

# State undermines parents

## Family can't provide for itself

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the third of 16 articles in the series "Moral Choices in Contemporary Society," a Course by Newspaper offering at Oakland University and this newspaper. Copyright 1977 by the Regents of the University of California.

By CHRISTOPHER LASCH

The survival of any form of human society depends on two things—the production of the necessities of life and the reproduction of the labor force itself.

Reproduction includes not merely the propagation of the species but the care and nurture of the young—education, training, discipline and cultural transmission.

In the early days of capitalism, the work of socialization took place largely in the family. The patriarchal family, in which the father's authority was unquestioned, was responsible not only for imparting ethical norms—standards of right and wrong—but also for instructing the child in the prevailing social rules. It thus served as the primary agency for shaping the child's character.

**THE CAPITALIST** made little effort to interfere with this central position of the family. He attempted to supervise his workers' lives on the job, but his control ended when the workers left the factory at closing time.

Only a handful of employers in the early 20th century understood that the success of the mass production economy now required not only the capitalist organization of production but the organization of consumption and leisure as well.

One of the first business leaders to recognize the need for a new kind of social education for the young was Edward A. Filene, the Boston department store magnate.

"Mass production," he said in 1919, "demands the education of the masses; the masses must learn to behave like human beings in a mass production world."

In other words, the mass production of commodities in ever-increasing abundance demands a mass market to absorb them.

**TODAY THE "education"** of masses of people has proved to be one of the most important elements not only in the emergence of an economy based on mass consumption, but in the transformation of the family.

In the course of bringing Filene's bargain-basement "culture" to the consumers of it, the advertising industry, the school, and mental health and welfare services have taken over many of the socializing functions of the home. The ones which remain have been placed under the direction of modern science and technology.

While glorifying domestic life as the last haven of intimacy, these agencies of mass tuition have propagated the view that the family cannot provide for its own needs without outside assistance.

The advertising industry insists that the health and safety of the young, the satisfaction of their nutritional requirements, their emotional and in-

tellectual development and their ability to compete with their peers for popularity and success all depend on consumption of vitamins, Band-Aids, cavity-preventing toothpaste, cereals, mouthwashes and laxatives.

"Domestic science" urges the housewife and mother to systematize housekeeping and to give up the rule-of-thumb procedures of earlier generations.

Modern medicine orders the abandonment of home remedies. The mental health movement teaches that maternal "instinct" is not to be trusted in child-rearing.

Even the sex instinct has come to be surrounded by a growing body of scientific analysis and commentary, according to "folk sexual" "ment" depends on study, technique, discipline, control.

**THE DIFFUSION** of the new ideology of social welfare and "civilized" consumption has had the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

By convincing the housewife—and finally even her husband as well—to rely on outside technology and the advice of outside experts, the apparatus of mass tuition—the successor to the church in our secularized society—has undermined the family's capacity to provide for itself.

The agencies of mass socialization have thereby justified the continuing expansion of health, education and welfare services.

Yet rising rates of crime, juvenile delinquency, suicide and mental breakdown belatedly suggest to many experts, even to many welfare workers, that welfare agencies furnish a poor substitute for the family.

Dissatisfaction with the results of socialized welfare and the growing expense of maintaining it now prompt efforts to shift health and welfare functions back to the home.

**IT IS TOO LATE,** however, to call for a revival of the patriarchal family or even of the less authoritarian family that replaced it.

The socialization of reproduction has fatally weakened not only the father's authority but that of the mother as well.

Instead of imposing their own standards of right and wrong, now thoroughly confused, parents influenced by psychiatry and the doctrines of progressive education seek to understand the "needs" of the young and to avoid painful confrontations.

Instead of guiding the child, the older generation struggles to "keep up with the kids," to master their incomprehensible jargon, and even to imitate their dress and manners in the hope of preserving a youthful appearance and outlook.

Under these conditions, children often grow up without forming strong identifications with their parents.

**YET IT IS** precisely these identifications that formerly provided the psychological basis of conscience or superego—that element of the psyche which internalizes social prohibitions and makes submission to them a moral duty.

Lacking an internalized sense of duty, children become "other-directed" adults, more concerned with their own pleasure and the approval

of others than with leaving their marks on the world.

The ease with which children escape emotional entanglements with the older generation leaves them with a feeling not of liberation but of inner emptiness. Young people today often reproach their parents with indifference or neglect, and many of them seek warmth and security in submission to spiritual healers, gurus, and prophets of political or psychic transformation.

Permissive styles of child-rearing, instead of encouraging self-reliance and autonomy, as might have been expected, appear instead to intensify the appetite for dependence.

**THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE** to the superego, it has been said, is the superstate. Formerly, the absorption of parental values enabled the young to overcome childhood dependency and to become morally autonomous.

Today, the wish for dependence persists into later life, laying the psychological foundations of new forms of authoritarianism.

At first glance, the decline of conscience might appear to make it more difficult for the authorities to impose themselves on the rest of the population. Not only parents, but all those who wield established authority—teachers, magistrates, priests—have suffered a loss of "credibility."

Unable to inspire loyalty or even to command obedience, they therefore attempt to impose their wills through

psychological manipulation. Government becomes the art of personnel management, which treats social unrest as a kind of sickness, curable by means of therapeutic intervention.

**YET IN MANY** ways the new forms of authoritarianism and social control work more effectively than the old ones.

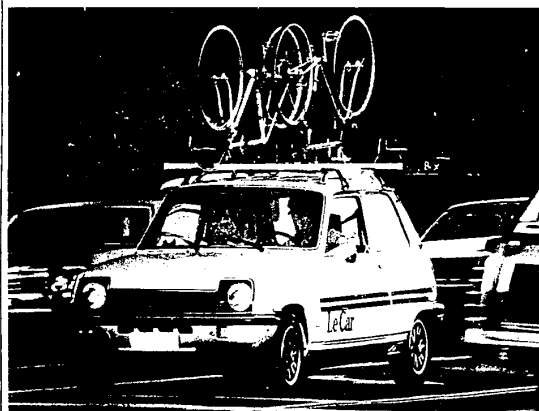
As religion gives way to the new anti-religion of mental health, authority identifies itself not with what ought to be but with what actually is, not with principles but with reality.

The individual's conduct is governed less by his superego than by his conception of reality: resistance to the status quo becomes not "unprincipled" but "unrealistic."

Political authority no longer rests on the family, which formerly mediated between the state and the individual. Indeed, the state has accommodated itself so well to the weakening of parental authority that effort to strengthen the family are likely to be perceived as threats to political stability.

Through the proliferating apparatus of mass socialization, the state now controls the individual more effectively than it controlled him through appeals to his conscience.

Even though the new methods of social control might exact a mounting economic, social and psychological price, those methods will be discarded only when the price threatens to become altogether unbearable.



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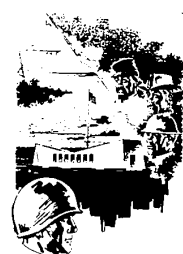
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