

Historian describes crisis of private life

New hedonism masks struggle for power

By ALICE KLEIN

The new hedonism of the middle class is just the psychic reflection of the new American work ethic, according to historian Christopher Lasch, speaking at York last Thursday as part of the distinguished speakers in the social sciences series.

His talk, entitled "Changing Modes of Making It: From Horatio Alger to the Happy Hooker" touched on androgyny, sexuality, Vietnam and the corporate structure to demonstrate the crisis provoked by the emergence of this new ethic.

Until recently according to Lasch, the Protestant work ethic "furnished the most important underpinnings of bourgeois culture." The individual striving for success "found the deferral of gratification his principle gratification." Today, in the age of diminishing expectations, when men live by their wits not so much to prosper as to survive, "only fools put off until tomorrow, the fun they can have today".

In his talk, Lasch described the evolution of this new ethos and the new personality structure which in his view, it has spawned. For the puritans, Lasch explained, godly man worked diligently because he was following God's bidding. Social aggrandizement was secondary to the spiritual reward of a "worthy life". As puritan became Yankee, the work ethic produced more earthly rewards. In the eighteenth century, virtue paid and not merely in cold hard cash. "Wealth was only the precondition for cultural and intellectual cultivation."

CAPITAL GROWTH

In the nineteenth century Lasch said, the growth of industrial production, signalled the rise of a

new ethic in which wealth was its own reward. "The art of money-getting" epitomized the nineteenth century "cult of success". Knowledge was valuable because it helped one take advantage of the market. The good opinion of others was good for business. "All the virtues were valued, not for themselves but for the potential monetary reward which they commanded" As for concern for the general good, one of the robber barons explained, "Accumulated capital means progress".

POSITIVE THINKING

"The bureaucratization of corporate careers," however transformed the work ethic, according to Lasch. Success was now the "will to win" in a corporate structure in which personalities compete for higher standing in the corporate ranks.

"Will - power, self - confidence, energy and initiative were the new virtues celebrated by the self-help manuals." Magnetism, boosterism and salesmanship were the means to manage your way to the top. Dale Carnegie restated and transformed Benjamin Franklin's pious homilies on frugality and hard work as the road to success, with his new prescription "How to win friends and Influence People". The "positive thinkers" praised the love of money and downgraded the idea that hard work alone brings success, said Lasch.

In this new context, Lasch explained, "men have little to measure their achievements against except those of others." "Self - approval means public approval". Thus it has become more important to be "admired than esteemed, envied than respected." In the new cult of success, "what you do is less im-

portant than the fact that you've made it". The tycoon who shuns publicity, the behind the scenes empire builder are vanishing types since "success must be ratified by publicity."

PACKAGE POLITICS

Thus according to Lasch, "all politics become a form of spectacle." Not only does "Madison Avenue package politicians like commodities" but this new ethos "transforms policy itself". "The modern policy maker is more concerned with the trappings of power than its reality," hence Vietnam where policy-making had no other object than to excite "envy and fear".

In Lasch's view, the distinction between truth and falsehood is lost. Truth is replaced by "credibility". "Impressions overshadow achievements."

In the corporate structure, "the persistence of the rhetoric of achievement covers the real object of the corporate career", according to Lasch. The ladder of success has shifted from task-achievement mastering to the pre-guessing and manipulation of one's opponents moves.

FEMININE WILES

These changes not only indicate the emergence of a new personality structure. The "narcissistic self-absorption, once the attribute solely of beautiful women" whose survival depended on their ability to manipulate "now seems to pervade the entire population." Today the "worst features of what used to be considered feminine attributes, the cultivation of personal charm and acquired accomplishment" - the so-called "feminine wiles" have become "indispensable to everyone." This

according to Lasch, is the basis of the "widespread move, much acclaimed in some circles, towards the "androgynous personality." "The bland surface of American congeniality conceals but does not eradicate" the "murderous competition" below the surface friendliness.

HAPPY HOOKER

For Lasch, it is the "happy hooker" who best typifies this new personality. "The prostitute craves admiration but scorns those who provide it. She attempts to move others without herself being



University of Rochester professor Christopher Lasch speaking on "Changing Modes of Making it: From Horatio Alger to the Happy Hooker".

moved. She becomes a loner, dependent only in the sense that a hawk is dependent on the chickens."

Modern hedonism, Lasch says, is "not the pursuit of pleasure but rather the war of all against all." "The most intimate encounter becomes a form of mutual exploitation." "The attempt to measure sexual performance is testimony to the invasion of play by the mentality of work and achievement." Personal life is no longer "a refuge from the deprivation of work" since personal relations have become "a means to win competitive advantage through emotional manipulation."

It is this "anarchical warlike nature of sociability", Lasch argues, that accounts for the new vogue of assertiveness training and game therapy which address themselves to the "anxiety to avoid emotional manipulation by others the deadly game of intimidating friends and seducing people."

SURVIVAL

"The poor have always had to live for the present." Now, according to Lasch, "the concern for survival often disguised as hedonism pervades the middle class. "The world is a dangerous place - "unemployment, race war, the propoganda of death and destruction emanating from the media", the absence of "continuity" with the past all reinforce the separation from history which holds "no signposts for the present". Only in political change is there hope for the development of a society in which we would want to live. "Perhaps the crisis of private life will rekindle an interest in such solutions," Lasch concluded.

PM's new nanny is a York student

By MAXINE KOPEL

The job as nanny for the Pierre Trudeau children has turned 22-year old York student Leslie Kimberley into an overnight celebrity.

Kimberley, a fourth year York English major, applied for the job about three weeks ago. She had an interview on Monday, January 24, and was notified by phone on January 25 she was selected for the new position. "I'm so excited. I think it's great," said Kimberley, who will meet her new boss this Sunday. She said she doesn't know how many applications were received, but that "there was an ad in every paper across Canada."

Kimberley has worked with children in the past. When Timothy Reed, the MPP of Scarborough East and a friend of Kimberley, went to Paris for a year, he took the York student with him to watch his

children. Kimberley has done volunteer work with children, and worked in a halfway house. Of the Trudeau children, aged five, three and one the new nanny said, "they're really great. I can't wait to see them again."

Kimberley said her professors are "quite agreeable" in her leaving school in February. She will complete her five English classes as reading courses, which means handing in a fairly large essay in each course. She expects to work beyond the spring semester, completing her courses by the end of the summer.

Kimberley was not asked about political affiliation at any time. "There was nothing about politics. Maybe that's why I was hired. I have no political interest."

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