Opinion Article

The Commodification of Self-Help: Deconstructing the Sirens' Song

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation is to assess through a critical lens the unexplored motives and machinations of the wildly popular "self-help" industry and its potentially devastating effects on people seeking personal growth and healing from it. Because of the COVID disruption, target subjects are now more likely to include (with IRB approval) Marshall students, faculty, and staff. It is not a medical research project nor is it a statistical analysis. Instead, it is a continuation of an extant project detailed below. This project began before COVID, was interrupted/stalled by it, and now because of it, includes, unexpectedly, additional streams of inquiry. In other words, this proposal asks a sabbatical to a) resume a project stalled by the pandemic's societal shutdown, and b) capitalize on its disruptive effects now that it is a part of the culture. Research projects thrive on realism, which is why the earlier endeavor showed such promise. The new reality of COVID's corrosive effects on normal interactions creates the tragic prospect of added alienation, as well as feelings of being disconnected, adrift, and less "worthy" or "valuable." These are the very attributes most self-help seekers use to self-describe. It is, therefore, obligatory that the Academy attempt to understand it better.

Introduction

The research project posits the general questions, "Has the multi-billion-dollar self-help industry merely become a replacement addiction for the millions who pursue it? "Further, "How might the pandemic's newly imposed isolation alienate already vulnerable populations, and tragically, cast a wider "net" for those who were teetering on the edge already?" Low self-esteem, poor social skills, emotional damage, and feelings of emptiness are all noteworthy motivations for restorative endeavor. It is literally the reason self-help exists. Moreover, feelings of isolation and hopelessness are particularly keenly experienced in regions of the country such as the Ohio Valley where tectonic economic forces are leaving large segments of the population behind, including in our own community and our own ranks. Compounding that dystopic state is the social isolation created by the pandemic. It is likely that people already feeling somewhat out of place or marginalized before, are feeling that in triplicate now. Yet, the self-help many

seek is akin to fools' gold in that its glitter does not match its real value. When viewed through the prism of critical theory (best articulated in Marx's Manifesto and 1844 Manuscripts), self-help with its glossy bookstore covers and designer-clad "gurus" promising deliverance has likely become enslaving rather than liberating. Just as the unsavory auto mechanic finds more and more to fix in a broken car, self-help carries its readers/listeners/viewers not to fulfillment or autonomy, but to the next self-help "best seller" instead, perpetuating the very cycle it purports to break [1]. Critical scholars argue this is neither accidental nor unintended. Rather, it is deliberate and coldly calculating. This ongoing travesty is trebled in its impact because a global pandemic upended an already tenuous (for many) order. All theorizing and data analysis in the critical tradition views reality as socially constructed. Moreover, these constructions are optimally examined through a lens of power differentials at work in the superstructure (a term

Marx coined to argue the economic base of an historical period created and maintained a "superstructure" for its preservation). To the lay reader, this roughly translates to a single premise. "Power. Acknowledged, examined, revealed permeating everything." In critical theory, all interactions are viewed in relation to power how it suffuses relationships and institutions, how it insinuates itself, and how it unwaveringly pursues the preservation of itself, usually with stunning success.

Theory and Abbreviated Summation of Literature

Commodification of culture, a logical extension of critical theory, suggests all manifestations of human enterprise/expression/experience fall inevitably to the least common denominators of "barter, sell, or exchange" in late-stage capitalist societies [2]. Altruism, good intentions, even authenticity and originality, are inevitably consumed and supplanted [3]. As a result, self-help, once commodified, offers not freedom, but a more insidious form of slavery a slavery which is nearly undetectable unless its meaning is deconstructed. Deconstruction is best articulated by Jacques Derrida [4] with a linguistic roadmap offered by Ferdinand Saussure, 1916, and a vocabulary of interpretation suggested by Stuart Hall [5]. Unlike other communication theory, this approach does not readily lend itself to hypothesis testing but, instead, suggests prima facie evidentiary support. Cultural studies researchers have long looked askance at self-help's most successful proponents. And that derision has little to do with the belief it may be a scam, wherein the keys to freedom lie perpetually out of reach and draw closer only with the purchase of the next book. This makes the author richer and the self-help seeker poorer with every false promise. Rather, the suspicion among that group is peddling freedom and greater autonomy is a mechanism of control and limitation carefully disguised. French philosopher Louis Althusser believed the state keeps its power via RSAs and ISAs (1970). The Repressive State Apparatuses include visible manifestations such as the police and the military, currently on vivid display as society wrestles with long simmering discontent with the status quo. Less transparent but more influential are the Ideological State Apparatuses of the entertainment and news media (including social media), the entertainment industries, the educational system, organized religion of all stripes, and even the family itself. This active process exists in service to the cultural hegemony of the state [6]. Even the influential scholars Bandura, and separately, Gerbner, lent support to the socializing power of observed/learned behavior. In each case those norms and conventions were transmitted via the ISAs (though the researchers did not label them as such).

To Wit

•   RQ 1 What cultural evidence exists for the premise that commodification has successfully co-opted self-help's original, well-meaning intent? What have scholars discovered?

•   RQ 2 Using the Simulacra as a template, is it reasonable to contend the "original" expressions of inner peace (found in Eastern mysticism, Vedic literature, and the oral traditions of dozens of ancient cultures) are, in fact, lost? Baudrillard argued all originality and autonomy would disappear, such that all that remained would be copies and cheapened fakes.

•   RQ 3 In what way does the message of self-help differ significantly from the original to justify monetizing it?

•   RQ 4 If the process is, in fact, cyclical as proponents of hegemony argue, is the system that offers self-help also responsible for inflicting the "brokenness" clients exhibit? In other words, does a hyper capitalist machine dehumanize an individual, then does it encourage her to get "better," only to turn around and offer her a chimera of a solution that improves only her ability to maximize profit rather than attain "wellness?"

•   RQ 5 What can an individual do to seek real emancipation? How can revealing the fraudulent nature of the Sirens' Song aid in a proper deconstruction of the text?

By the time the project above was ready and rolling, the pandemic shut down virtually all attempts at travel, non-human data collection, face-to-face meetings at three conferences to further it, and almost all manner of moving forward. Therefore, this leave request has one purpose to advance a worthwhile research project stopped by a disruption in the social order while at the same time, taking advantage of that situation to study the phenomenon further. In fact, the pandemic's arrival exacerbates feelings of low self-esteem [7, 8] making the project both more current and more needed than before. Moreover, these studies also suggest a disproportionate impact falling on the already vulnerable in socioeconomic status, minority ethnicity, and persons with predispositions to mental illness and addiction. This list defect comprises a large portion of the Appalachian region Marshall serves. The confluence of a national emergency and the emotional trauma it generates with a research project on the self-help venues proffered as remedy ... would be serendipitous were it not both tragic and unwanted. In a long television career, the researcher was frequently asked, "How can you cover such tragedy (fill in with all manner of horrors)?" The answer then is appropriate now for those who question how a researcher can capitalize on the nightmare of COVID 19. Social science often advances most when it studies human activity at its worst, that is, at its most visceral and raw. It is not opportunism, but is, instead, an attempt to "un-mask" the true "villains," the self-help icons who profit from human misery. Much as defense contractor profits soar in times of unrest, so, too, do the profits of the self-help promoters in times of despair. A deeper tragedy exists in that (as this project will attempt to explicate) much of the material these seemingly unsavory characters peddle was once, and even now still is, free. To commodify suffering should be abhorrent, but in an age in which the powerful create angst and weaponize it, self-worth, self-esteem, and even a sense of place are in mortal peril across the spectrum. As such, vulnerability is ripe for critical research. The reformed Nazi clerical secretary turned scholar, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, said the louder a minority opinion gets, the more likely a person with an opposing view is to stay quiet. She called it The

Spiral of Silence, and its relationship to the tumultuous climate bears mentioning as a foundation for the current study. People who are already disaffected, dispatched, and generally "lost" are not encouraged in this time of rising intransigence and violence. They are likely to bury their perceived weaknesses further as they consume a daily diet of polarization, isolation, simmering discontent, and rising, strident nationalism. In short, it is never a good time to need self-help, but now could be among the worst.

Methodology

Text deconstruction informed by Derrida, Saussure, and Hall French philosopher Jacques Derrida is credited with popularizing the term "deconstruction" to mean critiquing not only literary text but also institutions and the superstructure propping them up. Its purpose is to distill authentic meaning from the superficial. As self-help is the focus of the study, half a dozen best-selling self-help books will be perused and coded for their content. The researcher will code said content synchronically rather than diachronically. Linguist Ferdinand Saussure suggested words and their meanings could only be correctly understood if currency, context, social construction, and nuance are accorded to the attempt. This, he calls interpretation synchronically, as opposed to relying on historical context alone to assess the meaning of a word---diachronically. Slavery, for example, if interpreted historically, results in the retort, "Why are people complaining about slavery? It ended 150 odd years ago!" Yet, a diachronic interpretation is insufficient here. Modern slavery is exposed in current practice—most visibly in the mass incarceration of people of color. This unapologetic racism is manifest in its disproportionate representation both in crime and percentage of the general population. Evidence of hegemony includes the endorsement by the government of for-profit imprisonment, which is a perversion of justice at the most fundamental level. Other synchronic evaluations could include disparate mortgage interest rates, gentrification, even a newly discovered phenom, that people of color are much more likely to be dropped in their Uber or Lyft ride requests. Interpreted this way, slavery is contextualized rather than addressed through its past meaning. Next up is Stuart Hall. Vocabulary is critical to an understanding of critical theory. Hall suggested the way a message is "read" by its audience is instructive in either promoting the subterfuge or taking action against it. The preferred read means success for the message creator. For example, a police presence in every news clip of every protest translates that protest is an unacceptable practice worthy of law enforcement when, in fact, the country itself was founded on protest. A negotiated read means an audience sees authorial intent but has experience with a different outcome. Finally, the oppositional read means seeing text for what it is an organ of power exercised in service to hegemony. In this read, Hall calls us "occasional Marxists." It is, in effect, an "un-masking" of the plot and a call to action at the same time. As a baseline, several exemplars of the "lost" originals of self-help will be comparatively analyzed. An example would be Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance or The Dharma, both readily available and free at any public library. Even the poem Desiderata beckons us to "go placidly amid the noise and haste," and its advice is available 24/7, a mouse click away. Such comparisons will prove instructive in responding to the research questions.

Expectations/Outcomes and Timeline

As stated, this project will include the reading and content analysis of such self-help gurus as Tony Robbins, Deepak Chopra, Laura Schlessinger, and others. Consistent with the critical tradition, the "coding" will articulate/foreground power in its role as creator of "false consciousness" enforced via ISAs. Self-help, it will be argued, is another head of that Hydra. Many popular culture media portrayals already suggest the icons of wellness are merely designer-clad con artists. Yet, this revelation has done little to alter the trajectory. Further deconstruction, aided by Derrida, Saussure, Hall, and Baudrillard, is needed to create additional enlightenment. And this project, standing on the shoulders of the giants, will further that emancipative agenda. Continuing the respected history of research Marshall has long established and been lauded for, it is the researcher's goal to further that scholarly agenda in the critical tradition. It is especially salient that this research designed to deconstruct messaging-- comes at a time when the United States government itself is engaged in an all-out war via Twitter for the hearts and minds of its constituency. In short, what the country needs desperately is better equipage to perceive messages for their manipulative intent at the very time when manipulative intent is brazen and unabashed. Additionally, when viewed in the context of the pandemic, this research takes on new and nuanced meaning, which could aid in understanding the phenomenon better [9-14].

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Conflicts of Interest

Author has no conflict of interest.

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