Self-Help, Inc.

Makeover Culture in American Life

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All You Can Be, or Some Conclusions

[Contemporary seekers of authenticity often lack any but the vaguest ethical or religious commitments. Their obsession with "meaning" masks its absence from any frame of reference outside the self. . . . The effort to re-create a coherent sense of selfhood seems fated to frustration. Every failure inaugurates a new psychic quest, until the seeker is embroiled in an interminable series of self-explorations. . . . [T]he vision of a self in endless development is perfectly attuned to an economy based on pointless growth and ceaseless destruction.

—T. J. Jackson Lears

The demand that one "be all one can be" is double-edged. On the one hand, if one imagines oneself living in a democracy where every person's self-development will benefit them individually as well as society as a whole, then "being all one can be" is a social responsibility and privilege for each and all. On the other hand, if one imagines oneself living in a market-driven capitalism rapidly careening toward the annihilation of the planet, then "being all one can be" is little more than another advertising slogan encouraging one to exploit the closest natural resource, in this case, one's self. The capitalist demand is that one "be all one can be": human capital, as with any other natural resource, is to be developed and exploited. In such a context, the self is inevitably belabored. The democratic demand—and promise—is that one will get to "be all one can be": a human being reaching his or her greatest potential in association with others. As it happens, we live in a world that can be characterized by either of these representations—one as an ideal that is only occasionally realized and the other as an unfortunate reality all too readily available. Yet abandoning the notion of individual self-determination that is at the center of self-help culture at exactly the moment
that this ideal is extended to those who have been historically excluded from the privileges of citizenship and the possibilities of self-invention seems a troubling proposal. On the other hand, embracing the prior models of self-making seems a faulty course if one is to allow for the possibility of self-making that embraces autonomy and connection, individual freedom and an abiding sense of community.

Tired Models of the Self

Prior, tired models of the self have fostered the belabored self. These ideas of self-making—ideals inherited from our Enlightenment philosophical traditions—populate the literatures of self-improvement culture. Whether driven by stark economic motives, as is the Number One of Looking Out for Number One, or operating according to a set of abstract moral principles, as do Stephen Covey’s “highly effective people,” this self-mastering self is an ideal that was revived by Enlightenment gentlemen philosophers who’d taken up where Greek philosophers had left off. These rational-economic and rational-ethical versions of the self included the desire for self-mastery, the suppression of the bodily, the denial of the importance of the caring labor of others, and, at least in the case of the Homo economicus, the privileging of the individual over the collective. As an alternative to these two rational versions of the self, the late nineteenth century also offered two aesthetic alternatives: a version of the self that is best exemplified by the mystical, transcendental vision of the poet Walt Whitman and the more bracing aestheticism of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The transcendental version of the self neither mastered itself nor sought control over anything but instead operated in tune with a higher Source or Power, Nature standing in for God. Operating outside boundaries, rejecting categories, and denouncing distinctions, this Romantic version of the self (and post-Romantic in the case of Nietzsche) privileged the creative potential in each individual and provided an alternative to the rational approach.

While these versions of the self are not new, what is new, as I noted at the outset, is that the ideal of self-fulfillment and self-mastery has been extended more broadly. In that process, two things have occurred. First, within the cultures of self-improvement, values from the competitive world of the marketplace have been transplanted to the personal world of intimate life, and vice versa. Second, and perhaps more important, the serious flaws in

the notions of a self-mastering and self-creating self have grown more apparent. The first development—the hybridization of personal and commercial values—was eminently evident in the texts of self-improvement culture. A calculating rationality was imported into the private sphere under the aegis of recovery from “codependency.” And, reciprocally, the full-scale entry of women into the labor force (coupled with the historical coding of the aesthetic as “feminine”) fostered a newly invigorated aesthetic orientation in both intimate and workplace domains. In the intimate domain of personal life, the ideal of life as work of art was increasingly offered as a source of solace for individuals whose life courses were unpredictable, while in the workplace the artist has come to serve as a new workforce ideal.

The second development—that the idea of a self-mastering self cannot be sustained when it is extended to everyone—is less apparent in the context of the literatures of self-improvement. In scholarly circles, this has appeared as what one hears called “the crisis of the liberal subject” or “the death of the subject.” For example, Michel Foucault’s famous and often-quoted assertion that the self will fade like a face drawn in the sand offers an image of selfhood as an ephemeral phantom borne of our particular historical epoch. But in the literatures of self-improvement, one does not read of a crisis of the subject. In this literature, proclamations of the death of the subject, as with the death of God, seem to be either premature or, as the joke goes, greatly exaggerated. Instead, in this milieu, that crisis of subjecthood is not articulated but enacted—demonstrated in ever expanding self-help book sales and, presumably, enacted in the lives of subjects who find that it is difficult or impossible to manage mastery of themselves and their life courses in the face of volatile social and economic forces. For these individuals, the self is belabored: caught in a cycle of seeking individual solutions to problems that are social, economic, and political in origin.

In the mid-1980s “women who loved too much” were urged to be “co-dependent no more.” Two decades and thousands of self-help books later, a rather different directive is needed. Rather than renouncing or denying our interdependence, perhaps it has come to the point where anxious readers of self-help literature need to refuse to participate in futile efforts at individual self-improvement and instead focus collectively on eliminating the vast social and economic inequities that have rendered us such a ready market for this literature. In short, we need to become belabored no more. But as this is not a standard lifestyle makeover project, it cannot be
undertaken by individuals acting in isolation. Rather, it calls for newer models of the self and new social movements.

The first of these requirements is a model of the self that is fully embodied, relational, and emotional, that imagines the self as part of a constellation of relationships in which contributing to the advancement of others is seen as necessary and inseparable from contributing to one’s own advancement. The second and related necessity would be the development of social movements committed to making the possibility of this kind of interdependent self-development available to each and all. Although these requisites are interconnected, I want to consider them each in turn.

Newer Models of the Self: Maternal and Internal Multitudes

In developing newer models of the self to replace the inadequate prior representations, a good place to start would be to consider the lives of those who have been traditionally un- or underrepresented in the previous representations: the various Maria Coeys whose lives are rendered unmanageable by our culture’s blindness to the amount of caring labor required to reproduce ourselves as individuals, communities, and a species. Some feminist theorists and philosophers have suggested that motherhood offers an improved metaphor or model for a new vision of self-making.5 One engages in the “making” of others and the making of one’s self, neither to the exclusion of the other, and both irrevocably intertwined. In the act of fostering another, one creates not one life but two. Metaphorically it is perhaps not overreaching to observe that the word “mother” has “other” contained within it. While such a metaphor risks the possibility of falling into a kind of biological essentialism with all its clichés (e.g., the pure and selfless mother),5 this pitfall can be avoided if one recalls that mother is both noun and verb, and that the verb form is available to anyone, regardless of his or her gender or reproductive history.7 Mothering, not mother or motherhood, is the model.

The point is not to idealize mothers—sentimental literatures and popular culture of the last two centuries have done a thorough job of that. Rather, the point is to find a central role for the nurturance of others in the models of the self and then generate a multiplicity of caring selves. Although the literatures of self-improvement occasionally rely on metaphors of mothering (as in caring for one’s “inner child”), this inward turn of mothering, focused back on the individual self, saps the mothering metaphor of its ethical and political potential. Curiously, Nietzsche, a philosopher not known for his high regard for women, proposed the image of mothering as the model for a new ethics: “Let yourself be in your deeds as a mother is in her child, let that be your word concerning virtue.”8 The somewhat cryptic imperative is consistent with his vision of selves within selves: “not one immortal soul, but many mortal souls.”9 Like Walt Whitman, who proclaimed: “I am large . . . I contain multitudes,” 10 Nietzsche’s assemblage of mortal souls makes multiple identifications and allegiances the model. His version of the self, supported by the artificial intelligence work of theorists such as Marvin Minsky, suggests that the individual be understood as a constellation of agendas or “agents” that compete for one’s resources.11 Internal conflict, rather than the “congruence” urged by Anthony Robbins, is recognized as necessary and inevitable in developing a multifaceted self. Governing the self is seen as a process of both contestation and coalition building, much as contemporary political efforts call for a politics of coalitions—the possibility of community without the requirement of a false or forced unity or oneness.

Related and interdependent models of the self have started to enter the self-help literature: Stephen Covey’s “highly effective person” is one such model. However, the interdependence Covey advocates is limited to particular social roles and, as such, is “scripted” or formulated out of normative expectations: what one ought to do in one’s role as spouse or parent, employee or manager, student or teacher. Beyond that, the self that Covey proposes is one that privileges reason and self-control. Covey’s model is that of a rational ethical subject guided by fixed universal principles rather than the particulars of specific contexts or the needs of his internal coalition of agents. His emphasis on a rational self that “manages” a variety of roles significantly overestimates the role of reason and willpower while underestimating the irrational or “bio-logical.”12 This planning, managing, and calculating version of the self is, by Covey’s own admission, unable to accommodate the messy realities of mothering. Perhaps most important, what is missing in Covey’s model is any acknowledgement of the actually existing inequitable distribution of resources and power, any concern about how the gendered division of labor in family life might lead to limited opportunities for women, as well as any acknowledgement that where there is an inequitable distribution of power, resources, and opportunities, that conflict is not only likely, but perhaps inevitable, if not desirable.
Covey's conflict-averse cosmology requires a focus on the internalized versions of the external world. Social relations are reduced to roles, and conflicts are internal—between the roles one fulfills rather than with actually existing others in the world. This reduction of conflict is tracked by the sociologist Irene Taviss Thomson, who undertook a content analysis of self-improvement literature from the 1920s through the 1990s. Taviss Thomson argues that the literature of self-improvement demonstrates that Americans have already moved away from a model of the lone individual in conflict with society to a newer model of a relational self that forms and reconfirms itself within small voluntary groups. Taviss Thomson understands this development as the end of the conflict paradigm—the end of the notion of the individual pitted against an overarching “society.” And if individuals had only to live within small self-constituted communities, her argument would appear incontrovertible. The hitch is that while individuals are clearly constituting themselves in small self-created communities of interest—Twelve-Step groups, reading groups, and groups along the lines of what Gloria Steinem proposed and the sociologist Robert Wuthnow documents—they continue to have involuntary relationships with a whole group of institutions that are neither voluntary nor self-constructed. For example, legislative and judicial institutions limit the use of controlled substances, and increasingly regulate even traditionally accepted drugs such as tobacco; the taxes that support wars one opposes are not optional; and so on. Conflict will inevitably continue, not only between individuals and larger institutional structures but also between the self-constituted groups and established institutional forces. In such a setting, “becoming oneself” or “being all one can be” could potentially challenge existing power structures.

Newer Versions of Selves, Newer Social Movements

Cultivating groups in which individuals might become themselves—multiple, complex, and interrelated selves—as well as insisting on a world in which they can be themselves would seem to be the work of progressive social movements. If one imagines self-help culture not only as means of social control but also as a symptom of social unrest that has not found a political context, then, given the exponential growth of self-help reading, there is no shortage of unrest or dissatisfaction. Understood in these terms, self-help culture could potentially offer an enormous opportunity for cultivating social change. Indeed, some would argue that the rise of the Twelve-Step groups constitutes one of the most significant American social movements of the late twentieth century. Tapping into this vast reserve of discontent has been, some suggest, one of the secrets of the conservative rise to power in the late twentieth century. For those who might wish for a more progressive, even radical, political agenda, mobilizing this dissatisfaction would surely be an important undertaking. Toward such an end, a number of factors would be of vital importance.

Perhaps the most important shift that would be required would be a change in the ways in which we understand the self, which has already been considered at some length. Individuals who have been urged to imagine themselves as self-directing would need to come to understand the fundamental flaws in this ideal. Not only does this notion of the self oversate the individual capacity for willed actions but, as I’ve shown, this characterization relies on the unacknowledged, and typically un- or undercompensated, labor of others. Those who have been exhorted to become the CEOs of Me, Inc., would come to acknowledge the underside of their ideal—a belabored self demanding boundless effort from one’s self and from those around one. Individuals would understand themselves and each other not as the failed CEOs of Me, Inc., but rather as disenfranchised members of a group of people who have been “liberated” from the possibility of stable jobs and careers (that is, from stable sources of a livelihood) and deprived of a social safety net, much as serfs and peasants were once freed from their indenture to lords and deprived of the lands on which their livelihoods depended.

While this shift of consciousness would be necessary, it is also insufficient, as there are notable limits to developing a politics out of a sense of victimization. The difficulty of operating from a politics of “victimhood” is at least threefold. First, there is the tendency of this formation to reinscribe and perpetuate precisely the categories it is meant to eliminate. For example, if disability activists achieved genuine success at full access and opportunities, the category of “disability” would fade into something akin to differences of ability to which everyone is subject. “Reasonable accommodations” for differences in learning styles, or mobility, or sensory capacities would no longer be exceptional demands, they would be commonplace. If antiracist politics were to succeed, then these completely ideological categories built on skin tones and facial features would likewise fade, and racial categorization would vanish. And so on with any category of difference. Second, a politics of victimization requires good guys and bad guys, and
historically it has been all too easy for one exploited group to imagine another exploited group as its oppressor. Anti-immigrant sentiments are one popular version of this tendency, as are claims that women and other formerly excluded groups in the labor force have “taken” the good jobs once reserved for able-bodied white men. While there may indeed be good guys and bad guys, correctly identifying those who are genuinely operating against one’s interests can be a risky undertaking. Finally, unless one can imagine the possibilities of redressing one’s grievances, feeling that one is a victim simply feels bad. Individuals who feel they have some control over their lives—what psychologists call “self-efficacy”—are more likely to exercise whatever control they may have, as well as to join with others to change the conditions of their lives.21

Self-improvement culture, as it actually exists, derails the opportunities for individuals to understand injuries or grievances as part of systematic social problems. In this sense, it offers a worldview that is precisely the inverse of the “sociological imagination” that C. Wright Mills proposed.22 The literatures and practices of self-improvement culture do this in two ways: first, in self-improvement literature, victims are anathema, and second, when victimization occurs, it is almost exclusively located in the past, in the lost world of childhood, where the family, imagined as isolated from society as a whole, is named as the cause of the violence or injustice. Apart from the juridical arena of civil court, where victims can be channeled into the manageable and profitable category of plaintiffs, and the national arena of combat casualties and their bereaved families, where the loss of loved ones can be transmuted into patriotism, victims are notoriously loathed. Viewers of talk show television are told—by, for example, Dr. Philip McGraw on the Oprah Winfrey Show—that “there are no victims, only volunteers.”25 If one “volunteered” to be abused, then there is really no one to blame but oneself. Thus the usual political strategy of organizing individuals around their grievances is short-circuited, and culpability is turned back on the self. Problems and grievances are cast as personal “challenges” that the individual must strive to overcome. Second, in the culture of recovery, victimization exists, but only in the past, where it cannot be remedied. The sources of one’s problems, in this milieu, occurred only in childhood; thus no political action in the present is possible. The injured party is not an adult who may have equal measures of agency and vulnerability but rather is located in the arena of lost childhood, where vulnerability and dependence are still accepted conditions.24 What the literatures of self-improvement do offer is the promise of power, however limited in scope and mistakenly located it may be in isolated individual action. Traditional political organizing, for example, the recruitment strategies of labor organizers, builds on a sense of aggrievement and then moves the aggrieved individual to locate his or her power in the group, forging a sense of collective identity that is not wholly a function of victimization but that takes victimization as its starting point.25

Beyond the challenges associated with forming individual and collective identities within the framework of political grievances—beyond this politics of recognition—what is also necessary is a commitment to the equitable distribution of wealth and resources.26 Demands for recognition without a parallel demand for economic justice is at the heart of why the self is belabored. The demand for individual self-development and realization without the possibility of economic security can never be more than an ideological carrot or a bludgeon. For those who have some measure of middle-class access to resources, however tenuous this access may be during the ebbs and flows of the economy, the ideal of self-fulfillment serves as an enticement. And for those who do not, particularly for those recently “liberated” from public assistance, the ideal gives way to a punishing rhetoric of individual self-reliance. Either way, in the absence of a social safety net and in the face of profound economic injustice, any discussion of self-actualization is rendered absurd. Even the psychologist Abraham Maslow, who popularized this term, would consider the pursuit of self-actualization without some measure of economic security to be a tenuous, if not impossible, undertaking. The demand for an equitable distribution of resources would be central to any politics emerging from the fatigue of the belabored self. A social safety net with a guaranteed minimum living allowance would be a necessary component of a politics of self-realization. Without forced labor—without the requirement that one scurry about to pursue a livelihood like the desperate rodents of Who Moved My Cheese?—work might be genuinely recast as an expression of identity and self-fulfillment, and the self would lose its belabored quality.

For the most part, self-improvement culture continues to operate on a belief that wealth is a sign of industry, intelligence, competence, or attunement with the universe. Poverty, bred of economic injustice, remains a marker of laziness, stupidity, immorality, or some sort of cosmic dissonance. As with much of American culture that finds its roots in Christian traditions, self-help culture suggests that inequitable distributions of wealth ought to be remedied through charity rather than through any process of distributive
justice. Charitable foundations, rather than a progressive tax code or the elimination of untaxed wealth transfers through inheritance, are offered as the solution to the social problem of economic inequity. Even the most visible social justice movements of the late twentieth century have tended to eschew struggles over the distribution of goods and resources, focusing instead on issues that involve symbolic or representational issues (sexist or racist representations, for example). More recently, with the antiglobalization movement that burst onto the public landscape in Seattle in 1999, this may be changing. Fostering a politics of economic justice will require that we remember a crucial axiom: any politics of equitable distribution necessarily includes a politics of identity, insofar as particular identities are denied equitable access to material and symbolic resources. However, the obverse does not hold true: a politics of identity does not necessarily encompass a commitment to economic justice. One can, for example, be concerned about equal rights for women without being concerned about economic justice for women of all backgrounds. However, if one is committed to economic equality for all people, one is necessarily concerned with the impact that an array of categorical distinctions—for example, "woman" and racial and ethnic categories such as "African American" or "Latino"—have had on women’s earning power and access to other economic resources. Or, to use a more contemporary example, the desire of same-sex couples to gain access to the institution of marriage is at once a question of identity or recognition, specifically the public recognition of one’s choice of a life partner, and of material concerns or redistribution of resources, in that an unmarried partner is routinely denied access to the healthcare and pension plans of his or her employed partner. When one conceives of the problem solely in terms of recognition—in terms of sexual identity—one misses the covalent and coalition-building concern for equitable access to healthcare and to secure retirement.

Common Vulnerabilities, Mutual Recognitions

A politics that encompassed a commitment to redistribution would require mutual, reciprocal recognition. While one demands recognition for one’s self and the members of groups with which one is aligned, one must necessarily be willing to offer recognition to others. One way to foster this mutual recognition would be to focus not on one’s differences but rather on the common vulnerabilities that we experience as embodied, corporeal creatures. These vulnerabilities are elided and eliminated in the rhetoric of self-help culture with its can-do, bootstrapping proposals. Mind is supposed to trump body at every juncture. Recognition of our own and each other’s repressed corporeal vulnerabilities suggests an immediate basis for locating common ground. Rather than rising above the challenges of physical limitation through some sort of mind-power, as does the Maudlin Exemplar identified earlier in inspirational self-help literature, we might attend to the fragility of embodied existence. Such attention ought to foster a culture of care and mutual interdependence. Although you may not be mobility-impaired today, you or someone you love may be tomorrow; thus the "disabled self" is one that you carry within you as a real, even likely, possibility. Disability rights, though perhaps not an immediate concern to you as a discrete, able-bodied person, would necessarily be a concern.

Another way to cultivate mutual recognition is to foster public spaces for discussion and dialogue. The much-lamented vanishing of a public sphere may need to be understood somewhat differently as the distinctions between public and private, and commercial and intimate life, are eroded. Indeed, it may need to be reimagined not as a disappearing act but rather as a redistribution of public spaces to multiple constituencies. Rather than one public sphere, political organizing may be most fruitful in multiple and overlapping spheres. The unstable and often confusing dichotomy of public and private, which was traditionally understood as paired spaces of citizenship (public) and commerce (private), respectively, would need to be reforged to encompass the radical ways in which commerce has entered into intimate life (as in the emergence of concepts such as codependency and the financialization of daily life) and the ways in which intimate life has become part of the public discourse (talk show confessions being only one of many examples). An effective politics in the current context would necessarily embrace the demise of the public-private split for all of its possibilities, rather than mourning its passing. For example, rather than attempting to maintain the family or intimate sphere as a retreat from the demands of the market, one might instead "take parenting public" and argue that the nonmarket values formerly confined to the intimate sphere (or otherwise articulated only in religious contexts) must be upheld in every arena of life. One might argue that the caring work provided by stay-at-home parents be adequately compensated through a modified tax structure or by other adjustments.
Self-improvement culture, particularly the culture of recovery based in the Alcohols Anonymous tradition, has contributed much in the formation of small groups where dialogue is possible. The difficulty with these groups is that the political possibilities are radically short-circuited by several factors: (1) the anonymous groups have a strong commitment to remaining apolitical and focused solely on individual recovery; (2) the very requirement of anonymity cuts off the individual from any of his or her other identities; and (3) modes of dialogue are necessarily short-circuited by the speech guidelines set down by the Twelve-Step "Traditions." The sociologist Anthony Giddens suggested that these groups served as a sign of the "transformation of intimacy" and a "democratization of the private sphere." And in broad strokes, that may indeed be correct. But in the details, in the fine-tuning, the structures of these groups have largely mitigated against progressive social change. Alcohols Anonymous has an inviolable tradition of remaining apolitical, while the requirement of anonymity ensures that the individual separates his or her "addict" identity from his or her other social roles. Inside the groups themselves, speech rules that require individuals to refrain from responding to other members' comments short-circuit dialogue and maintain a series of related monologues strung together by the medical metaphor of addiction and the Protestant tradition of testimony.

On the other hand, one of the virtues of these groups is that they have fostered a notion of individual self-mastery or self-control as limited. The premise of these groups is that one is powerless over the particular "addiction" being battled. In other words, the self that operates in the Twelve-Step framework is not a fully rational agentic self but rather a self that is subject to irrational behaviors, subject to "temptations," subsumed under the general medicalized category of "addictions." The self proposed in these groups is not all-powerful but rather admits that there is a power (or powers) greater than the self that shape(s) the individual's life. Individuals are encouraged to develop their own notion of a higher power, typically understood as unitary and benevolent, encouraging a traditional monotheistic understanding. However, if the individual were asked to consider that there are multiple, and not necessarily beneficent, powers greater than the self shaping his or her life—for example, an out-of-control economic market or the erratic weather patterns borne of global warming—then there could be a space for political discourse. This admission of powerlessness offers the paradoxical point from which to gather new sources of power—from the group and from a particular set of ideals or values. In the case of AA, the value is sobriety, but for groups adopting this model, other values might prevail.

Citizen-Artists as Agents of Social Change?

Along with new spaces of dialogue, what will also be needed are new ways of envisioning the world: ways of making over culture rather than remaining subject to makeover culture. For new visions of the world, our culture has often turned to various avant-garde artists and poets. The political philosopher Richard Rorty borrows the literary critic Harold Bloom's ideal of the "strong poet" as the most effective agent of social transformation. In this model, the artist is no longer the ideal model for the new knowledge-labor economy, nor is she simply composing a life—rather, the "strong poet" has the power to transform culture and society through his own self-creation or self-transformation via new metaphorical constructs. The concept of the "strong poet" suggests that cultural vanguards are the last best hope for political transformation. The strong poet's goal is to overcome the given world, the inherited world, and, in Bloom's words, "give birth to one's self." Leaving aside for the moment this metaphorical usurpation of maternal powers—this powerful image of mothering turned back on the self—there are obvious limits to the virtue of the new, particularly when it is cast as the work of lone individuals. In an effort to avoid these problems, Rorty proposes a partition of private and public, a continuing separation of spheres. In the former, the pursuit of private self-creation and self-fulfillment is made possible, limited only by a liberal public sphere where only cruelty and intolerance are not allowed. The trouble with Rorty's private-public partition is that it imagines self-creation as an individual's private project rather than a social endeavor. Rorty imagines a private self-construction, an individual "becoming what one is," rather than a community-based dialogue that moves our understandings of social possibilities forward. But self-realization is seldom a private endeavor, particularly when the individual who is attempting to realize herself bumps up against limiting normative expectations. It was not individual self-creation in isolation but self-invention in the context of consciousness-raising groups that made the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s a social movement to be reckoned with. Feminist groups were among the first to recognize that personal change was catalyzed
by group participation, while group participation could also forge larger social and political agendas. That these groups were able to wed a culture of collective self-help with political actions offered a model for other social movements.39

The ideal of political change through imaginative transformation—the vision of the artist as an agent of social change—must be joined to a culture of collective dialogue to forge effective political transformation. “Cultural citizenship,” to use the term offered by the cultural theorist Toby Miller, recuperates citizenship from the traditional sphere of electoral politics and transports it to the arena of the representational, suggesting that citizenship operating in multiple arenas offers the best possibilities for fostering social and political change. The effective cultural citizen, in this model, joins together with others to articulate not their similarities and unity but rather their differences from normative social categories. By locating and articulating these spaces of disjunction—of the differences between one’s own experience and the predictable, stereotypical categories of borrowed thought, by operating against the cultural grain—the cultural citizen engages in a kind of autoinvention that challenges existing norms and modalities, generating new and emancipatory possibilities for self-construction.40 Such challenges to normative categories, when they occur in spaces of public dialogue, constitute an engaged cultural citizenship.41

Ironically, self-help culture, particularly Twelve-Step culture, has provided some of our most robust new language: recovery, dysfunctional families, and, of course, codependency are all concepts that emerge from this vital, if depoliticized, context. The difficulty with these formulations is that they do not operate out of a disjunction with cultural norms but rather are hybridizations of religious traditions of testimony and medical discourse. These formulations necessarily produce some measure of social transformation, but in the process of hybridization rather than disjunction, the tendency is for their formulations to maintain, rather than disrupt, the status quo. The literatures of self-improvement are, as I have demonstrated throughout this consideration, in the main, un inventive, liberally appropriating from prior inspirational literature. The developments we’ve seen have been not so much new inventions but expansions and adaptations.42 The actually existing culture of self-improvement, while its prevalence fairly shouts the need for progressive social movements, does not yet offer much possibility for progressive social change. What would be required to tap into the unrest in self-improvement culture would be a politics committed to economic justice (redistribution) as well as to mutual recognition.43 Such a politics would be forged in public dialogue, where both imagination and dialogue would formulate new ways of thinking, acting, and behaving.44

What Activists Might Learn from Self-Help Culture

Finally, a radical or progressive agenda committed to relief for belabored Americans would ask why the growth of self-improvement groups and culture has far outpaced the growth of either progressive or radical political movements throughout the last part of the twentieth century. Why have people embraced self-help groups—what do they get there that they don’t get in political organizations? Anyone who has ever worked in an alternative political context can answer this question. There are long hours and low pay—pay that is often lower than one would find in the most menial of jobs. Often there is no pay at all. Individuals without access to independent financial resources are asked to choose between economic security for themselves and their families and their commitment to the group’s cause. Frequently one finds precisely the hierarchical and authoritarian power structures one rejects in the dominant culture, complete with a recapitulation of privileges dispensed along race, gender, class, and heterosexist categories glossed over in a rhetoric of equality. Often there is a sense that any concern with individual personal well-being is simply self-indulgence. Any skilled political organizer knows that when people are asked to choose between their own well-being and a political cause, they will necessarily choose themselves.45 When political organizations fail to meet personal needs—economic, social, and emotional—individuals will drop out. Self-help groups, on the contrary, suggest that they will do nothing but meet the individual’s needs for safety and well-being, for community and connection, and for hope about the future.

There is reason to be optimistic that political organizers have already begun to learn these lessons. Analysts of recent social movements observe that traditional, or older, social movements were focused primarily on the economic interests of particular groups of working people. In contrast, what are called “new social movements” have focused primarily on issues of identity. But newer, more effective social movements will necessarily focus on both. Operating in a realm where public and private domains are no longer even remotely distinct, individuals in these movements require that their
political organizations not simply function as a means to an end but rather operate as a manifestation of the principles they espouse—as a model form of collective action. Absent a public/private divide, living differently and changing society are seen as complementary. Working for an abstract and distant goal or principle at the expense of the present is no longer a viable option. Some social movement theorists, for example Barbara Epstein and Verta A. Taylor, observe that feminist modes of organizing, despite their middle-class and white origins (and possible obliviousness to issues of economic and racial injustice), offered a model for taking the personal into the political arena. Gloria Steinem’s image of revolution from within, though perhaps overstated and somewhat mired in the language of recovery, offered a model where individual needs would be consistent with, rather than contradictory to, a progressive or radical social agenda. The personal-political politics of direct action groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) demonstrate the power of these personal-political formations when both a politics of recognition and redistribution are in play. Committed not only to fostering a powerful image of people with HIV-infection but also to the equitable distribution of resources (medical research funds, pharmaceutical products), ACT UP served (and continues to serve) as a model for direct-action anti-globalization efforts, as well as a host of other issues. Similarly, the geographically and hierarchically dispersed political organizing that marked the breakout campaign mounted by Howard Dean for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination or the flourishing recent online political action groups such as MoveOn.org suggests that the decentralizing effects of the internet may help foster a new politics across what was once a public/private divide. The most successful newer political movements will increasingly capitalize on the erosion of the partition between public and private needs, ensuring that their organizations serve the needs of their constituents in the present as well as in the long term.

An effective mobilization of the millions of Americans who find they must constantly upgrade themselves simply to hold their ground in an increasingly competitive economy would have as its agenda a politics of recognition wedded to a politics of economic justice. The American myth of equal opportunity for self-development would need to be rendered plausible with a politics of economic justice. Accomplishing this will be no mean feat, and will call on multiple resources and dimensions, including: (1) sustaining a model of the self that is relational and multiple; (2) cultivating the capacity to move from aggrievement to a collective identity and power; (3) fostering of new spaces for public dialogue and mutual recognition; (4) promoting imagination—not only political imagination but social and sociological imagination as well; and (5) assessing and embracing what the cultures of political organizing can learn from the cultures of self-improvement. Tapping into the discontent that the literatures of self-improvement evidence may be the work of the radical and progressive movements of the coming decades.

The questions asked at the outset—whether one could observe changes in the American ethos around self and work roughly corresponding to the emergence of new postindustrial or knowledge-based economic structures—seem at least provisionally answered. Faced with a new economic climate of increased competition between individuals for fewer and less stable employment opportunities, a literature of self-improvement has emerged that counsels self-fulfillment and self-improvement as an antidote to economic uncertainty. On the whole, this literature recycles images from prior self-improvement and inspirational literatures. However, the large-scale entry of women into the paid labor force encouraged a new emphasis on the metaphor of life as a work of art, while changing work conditions suggest that the artist may be the emerging model for the postindustrial, contingent labor force. Although these emerging tropes—the metaphor of life as work of art, and the model of artists as ideal workers—suggest a Romantic, antimodernist refusal of the domination of market forces, paradoxically they contribute to the expansion of a culture of work without end. Cast in the upbeat literature of self-improvement as “creators of their own work of art” or as the “chief executive officers” of their own enterprises, the reality for most readers of self-improvement literature is less one of creative adventure and entrepreneurial enthusiasm than of constant vigilance against individual obsolescence and expendability. One might hope that inside every person imagining himself or herself the creator of his or her own life-artworks—inside every CEO of Me, Inc.—is a belabored self finally weary and fed up enough to throw off the fantasy of self-sufficiency and to demand instead, sufficiency for each and all. In such a world, we might find that, in the place of endless struggles for private self-improvement couched in a language of entrepreneurial uplift, a nearly forgotten imperative emerges: the demand for a world in which the free development of each is understood as the condition for the free development of all.