

Saving the Modern Soul

THERAPY, EMOTIONS, AND
THE CULTURE OF SELF-HELP

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ONE Introduction

To be sure, the concept of enlightenment must not be too restricted methodologically, for, as I understand it, it embraces more than just logical deduction and empirical verification, but rather, beyond these two, the will and the ability to speculate phenomenologically, to empathize, to approach the limits of reason. . . . Emotions? For all I care, yes. Where is it decreed that enlightenment must be free of emotion? To me the opposite seems to be true.

Enlightenment can properly fulfill its task only if it sets to work with passion.

—Jean Amery

By words one person can make another blissfully happy or drive him to despair, by words the teacher conveys his knowledge to his pupils. Words provoke affects and are in general the means of mutual influence among men.

—Sigmund Freud

Studies and critiques of therapy have steadily accumulated for the past three decades. Although differing in method and outlook, they agree that the therapeutic persuasion is quintessentially modern and that it is modern in what is most disquieting about modernity: bureaucratization, narcissism, the construction of a false self, the control of modern lives by the state, the collapse of cultural and moral hierarchies, the intense privatization of life caused by capitalist social organization, the emptiness of the

modern self severed from communal relationships, large-scale surveillance, the expansion of state power and state legitimation, and “risk society” and the cultivation of the self’s vulnerability.¹ Studies of the therapeutic discourse alone could provide us with a compendium of the various themes that make up the sociology (and critique) of modernity.

The communitarian critique of modernity argues that psychology expresses an atomistic individualism that creates or at least encourages the very ills it claims to heal. Thus, while psychology supposedly addresses and helps resolve our increasing difficulty in entering or remaining in social relations, it actually encourages us to put our needs and preferences above our commitments to others. Under the aegis of the therapeutic discourse, social relations are dissolved by a pernicious utilitarianism that condones a lack of commitment to social institutions and legitimizes a narcissistic and shallow identity.²

Commentators such as Lionel Trilling, Philip Rieff, Christopher Lasch, and Philip Cushman have interpreted the rise of the therapeutic worldview as marking the decline of an autonomous realm of culture and values.³ Thanks to consumption and therapeutic practice, the self has been smoothly integrated into the institutions of modernity, causing culture to lose its power of transcendence and opposition to society. The very seductiveness of consumption and therapeutic self-absorption marks the decline of any serious opposition to society and the general cultural exhaustion of Western civilization. No longer capable of creating heroes, binding values, and cultural ideals, the self has withdrawn inside its own empty shell. In calling on us to withdraw into ourselves, the therapeutic persuasion has made us abandon the great realms of citizenship and politics and cannot provide us with an intelligible way of linking the private self to the public sphere because it has emptied the self of its communal and political content, replacing this content with a narcissistic self-concern.

The most radical and probably the most influential critique of the therapeutic discourse has been inspired by Michel Foucault’s historicization of systems of knowledge. Foucault’s approach to the therapeutic discourse is less interested in restoring communities of meaning than in exposing the ways that power is woven into the social fabric vertically

and horizontally. Foucault notoriously unleashed a fatal blow to psychoanalysis by revealing its glorious project of self-liberation as a form of discipline and subjection to institutional power “by other means.”⁴ He has suggested that the scientific “discovery” of sexuality at the heart of the psychoanalytical project continues a long tradition in which, through confession, subjects are made to search and speak the truth about themselves. The therapeutic is a site within which we invent ourselves as individuals, with wants, needs, and desires to be known, categorized, and controlled for the sake of freedom. Through the twin categories of “sex” and “the psyche,” psychoanalytical practice makes us look for the truth about ourselves and is thus defined in terms of discovering that truth and finding emancipation in the search for it. What makes “psy discourses”⁵ particularly effective in the modern era is that they make the practice of self-knowledge a simultaneously epistemological and moral act. Far from showing the stern face of the censor, modern power takes on the benevolent face of our psychoanalyst, who turns out to be nothing but a node in a vast network of power, a network that is pervasive, diffuse, and total in its anonymity and immanence. The discourse of psychoanalysis is thus a “political technology of the self,” an instrument used and developed in the general framework of the political rationality of the state; its very aim of emancipating the self is what makes the individual manageable and disciplined. Where communitarian sociologists view the therapeutic discourse as driving a wedge between self and society, Foucault suggests, on the contrary, that through therapy the self is made to work seamlessly for and within a system of power.

Although this book cannot fail to have implications for the critique of modernity, I would like to skirt that critique altogether. Whether the therapeutic discourse threatens moral communities of meaning, undermines the family, oppresses women, diminishes the relevance of the political sphere, corrodes moral virtue and character, exerts a general process of surveillance, reinforces the empty shell of narcissism, and weakens the self does not preoccupy me—although some of these questions cannot fail to haunt some of the discussion to follow. My purpose is neither to document the pernicious effects of the therapeutic discourse nor to discuss its emancipatory potential, tasks that have been masterfully accom-

plished by many others.⁶ My intent here is rather to move the field of cultural studies away from the “epistemology of suspicion” on which it has too heavily relied. Or, to say this differently, I wish to analyze culture without presuming to know in advance what social relations should look like. Using Bruno Latour’s and Michel Callon’s sociological approach to scientific objects, I call on students of culture to adopt two principles: the principle of “agnosticism” (taking an amoral stance toward social actors) and the principle of symmetry (explaining different phenomena in a similar or symmetrical way).⁷ The point of cultural analysis is not to measure cultural practices against what they ought to be or ought to have been but rather to understand how they have come to be what they are and why, in being what they are, they “accomplish things” for people. Thus, despite its brilliance, a Foucauldian approach will not do because Foucault used sweeping concepts—“surveillance,” “bio-power,” “governmentality”—that have some fatal flaws: they do not take the critical capacities of actors seriously; they do not ask why actors are often deeply engaged by and engrossed with meanings; and they do not differentiate between social spheres, collapsing them together under what the French sociologist Philippe Corcuff calls “bulldozer”⁸ concepts, concepts so all-encompassing that they end up flattening the complexity of the social (e.g., “bio-power” or “surveillance”). As I hope to show, it is crucial to make such differentiations. A thick and contextual analysis of the uses and effects of therapy reveals that there is no single overall effect (of “surveillance” or “bio-power”). On the contrary, these uses and effects significantly differ according to whether they take place in the realm of the corporation, marriage, or the support group (respectively chapters 3, 4, and 5).

If all the critics of the psychological discourse agree that it has “triumphed” and if some remarkable studies now detail *what* in the therapeutic has “triumphed,”⁹ we still do not know much about *how* and *why* it has triumphed.¹⁰ In addressing this question, I part company with the critical approaches to culture that rely on the epistemology of suspicion in their systematic exposure of how a cultural practice accomplishes (or fails to accomplish) a specific political practice. Instead, I argue that a critique of culture cannot be adequately waged before we understand the mecha-

nism of culture: how meanings are produced, how they are woven into the social fabric, how they are used in daily life to shape relationships and cope with an uncertain social world, and why they come to organize our interpretation of self and others. As I hope to show, both the analysis *and* the critique of the therapeutic ethos take a new aspect when they are not predicated on a priori political assumptions about what social relations *should* look like. Instead, my analysis subscribes to the pragmatic insight that meanings and ideas should be viewed as useful tools, that is, as tools enabling us to accomplish certain things in daily life.¹¹

My study of the therapeutic discourse is thus waged first and foremost from the vantage point of the sociology of culture. Perhaps more so than for most other topics, the exploration of the therapeutic ethos is an ideal site for examining “how culture works.” This is true for several reasons.

First, for the student of culture, therapeutic language has the rare virtue of being a qualitatively new language of the self. Although it relies upon an age-old view of the psyche, this language has virtually no antecedent in American or European culture. In that respect, it represents a uniquely pristine possibility to understand how new cultural forms emerge and how new languages transform the self-understandings that infuse social relations and action. Recalling Robert Bellah’s insight regarding the Protestant Reformation, we may say that the therapeutic discourse has “reformulated the deepest level of identity symbols.”¹² Such reformulation is of particular interest to the cultural sociologist, for it occurred simultaneously through the specialized and formal channels of scientific knowledge and through the culture industries (movies, popular press, publishing industry, television). To the extent that the therapeutic discourse represents a qualitatively new language of the self, it enables us to throw in sharp relief the question of the emergence of new cultural codes and meanings and to inquire into the conditions that make possible their diffusion and impact throughout society. This book can be read as a fragment in the broader cultural history of introspection, that is, the history of the language and techniques we use to address and examine ourselves (through such categories as “desires,” “memory,” and “emotions”).

Second, no other cultural framework, with the exception of political liberalism and the market-based language of economic efficiency, has

exerted such a decisive influence on twentieth-century models of selfhood. Not only has almost half of the entire population consulted a mental health practitioner,¹³ but even more critically the therapeutic outlook has been institutionalized in various social spheres of contemporary societies (e.g., in economic organizations; mass media; patterns of child rearing; intimate and sexual relationships; schools; the army; the welfare state; prison rehabilitation programs; and international conflicts). Therapy under many forms has been diffused worldwide on a scale that is comparable (and perhaps even superior) to that of American popular culture. Whether it has assumed the form of introspective psychoanalysis, a New Age “mind-body” workshop, or an “assertiveness training” program, it has mustered a rare level of cultural legitimacy across a wide variety of social groups, organizations, institutions, and cultural settings. The therapeutic discourse has crossed and blurred the compartmentalized spheres of modernity and has come to constitute one of the major codes with which to express, shape, and guide selfhood. Moreover, through the standardization of academic curricula and the standardization of psychological professions, the therapeutic discourse transcends national boundaries and constitutes a “transnational” language of selfhood. If, as S. N. Eisenstadt put it, civilizations have centers that diffuse and embody ontological visions,¹⁴ the therapeutic outlook has become one of the centers of that amorphous and vague entity known as Western civilization.

Third, perhaps more than any other cultural formation, the therapeutic discourse illustrates the ways in which culture and knowledge have become inextricably imbricated in contemporary societies.¹⁵ As Karin Knorr-Cetina put it:

A knowledge society is not simply a society of more experts, of technological infra- and information structures and of specialist rather than participant interpretations. It means that knowledge cultures have spilled and woven their tissue into society, the whole set of processes, experiences and relationships that wait on knowledge and unfold with its articulation. This “dehiscence” of knowledge, the discharge of knowledge relations into society, is what needs to be rendered as a problem to be solved in a sociological (rather than economic) account of knowledge societies. . . . We need to trace the ways in which knowledge has become constitutive of social relations.¹⁶

Psychology is undoubtedly a body of texts and theories produced in formal organizations by experts certified to produce and use it. But it is perhaps primarily also a body of knowledge diffused worldwide through a wide variety of culture industries; self-help books, workshops, television talk shows, radio call-in programs, movies, television series, novels, and magazines have all been essential cultural platforms for the diffusion of therapy throughout U.S. society and culture. All of the above have been and continue to be central sites of diffusion of therapeutic knowledge, making that knowledge an essential part of the cultural and moral universe of contemporary middle-class Americans. This dual status of psychology as simultaneously professional and popular is what makes it so interesting for the student of contemporary culture; it offers an opportunity to understand how high and popular culture are saturated through and through by knowledge formations. Indeed, inasmuch as "knowledges have become decisive forces themselves in our economic and technological development,"¹⁷ they constitute an important aspect of cultural action in contemporary societies. The diffusion of this knowledge took place through mass media and multiple institutional arenas, in which psychological knowledge became a way of performing the self, which in turn explains why it took hold of definitions of the self in such a long-lasting and gripping way. Knowledge and symbolic systems have come to shape who we are because they are enacted within social institutions that bestow authority on certain ways of knowing and speaking and routinize them so that they may become the invisible semiotic codes that organize ordinary conduct and structure the interaction rituals of the self. This assumption informs the main strategy of this book as it examines how the therapeutic discourse has been incorporated into different institutional settings such as the corporation, the family, and ordinary practices of self-help (examined respectively in chapters 3, 4, and 5) and how it organizes social relations in each one of these spheres.

Finally, the therapeutic discourse is such a good site for cultural analysis because it has traversed the entire twentieth century, only gaining in strength and scope. How did the cultural structure of therapy survive and become reinforced throughout the American twentieth century? What is the process by which a cultural structure persists and endures?

As Orlando Patterson argues, cultural continuity needs to be explained, not simply assumed.¹⁸ The extraordinary resilience of the therapeutic discourse can be explained not only by its incorporation into central institutions of American society but also by the fact that it has been able to recruit a vast number of social actors and cultural industries (chapter 5).

For these reasons, I believe the therapeutic discourse is an outstanding, if daunting, object of study for the cultural sociologist. The purpose of this book, then, is not only to document the various aspects of the therapeutic culture but also to track down the emergence of a new *cultural structure*, a task that has been too rarely undertaken by sociologists of culture.

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE THERAPEUTIC

Even if at times cultural sociology may seem to be a hopelessly fuzzy field, one may identify a number of propositions constitutive of the core of the discipline. The first is that culture matters a great deal for who we are. By “who we are” I do not refer to our objectives, interests, or material resources. Rather, I refer to the way we make sense of who we are through actions shaped by values, key images and scenarios, ideals, and habits of thought; through the stories we use to frame our own and others’ experience; through the accounts we use to explain our own and others’ failures and successes; through what we feel entitled to; and through the moral categories we use to hierarchize our social world. Our actions, narratives, accounts, and moral categories not only help us make sense of who we are but are central to the way we communicate ourselves to others, the way we mobilize their support, what we are ready to defend and fight for, and how we orient ourselves in the face of ambiguous choices. As George Steinmetz put it: “Culture is more than a conveyor belt for deeper, more fundamental, or more material forces.”¹⁹ The therapeutic discourse offers an entirely new cultural matrix—made of metaphors, binary oppositions, narrative schemas, explanatory frameworks—that throughout the twentieth century has increasingly shaped our understandings of the self and of others. To that extent, it represents an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to sociologists who still need to be convinced the centrality of meaning.²⁰

The second proposition made by cultural sociology is that meanings differ in their ability to constrain definitions of reality: some meanings are more powerful and binding than others.²¹ Traditionally, the sociology of culture has been interested in meanings that have had a great deal of institutional resonance, that is, meanings that are sanctioned by and enacted within powerful institutional frameworks. ("Individualism" is a good example of a meaning that has enormous institutional resonance in the sense that it is enacted in and sanctioned by a variety of institutions.) The study of culture is usually interested in meanings that are enacted in and through powerful institutional settings because these meanings are assumed to be more constraining and because they are most visibly connected to the social order. Contrary to the view (widespread among communitarian sociologists) that the therapeutic ethos privileges an anti-institutional and narcissistic self,²² I argue that the therapeutic discourse has mustered an enormous cultural resonance because it has been enacted within and through the main institutions of modernity. Far from instilling an anti-institutional attitude, the therapeutic discourse represents a formidably powerful and quintessentially modern way to institutionalize the self.²³

The third characteristic claim made by the sociology of culture is that culture does not cause our actions in the same way that the wind causes a leaf to fall from the tree. Even if many students of culture strive to identify those cultural variables that have an independent causal power, most of us working in the muddy field of culture view culture as so entangled with "the rest" that positivist causal models are, if not undesirable, at least uneasy. Indeed, what is taken to be the explanatory variable must, more often than not, itself be explained.²⁴ We may compare the relationship that culture entertains with society to the relationship between the rain and the soil on which it falls: even if we know that the rain has caused the soil to be wet, we are, more often than not, left only with "mud" that cannot be re-separated into soil and water. Similarly, while I try to trace the historical moment during which the therapeutic discourse progressively shaped the language of selfhood, it is now virtually impossible to isolate this language from other "master cultural" codes organizing selfhood, such as that of economic liberalism or contractual law. The challenge is thus to understand how culture constitutes social relations

without ever being completely autonomous from them.²⁵ The therapeutic discourse helps make a strong case for the claim that language is central to the constitution of selfhood in that it is a dynamic means of experiencing and expressing emotions. Language defines categories of emotions, establishes what an "emotional problem" is, provides causal frameworks and metaphors to make sense of these problems, and constrains the ways emotions are expressed, made sense of, and managed.²⁶

The fourth characteristic of cultural sociology is its attempt to systematically find connections (which are not reducible to causality) between meaning and social groups, whether as producers, carriers, or consumers of meanings. The connection between social location or material interests on the one hand and ideas, values, and beliefs on the other cannot be deterministic and mechanistic. However, it is and remains a vital task of the sociology of culture to identify the social carriers of ideas and symbols, even if this relation cannot be conceived of in a causal and deterministic way. What complicates such an inquiry, however, is the fact that the therapeutic discourse is a set of linguistic practices with a strong institutional base (it originates in university departments, research institutes, professional journals); it emanates from the professional class of psychologists and has found a particularly receptive audience among members of the new middle classes and among women; but it is also an anonymous, authorless, and pervasive worldview, scattered in a dazzling array of social and cultural locations (TV talk shows, the Internet, the publishing industry, the private practice of clinicians, business consulting, school curricula, prison training programs, social welfare services, and a plethora of support groups). In Lionel Trilling's words, the therapeutic discourse has become the "slang of our culture."²⁷ The therapeutic discourse is thus both a *formal* knowledge system that has distinct boundaries and rules of writing, is produced in formal organizations, and is carried through professional networks, especially through "knowledge producers,"²⁸ and an *informal*, amorphous, and diffuse cultural system present in ordinary cultural practices and self-understandings. Although this book focuses on the latter system, I try to stress the connections between the two realms.

To these four dimensions defining culture, with which, I believe, most

sociologists of culture would agree, I offer one or two additional dimensions of my own, unfortunately neglected by the sociology of culture. Cultural sociology has surprisingly failed to devote serious attention to what is perhaps the central missing link connecting structure and agency, namely emotion.

Emotion is the inner energy that propels us toward an act, just as it endows a particular "mood" or "coloration" to that act.²⁹ Emotion can thus be defined as the "energy-laden" side of action, where that energy is understood to simultaneously implicate cognition, affect, evaluation, motivation, and the body. Far from being presocial or precultural, emotions are cultural meanings and social relationships that are closely and inextricably compressed together, and it is this tight compression that gives them their capacity to energize action. What makes emotion embed this "energy" is that it always concerns the self and the relationship of the self to culturally situated others. Emotions originate in the subject's beliefs and desires and cannot be separated from the ways in which culturally encoded social relationships are lived in and by the self. When someone says, "You are late again," whether this provokes shame, anger, or guilt will depend almost exclusively on one's relationship to the person who said it. A boss's remark about being late is likely to be shaming, and a colleague's is likely to make one angry, but that of one's child waiting at school is likely to make one feel guilty. Emotion is certainly a psychological entity, but it is no less and is perhaps more a cultural and social entity: through emotion we enact cultural definitions of personhood as they are expressed in concrete and immediate but always culturally and socially defined relationships. The intense, compact compression of cultural meanings and social relationships also gives emotions their prereflexive, often semiconscious character. Emotions are deeply internalized and unreflexive aspects of action, not because they do not contain sufficient culture and society, but because they contain too much of them. For this reason, a hermeneutic sociology that aims to understand social action from "within" must pay attention to the emotional coloration or intonation of action because that is what actually propels it. Like religion, the therapeutic discourse offers symbols that create an overriding experiential reality and transform the very nature of action.³⁰ To account for

such experiential reality, we need to bring in emotions. I therefore subscribe to the view of culture as practice expressed in the words of Richard Biernacki: "Thinking and feeling are not preparations for action, they are action."³¹ Essential to my approach to culture is the pragmatic claim that meanings help solve practical problems in which emotional life figures prominently.

This book examines the way the language of therapy has reformulated the "deepest level of identity symbols"³² by viewing the therapeutic discourse simultaneously as a formal and specialized body of knowledge and as a cultural framework that orients self-perceptions and conceptions of others and generates specific emotional practices. It has become virtually impossible to disentangle "knowledge" from "culture," so a dual approach to the therapeutic discourse is necessary: because it is both an established body of scientific knowledge conveyed through formal institutions and a language through which selfhood, identity, and emotional life are shaped,³³ it demands that we mobilize and reconcile the "production of culture" approach (which explains the emergence of cultural material by examining the resources, organizations, and networks that agents mobilize) and the hermeneutic approach (which views culture as a set of meanings deeply encoded in conceptions of personhood).

THERAPY AS A NEW EMOTIONAL STYLE

Many will object to my unrestricted use of the word *therapeutic*, a use that includes eclectic objects such as the demanding practice of the "talking cure," commercial self-help books that are manufactured for quick-fix mental health, support groups, assertiveness training programs, and the television programs that provide "one-show" therapeutic counseling. The objection is serious and demands that we pause to consider whether the enterprise might include so many eclectic elements that the object of analysis dissolves.

Akin to religious ideas—which at times may originate in the specialized discussions of theologians—concepts that are elaborated in the specialized and professional arenas of scientists shape our ordinary understandings of our social and natural environment. This observation is

especially pertinent to the science of clinical psychology, which has taken on the vocation of defining concepts (such as “intimacy,” “sexuality,” or “leadership”) that are at the interface between specialized institutions of knowledge and ordinary cultural practices. In suggesting a continuity between “professional” and popular psychology, I perform the same move that cultural studies does when it argues that highbrow literature and popular culture are equally revealing of the social conditions in which they are produced. Similarly, I argue that the boundary between specialized psychological knowledge and so-called pop psychology is porous in that both the professional language of psychology and its popular version address the self using similar metaphors and narratives.³⁴ This does not mean that I call for a disregard of the differences in the complexity of different cultural forms or that I am oblivious to the real differences that separate the painstaking (and costly) therapeutic consultation from the commodified quick-fix advice offered by self-help literature or workshops. But while we must acknowledge the discontinuities between the various organizational frameworks in which a language is deployed, we sociologists cannot accept at face value the “distinctions” guarded by professional practitioners in a given field. Such distinctions—between formal and informal knowledge—must be systematically examined, questioned, and even bracketed if we want to grasp the cultural continuities that exist beyond the established social divisions of knowledge.

There is another and perhaps more convincing reason justifying the seemingly cavalier move of blurring the specialized highbrow language of therapists and the language of popular culture. Starting with Freud himself (see next chapter), a significant number of professional psychologists have easily and happily crossed the boundary dividing specialized knowledge and popular culture and in fact have preferred to be located at the seam line between the two. For example, in the preface to his widely read book *On Becoming a Person*, Carl Rogers, the famous founder of humanist psychology, framed his enterprise in a way reminiscent of popular self-help guides: “It is my sincere hope that many people who have no particular interest in the field of counseling or psychotherapy will find that the learnings emerging in this field will strengthen them in

their own living."³⁵ Other popular books written by prominent psychologists, such as Aaron Beck's *Love Is Never Enough* or Albert Ellis's *A New Guide to Rational Living*, suggest similarly that well-known professional psychologists wanted to address the wide public as an undifferentiated mass of consumers of the publishing industry.³⁶ Conversely but symmetrically, many popular best-sellers present themselves as transcripts of therapeutic professional work. Countless self-help books have been written by certified therapists who share with a broad audience specialized insight they have gained in the course of their work, bringing case studies and even therapy transcripts to their readers.³⁷

In fact, from the very beginning of their profession, American professional psychoanalysts and psychologists turned to the culture industries to make their voice heard far and loud. By breaking down the distinction between the talking cure and the self-help book, I hope to show that the different cultural realms of professional and popular therapy are united by a common *emotional style*.

What is an "emotional style"? In her well-known *Philosophy in a New Key*, Suzanne Langer suggests that "every age in the history of philosophy has its own preoccupation. . . . If we look back on the slow formation and accumulation of doctrines which mark that history, we may see certain groupings of ideas within it, not by subject matter, but by a subtler common factor which may be called their 'technique.' It is the mode of handling problems, rather than what they are about, that assigns them to an age."³⁸ I call here *emotional style* the combination of the ways a culture becomes "preoccupied" with certain emotions and devises specific "techniques"—linguistic, scientific, ritual—to apprehend them.³⁹

An emotional style is established when a new "interpersonal imagination" is formulated, that is, a new way of thinking about the relationship of self to others, imagining its potentialities and implementing them in practice. Indeed, interpersonal relationships—like the nation—are thought of, longed for, argued over, betrayed, fought for, and negotiated according to imaginary scripts that fill social closeness or distance with meaning. Thus, as I show in chapter 2, Freud's greatest impact on culture has been to reformulate the relationship of the self to others through a new way of imagining the past (i.e., the personal familial past) and a

prospective freedom from that past. This reformulation was expressed in a number of key ideas and cultural motifs that would haunt American culture at large. Following the research agenda I outlined in previous studies,⁴⁰ I suggest that modern imaginings are especially likely to be formulated at sites where expert knowledge systems, media technologies, and emotions intersect.

The therapeutic emotional style emerged in the relatively short period from World War I to World War II and became both solidified and widely available after the 1960s. To be sure, this style drew on residues of nineteenth-century notions of selfhood, but it also presented a new lexicon to conceptualize and discuss emotions and self in the realm of ordinary life and new ways of handling emotional life. Given the extraordinary ubiquity of the therapeutic discourse, which ranges from professional treatises to *The Sopranos* via talk shows and self-help books, it is not easy to give a precise operational definition of it. I have opted for a conservative approach and have defined as “therapeutic” the body of claims proffered by certified psychologists and the body of texts in which psychologists and/or therapy appear and play a role (e.g., *The Sopranos*, the Oprah Winfrey talk show, Woody Allen’s movies). The cultural novelty of this emotional style was most apparent in the realm where it was perhaps least expected, namely the American corporation. Managers operating in the increasingly complex structures of the emerging corporate capitalism were eager to decipher the key to efficient control and thus avidly seized on a language and techniques that claimed to promote both harmony and productivity. As chapter 3 shows, psychology has profoundly transformed the emotional culture of the workplace in that it has made men and women’s emotional cultures increasingly converge into a common androgynous model of emotional conduct. This process has been equally at work in the realm of marriage. As I argue in chapter 4, under the influence of the new models offered by feminism and psychology, marriage called on women to become autonomous and assertive and on men to become emotionally reflexive and talkative. In chapter 5, I further argue that these new emotional models are performed in a gender-blind narrative of identity that is enacted in a wide variety of social sites, such as support groups and therapeutic workshops. In the final, sixth chapter, I

examine the effects of psychological knowledge on social structure. If culture is central to the sociological project, it is because it shapes the very structure of economic and symbolic resources. Psychology has transformed the resources that actors draw on in competitive arenas of struggle, creating new fault lines between social and gender stratification.

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

I study the meaning of the therapeutic outlook by doing what ethnographers should typically do, namely immerse themselves in their data. But this immersion has taken the form of a cross-disciplinary dialogue between historical, sociological, and anthropological methods. With William Sewell I am convinced not only that “a deeper theoretical engagement between historians and social scientists could be mutually enlightening” but also that such engagement is necessary if we want to advance the study of culture.⁴¹

Given the overwhelming presence of the therapeutic ethos in contemporary culture, these data are dauntingly abundant and dauntingly eclectic. They include a sample of magazines articles written between the 1930s and the 1990s (237 in toto). The magazines were *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, and *Parents*. I also used an eclectic sample of popular psychological self-help guides (most of which were best-sellers), novels, movies, autobiographies, and Oprah Winfrey talk shows. I read a wide variety of psychoanalytical and psychological theorists, such as Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Erik Erikson, Alfred Adler, Stephen Mitchell, and Elton Mayo, as well as *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and various textbooks in clinical psychology. To understand how the discourse of therapy transformed definitions of professional competence (see chapter 3), I conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with men and women working in corporations in the United States or studying in a prestigious MBA program (eight men, seven women) and another three interviews with corporate managers who were retired. To understand how therapy has transformed intimate relationships and marriage, I interviewed another fifteen middle-class people, many of whom had undergone extensive

therapy or who were themselves therapists (chapters 4 and 6); for the purposes of comparison, I also conducted six interviews with working-class men who had never undergone therapy. Over five years, I kept a diary of the turns of expression, stories, and self-understandings of friends and family that resonated with the therapeutic mode of thinking. Finally, to form hypotheses about how the discourse of therapy is deployed globally, I conducted an ethnographic analysis of two workshops in Israel, one on “emotional intelligence” and one offered by the Landmark Education Corporation. I conducted several informal conversations with the participants of these workshops. I also interviewed six Israeli organizational consultants as well as ten Israeli men and women who had undergone therapy (seven women, three men). The eclectic character of these data also indicate that my methods of analysis vary, ranging from historical to participant observation, to in-depth interviews, to the semiotic analysis of texts.

This array of data and methods is not fortuitous, for, as I argue throughout, culture is located in texts as well as in strategies of action. In fact, it is impossible to analyze psychological culture without being struck by the overwhelming importance of textuality in that culture. Psychology is a cultural formation in which a mass of written texts come to organize and structure the practices and modes of speech of oral interactions. In that sense, it compels the sociologist of culture to wrestle with the role of texts in the formation of contemporary selfhood. However, I do not view these two sites—the textual and the interactional—as equivalent or interchangeable. In fact, I believe that one of the crucial tasks of cultural sociology is to elucidate the relationship between texts and society, and more exactly to understand how and where texts affect action and how semantics and pragmatics connect to each other, to use Jeffrey Alexander’s words.⁴²

Most of cultural sociology has skirted or dismissed the question of the impact of texts on action either by collapsing action under texts (as in poststructuralism), by viewing action as the mechanistic deployment of meaning inscribed in objective structures (as in structuralism), or by deflecting the importance of texts as such. Reception theory, for example, focuses on the various and varying strategies used by readers to interpret

a single specific set of texts (a TV program or literary genre).⁴³ In this way, reception theory implicitly assumes that texts are reducible to or subsumed under their interpretive strategies and that if they have any impact it consists in activating preexisting meanings, usually reflecting the social positions of actors. The “production of culture” paradigm ignores altogether the question of the relationship between texts and their social effects by focusing on the institutional appropriation of texts and by viewing meaning as resulting from social power and organizational structure.

This book would like to bring the problem of the relationship of texts to action to the forefront of cultural sociology, where texts include both expert and popular knowledge systems formalized in visual and textual genres and propagated by the mass media. But how shall we study the vexed question of the relationship of texts and action? Following Durkheim’s central insight that the basis of social life is simultaneously moral and emotional, I understand the self as an inextricable ensemble of cognitions and emotions.⁴⁴ Similarly, I argue that texts insert themselves into action in two main ways: through cognition and through emotions. As Paul Ricoeur has argued, texts introduce a distance between the immediacy of experience and the self and, in that distance, codify experience. Texts are “communication in and through distance,”⁴⁵ and within that distance communication becomes formalized, a matter of codes, conventions, and stable representations. But if texts were only frozen codes, they could not draw us in. If cultural materials such as novels, movies, self-help literature, or television programs have any impact on us, it is not only as hermeneutic devices helping us make sense of our world but also as cultural devices that tap into, elicit, and channel complex emotional apparatuses (such as indignation, compassion, longing for love, fear, and anxiety). The significance of the novel, of contemporary advice literature, or of much of media culture lies primarily in their capacity to draw the reader in through a set of emotional responses. Both novels and advice literature, each in different ways, offer scenarios through which actors can cognitively rehearse their emotional experience and reflect on others’ emotional transactions and expressions. By doing so, actors make sense of their own (and others’) feelings, subtly prescribe

rules to manage emotions, and provide a vocabulary and a method of introspection. This is exactly how psychological texts insert themselves into action.

My method of interpreting cultural material is motivated by two main concerns. First, I try as little as possible to read “into” the meaning of practices, that is, to read “above” the shoulders of social actors. Instead, I opt for a strategy that refers to the literal meaning of texts (whether self-help literature, interview transcripts, or actual verbal exchange during social interactions). In doing so, I am better equipped to pay attention to the differences between what actors intend to say and the unintended consequences of their speech (see chapter 3 for an example of this strategy, where the intended meaning and the consequences of the human relations movement are clearly differentiated). Second, I look for systematic patterns and connections between various cultural sites. Although my analysis does not always make explicit how systematic a finding is, I have focused only on the repetitive and the systematic and have left out those elements that seem only loosely integrated into a pattern.

CULTURAL CRITIQUE AND PSYCHOLOGY

By insisting that the therapeutic lexicon “depoliticizes” problems that are social and collective, many sociologists have made it difficult for themselves to understand why the new middle classes and women have enthusiastically endorsed the therapeutic discourse—other than by presuming, somewhat implausibly, that theirs is a “false” consciousness or by presuming that modern societies are governed by a seamless process of surveillance equally embodied in computerized control of citizens and in the therapist’s office. Indeed, the therapeutic discourse can only fall short of satisfying the Marxist or feminist call to become aware of structures of exploitation. Sociologists’ critiques of psychology obscure the more challenging question: How can we explain the extent and power of that discourse without tautologically explaining it by “hegemony,” “patriarchy,” “symbolic violence,” or “surveillance”?

I do not ask whether the therapeutic injunction to narcissistic “self-realization” erodes moral commitments or whether the therapeutic con-

fession is subjection to power “by other means.” This task has been accomplished by others, and I prefer to examine the therapeutic discourse from the standpoint of what it is called upon to perform, namely to build coherent selves, procure intimacy, provide a feeling of competence in the realm of work, and facilitate social relations in general. We should ask why and how the therapeutic language has come to define languages of selfhood and what makes it a *cultural resource*, a way for actors to devise strategies of action that help them implement certain definitions of the good life. This implies, quite simply, that I analyze (and ultimately criticize) the therapeutic discourse from within its own horizon of presuppositions and claims, a model of critique I have called elsewhere *immanent critique* (see chapter 6).⁴⁶ Immanent critique must emerge from a “thick” understanding of people’s desires and goals and cannot bracket the actual understandings and strategies of lay actors.

I offer the hypothesis that the most successful ideas—as psychoanalysis has undoubtedly been—are those that can satisfy three conditions: they must “somehow” fit social structure, that is, make sense of actors’ social experience (e.g., rapid economic transformation, demographic patterns, immigration fluxes, downward mobility, status anxiety); they must provide guidance about uncertain or conflict-ridden areas of social conduct (e.g., sexuality, love, or economic success); and they must be institutionalized and circulated in social networks. I call this approach to culture “pragmatic” because it argues that ideas and meanings can become dominant not only when they undergo institutionalization but also when they help us “do things,” that is, cope with and resolve practical questions. Ideas become successful not only when they can address social experience and when they become incorporated in what William Sewell calls “institutional nodes” (sites that yield a high amount of resources, such as the state or the market) but also when they offer symbolic and practical ways of action. Successful cultural ideas are thus those that enable the self to integrate various bits and pieces of its environment in narratives, frames, and metaphors that “work” in given institutional contexts.

Following in the footsteps of pragmatism, the sociology of culture should ask two central questions: which “objective reality” lies behind

culture and why certain meanings “work.” To be efficacious, a discourse must accomplish certain things for the people who believe in it and use it (see chapter 2). A discourse will keep functioning and circulating if it accomplishes certain things that “work” in people’s everyday lives. A pragmatist view of culture invites us to inquire about why some ideas are viewed as true and how they are used in everyday life. To quote William James: “A new opinion counts as ‘true’ just in proportion as it gratifies the individual’s desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock. It must both lean on old truth and grasp new fact. . . . The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they are true.”⁴⁷ William James invites us here to understand what in “new” ideas makes us call them true, what makes them convenient and workable tools to address experiences. Further, as John P. Murphy summarizes James’s thought, “Ideas verify themselves by their ability to run novel experiences into funded experience ‘most felicitously and expeditiously’ (with ‘a minimum of modification,’ ‘a minimum of jolt,’ ‘a minimum disturbance,’ and ‘a maximum of continuity’). . . . Ideas are said to verify themselves by mediating between funded and new experiences most felicitously and expeditiously.”⁴⁸ Cultural shifts do not occur in the same way as scientific paradigmatic shifts, for the former often incorporate and recycle—rather than reject, as the latter do—old cultural material. Cultural change is “messy” precisely for that reason: because new ideas, values, and cultural models coexist with, incorporate, and rework preexisting cultural material. In that sense, culture is always a palimpsest in which the new is superimposed upon the old. The central question raised in the following chapters is what the “old truths” and “beliefs in stock” rearticulated by psychoanalysis and psychology are.