

"Introduction to Special Edition: Therapeutic Cultures"

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Introduction

An advertisement for the *Miruji Wellbeing Massage Chair* promises its users not only a personalised massage designed, amongst other things, to 'reduce stress', but also the possibility of transforming a 'negative mindset' into a 'positive "can-do" mindset.' This is to be achieved through the simultaneous use of 'exclusive' audios which employ the techniques of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP.) One satisfied customer, cited on the website, testifies to the chair's ability not only to produce a "feeling of total relaxation," but also to boost its user's "motivation and self-esteem."

If, after your *Miruji* massage/NLP life-coaching session, your self-esteem is still languishing in the doldrums, you could do no worse than sign up to one of Anthony 'Tony' Robbins' arena-scale motivational weekends such as his *Unleash the Power Within* (UPW) event, held at the San Jose Convention Centre (audience capacity: 3,900) in June this year (2014.) Tickets for this event ranged from \$995 for general admission, to \$2,595 for a 'Diamond Premiere' ticket, which included seating in the front section of the arena ("Close to Tony!") and access to 'Ultimate Edge' - described (admittedly on Robbins' own website) as "The World's #1 Personal Development System" and available to non-attenders for the sum of \$299 (+ \$14.99 pp.)

Robbins' motivational products - themselves based on a version of NLP - cover just about every aspect of life, from personal growth and development, through love, passion, health, energy, fitness (the Robbins brand includes a range of 'Inner Balance' health supplements) life and time management, and career advancement.

Robbins, of course, is merely one - albeit very successful - purveyor of what might be described variously as 'self-help', 'self-actualization', or 'motivational' products. The scope of such products is now bewildering, ranging from the specific - such as advertisements for *L'Oreal* hair products exhorting us to buy their products "because we're worth it" - to the the general - whole sections of bookshops devoted to publications (including, of course, CDs and DVDs) now gathered under the catch-all label: 'Mind, Body, Spirit.'

Bewildering as this may be, one thing seems utterly clear: this broad, diverse field comprises a highly lucrative industry. 'Self-help' books regularly appear on the non-fiction best-seller lists and, while statistical analyses of the value of the genre are made difficult by the sheer diversity of texts that might qualify, some commentators claim that 'self-help remains the world's bestselling genre' (Groskop, 2013: online) with total revenue regularly estimated in terms of billions of dollars.

One of the more recent 'classics' of the genre - Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, first published in 1989 - has to date sold around 15 million copies worldwide in its printed form alone (the audiobook has itself sold around 1.5 million copies) and has given rise to a veritable 'Habits' industry, with an eighth habit (*The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*) added to the portfolio in 2004. Other 'classics' of the genre such as Dale Carnegie's *How To Win Friends And Influence People* (1936, revised and updated edition 1981) and Napoleon Hill's *Think And Grow Rich* (1937) have rarely been out of print since their original publication.

But it is not solely as an industry that this phenomenon needs to be understood. As the following collection of papers shows, a broadly *therapeutic* ethos now pervades all facets of culture, from education (Apperley) and social policy (Simpson and Muir), through fashion (Pierce) and craft-working (Morton) to psychological and spiritual well-being (Vale; Wright; Jacobs) and on through TV content (El-Shall) to publishing (Collingsworth.) What all these papers share is a desire both to understand the *character* and to identify the *implications* - for the self and for society - of this therapeutic turn in our cultures.

What then, are we to make of this therapeutic ethos (or 'ontosphere', as Collingsworth suggests we should think of it?) Beyond this collection of papers - though acknowledged in various ways by the contributors - the therapeutic turn has often been read as a response to some kind of cultural crisis, though the nature of this crisis is itself the object of some dispute.

One of the earliest analyses of the emergence of a therapeutic culture - Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966) - saw it as primarily a response to the collapse of religious authority. Other analyses such as Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) saw it as a response to the collapse of authority structures more generally: religion, but also the family, the school and the community. What both writers share is a belief that the therapeutic turn is a turn inward, rooted in psychology, such that 'self-absorption defines the moral climate of contemporary society.' (Lasch, 1979: 25)

More recently, theorists have sought to locate the therapeutic turn in relation to debates concerning the fate of modernity. Authors such as Beck, Giddens and Bauman, for example, see in the therapeutic turn a response to the anxieties created by the collapse of the certainties with which modernity had come to be associated. This too has an inward, psychological dimension - a concern, that is, with the self. Bauman's idea of 'liquid' modernity (2000), Beck's idea of 'risk society' (1992) and Giddens' notion of 'late-' or 'reflexive modernity' (1991) all, in their various ways, propose that, bereft of 'solid', 'stable' or 'tradition-based' structures, our identities are no longer given to us ready-made, so to speak, but must be constantly refashioned through the choices we make. Human identity has been transformed, in Bauman's words, 'from a "given" into a "task"' (Bauman, 2000: 31.)

Moreover, this task - the fashioning of one's own identity - is one to which we must constantly attend. As Giddens puts it, the question of how to live one's life - of who we should be - 'has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat, and many other things.' (Giddens, 1991: 14) In this 'runaway world' (Giddens, 1999) anxiety in the

face of such relentless choosing is surely an understandable response. At the end of yet another hard day's identity construction, no wonder we collapse exhausted - physically, psychologically and spiritually - into our *Miruji Wellbeing Massage Chairs*.

One can see in this ongoing project of self-transformation, or self-fashioning, a partial fit with the notion of a therapeutic culture. Faced with such a welter of decisions, is it suprising that we seek advice and guidance from self-help 'gurus' such as Covey and Robbins, or movements such as the Art of Living (discussed below by Jacobs?) Rather than allow ourselves, in our ignorance and naivety, to be buffeted about by the confusing, unstable and unfamiliar, we can instead 'empower' ourselves with the advice of an expert.

But here we encounter one of several paradoxes which the therapeutic culture throws up, for placing oneself in the hands of an expert is not without its own risks. All too frequently, it seems, the discourses around self-help which trade on the idea of empowering the individual require a kind of surrender to the therapeutic expert. Robbins might exhort us to *Awaken the Giant Within* (subtitle: "How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Life") but he is the one to whom we turn for help in achieving this goal.

The quasi-religious nature of mass motivational events such as Robbins' UPW weekend has not gone unnoticed by commentators, and in some cases - such as that of Art of Living - they are explicitly religious, albeit in a rather diffuse 'New Age' sort of way. Religion aside, several contributors to this collection discuss the nature of 'expertise' in therapeutic contexts such as the treatment of mental health (Vale,) the psychoanalytic encounter (Wright,) and even the TV studio (see, for example, El-Shall's discussion of CBS TV's *The Dr. Phil Show* below.)

The paradoxical relationship between individual empowerment (or 'autonomy') and the potentially manipulative role of the therapeutic expert is one focus of concern here; but so too is the potential for a therapeutic ethos to recruit supposedly empowered individuals to the social order. As long ago as 1979, Lasch was warning us that the narcissistic personality, for all its desire to achieve 'authenticity and [self-]awareness,' nevertheless 'depends on others to validate [its] self-esteem.' (Lasch, 1979: 5,10)

Several contributors to this collection (Wright; El-Shall; Vale) see, in the inward - and individualising - trajectory of the therapeutic worldview, a shift in the relationship between the individual (or citizen) and the state, and in the kinds of politics that have come to characterise this relationship. Foucault's work around 'bio-politics', 'governmentality' and 'disciplinary power' problematises the dominant liberal-democratic contractual or consensual relationship between the state and the citizen. Similarly, in the therapeutic insistence on the individual's responsibility for itself, we can identify a form of disciplinary power that collapses or undermines the traditional role of both state and citizen.

Other contributors see in the therapeutic turn a potential for recruiting the individual, not only to the political order, but also to the economic order (Apperley; Simpson and Muir.) Here the therapeutic turn is read primarily in

terms of a shift in the nature of global capitalism - a move away from 'Fordist' mass production techniques and 'Taylorist' production principles, to 'flexible specialization', 'niche marketing' and 'just-in-time' production. This shift requires not only a re-organisation of the global workforce, but also a change in the nature of that workforce, with 'individual autonomy' reworked as 'flexibility' and 'adaptability', and 'personal responsibility' as 'lifelong learning' or 'continuing professional development'.

Yet the association between the therapeutic ethos and the trajectory of modernity - or capitalism - is not as straightforward as it seems. As Morton points out in her study of craft work in mid-twentieth century Nova Scotia, the therapeutic project can be critical of the stresses induced by the frantic pace of modernity. It can even be described as 'antimodern' in its romanticisation of traditional rural skills and associated lifestyles.

Nor should we underestimate the potential benefits of the therapeutic turn - as Pearce reminds us in her study of the use of clothing as a means to forging a strong - or stronger - post-colonial Caribbean identity. Similarly, Jacobs argues that the teachings of the Art of Living movement, although open to critical reading, might also have the potential to stimulate participants to help others who are less fortunate. We might respond cynically to the UK government's appointing of economist Richard Layard as 'Happiness Tsar' in 2007 and be dubious of the claims of 'Positive Psychology' which he champions (see Wright's discussion of this below) but, as several of the authors here acknowledge, there are resources available with which to resist the many potential dangers which the therapeutic turn throws up. A properly critical reading of this complex phenomenon will surely seek to acknowledge the potential strengths inherent in the discourse, as well as the many dangers which it might be said to present.

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