-called "age of

narcissism" is not at all an "age of vanity". It is rather an age of *defensive grandiosity,* of exhibitionism as a reaction to a strong self-evaluation, to a deep-rooted sense of sadness and shame. It is also an age of social withdrawal as a maladaptive response to the fear of being overwhelmed by shame for one's own inadequacy. It is therefore impossible to talk about "cultural narcissism" without understanding the role of widespread "*cultural depression*".

This dialectic – *grandiosity as a defense against depression* – is specific to narcissistic disorders. It should not be underestimated that the growth of social expectations, of glowing stereotypes of affirmation and omnipotent fantasies of achievement, has occurred, in recent decades, along with progressive social impoverishment, a loss of power of the middle class and a gradual increase in the unemployment rate in major Western countries. Less money, fewer opportunities, less capacity for professional fulfillment than in the past (and also much less hope for the future) have been accompanied by the taking root of an imagery characterized by a strong grandiosity.

The result has been a source of conflict between what one is called to be and the resources available, between promised success and a limited capacity for action. It is from this contrast that emerges the synthesis, so characteristic of our time, between the lack of self-esteem and the defensive cult of one's own image, between the demand to be looked at in one's own artificial perfection and the shame of what one perceives oneself to be in reality. The cultural phenomenology that we have examined – centrality of the ego ideal with respect to superegoic instances, dominance of an affectivity characterized by envy and shame, the spread of primitive mechanisms such as primitive idealization and primitive devaluation – should be observed on the basis of this "permanent crisis" that pervades the cultural climate of Western societies (Benasayag & Schmit, 2003).

In other words: the culture of narcissism, if we want to use this category, seems to offer itself as a grandiose defense against a depression that is becoming increasingly entrenched. This is not about vanity at all; rather, on closer inspection, the contrary.

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