



## Self-optimization and self-help: mediating subject formations in twentieth-century mass cultures

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Accepted: 15 August 2023 / Published online: 4 September 2023  
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In the discourses of interwar mass cultures in the United States—consumer products, the movies, dance performances and related entertainment events, magazine publications and pulps, cheap book series, newspapers, psychological advice literature, and call-in radio shows—ideologies of self-optimization and self-help had an overwhelming presence and influence. Practices of self-help, mushrooming in the wake of the publication of manuals by Samuel Smiles, Wallace Wattles or Ralph Waldo Trine, represent individual strategies of adjustment to a modern world characterized by acceleration, increasing mobility, urbanization, professionalization, commodification, and individualization. Although the concept of self-help is older than the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it gained immensely in usage and popularity during the Progressive Era (1896–1917) and into the interwar period.

Rather than simply being fashionable rhetoric, self-help discourses can be defined as rule-governed knowledge formations pertaining to questions of education, identity, and subjectivity, but also expectations about the ideal moral citizen. Obviously, they have a long legacy, ultimately reaching back to Puritan salvation manuals and enlightenment almanacs such as Ben Franklin’s with their very own specific normativities. What makes them so interesting in their emphasis on values and behavioural patterns is that they are almost ideal instances of governmentality, bringing together technologies of power and technologies of the self (Foucault 1988, pp. 18–19)—in other words defining and shaping the individual as well as the community.

Self-help discourses are intricately linked to African American programs of uplift theorized and popularized by leaders such as Booker T. Washington or W.E.B. Du Bois. Though values such as thrift, personal amassment of wealth, and moral irreproachability are common to both concepts, uplift ideology’s focus on racial solidarity turned its gaze more explicitly on both the person and the surrounding structures in society. According to Kevin Gaines, uplift ideology in Black communities of the interwar era served not only to motivate and guide individual behaviour, but to coalesce and propagate ideas about the interconnectedness of race with class, education,

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and opportunity (1996, p. 2). Thus uplift can be seen as an aspirational vision, a resistance to the racist structure of society and an “argument for black humanity” (1996, p. 4). White self-help discourses, as the papers in this collection will show, are far more individualistic in orientation. An in-depth exploration of the influences, borrowings and cross-fertilizations between white self-help discourses and African American uplift and their implications for white, respectively, Black subjectivities would be well worthwhile.

Self-Help has explicitly or implicitly been at the heart of discussions about the production and transformation of subjectivities in the last decades. From this journal, Lisa Blackman (2004), Ian Burkitt (2008), Sam Binkley (2011), Couze Venn (2020), Nilima Chowdhury (2022), among others, have theorized the intersections of the structures of the liberal and neo-liberal state, self-formation, self-optimization, psychology, and media. We contend that contemporary discussions of subjectification and self-help can find their roots in self-help and uplift discourses of the interwar period. We hope that the following articles in this collection illuminate some specific ways in which authors and practices from the Progressive era onwards anticipate methods of self-reflection and self-improvement in the neo-liberal age.

Advice practices across a variety of media, answering the call for self-optimization, contributed to the formation of very specific subjectivities and a very specific reflexivity (or language to reflect) about these subjectivities. Certainly, as a relatively new discipline, psychology partook of this formation of well-adjusted subjects and the concomitant discourse formations (of progress, self-realization, transformation, and self-reliance—see Moskowitz 2001). But so did the “science” of eugenics as well as the public discourse around practices of mental and social hygiene. So did the progressive discourse about amelioration, social engineering, and efficiency. So did the culture industry, the movies, book series for adolescents, and magazines. In other words, the modern subject came to be a subject under multiple pressures to monitor itself, define itself, improve itself, grow (itself), and consider alternatives to its own behaviours and practices.

While there was, among the progressive reformers, the psychologists, the advice specialists, a growing army of experts (Nikolas Rose has called them the “petty engineers of human conduct” (1999, p. 92); see also Illouz 2008), uplift and self-help discourses also materialized as entertainment. In fact, they can almost be thought of as synonymous with the modern mass entertainment cultures, as these newly commodified practices originated from the same historical transformation and targeted the same groups: the white and Black upwardly mobile, consumption-oriented, mostly professional part of the middle classes. Mass entertainment during the Progressive Era and up to the interwar years almost always contained messages, overt or covert, of self-making and self-regulation. This is where new subjectivities and new modes of relating to oneself first emerged.

Deeply intervening into the subject formations of this ever-growing group, self-help can be read as a technology of the self and an instrument of governmentality (Foucault 1988, pp. 18–19) just as well as a means of individual empowerment. The discourses of self-improvement and self-optimization partly fulfil the Taylorist mission of managing subjects: as Nicolas Rose would say, on the levels of epistemology, corporeality as well as intellectuality. Partly, of course, they are explicitly



moral. The papers in this collection explore how self-help as a discourse of subject formation is entangled in debates about human nature, progressive and New Deal politics, discourses of respectability, everyday practices such as eating and nutrition, feminism and women's rights, and the rules and practices of mass cultural forms such as adolescent book series. They take a consistently transdisciplinary look at the effect of self-optimization and self-help, combining approaches from history, psychology, sociology, economics, politics, literature, and cultural studies.

Nevertheless, readers will notice that the three contributions stem from and use the methodologies of literary and cultural studies. While making use of (empirical and theoretical) research in the social and political sciences, these papers focus on *textual strategies* as they emerge in close readings of the texts at hand. The ultimate objective in looking closely at the aesthetic, rhetorical, and symbolic techniques used in the texts explored in these papers (texts by Jack London and William J. Fielding, Theodore Dreiser and Stanwood Cobb, Lulu Hunt Peters, Susanna Cocroft, and Antoinette Donnelly as well as the Stratemeyer Syndicate) is the cultural work which they do. They take up tacit knowledges on values and beliefs and renegotiate, review, and remediate them.

As subjectivities are formed in a dynamic process between self and social institutions (i.e. desires and expectations), texts and especially personal advice literature or narrative texts can serve as catalysts for the establishment of the specific mode in which a human being has "come to relate to themselves *as selves*" (Rose 1998, p. 24). Paul Ricoeur even goes as far as to speak of a narrative identity through which human beings structure their (complicated) relation to themselves (Ricoeur 1991). Thus, subjectivity is at least partly an aesthetic structure, a mode of seeing oneself, of observing oneself as an agent in a social world. Narrative texts (and, by the way, much in the way of advice literature has narrative or anecdotal character) model this relationship. They can do this because, in the words of Wolfgang Iser, they "represent a perspective view of the world" (Iser 1978, 35). For Iser a narrative text is a system of perspectives (35) and can thus function as a testing ground or initiate vicarious learning. Narrative texts project a story world with symbolic structures, in which characters and reader develop attitudes towards this internal world. The textual strategies (the plot, the characters, the arrangement of perspectives, the register) guide the reader in this process—and thus make possible the text's specific cultural work.

Literary and cultural studies pay close attention to the movements of texts: the internal movements in order to decipher what a text posits as normal, successful, or harmful; and the external movements of discursive formations between texts in order to gauge how influential certain sets of values and beliefs are and how they are negotiated. The method of close reading focusses on text passages, closely looks at the repertoire (the borrowings from social discourses, the references), identifies the concerns and discourses at work in the passage, assesses the possible perspectives, and relates the findings back to the text at large and the contexts of the time. Thus, the literary and cultural methods used in these papers attempt to tease out how specific discourses of self-optimization and self-help have served as blueprints for the establishment of modern subjectivities.



With James Dorson (2023) we start by looking at some of the naturalist sources of uplift & self-help discourses. Biologist interpretations of societies and identities pervaded the Progressive Era and the Interwar Years. As Dorson argues in his essays, popular self-help and advice manuals took many of their ideas and concepts from U.S. naturalist fiction at the turn of the century. Taking his clue from William J. Fielding's *The Caveman within us* (1922), Dorson shows how notions of an inner "dynamic life force" (Fielding) or an inner "primordial beast" (Jack London in *The Call of the Wild*, 1903) link the naturalist literature from the turn of the century to the success manuals of the interwar years.

Self-help and advice manuals had to transform the rather deterministic (Darwinian) understanding of human nature in naturalistic literature into a more malleable concept, in which the awakening (to use a term or rather clue from self-help books that, at the same time, reiterates the title of Kate Chopin's naturalist novel from 1899) of the ancient, inner energies can be learned and rehearsed individually. Notably, Theodore Dreiser struggled with the same tension in several of his novels from *Sister Carrie* (1900) to *The "Genius"* (1915): that between learned and learnable behaviour (implicating a sense of control) on the one hand and hereditary and spontaneous attributes (defying any sense of control).

The Caveman is only one of the tropes Dorson traces from naturalist fiction to self-help literature, others being the genius (a romantic concept which self-help necessarily had to universalize), the artist (who derives their specific sensibility from a propensity and insistence to link to the *élan vital*), and the entrepreneur (whose difference from the employee is exactly their resistance to social rules). One of the blind spots in all success manuals, as Dorson explains, is that economic resources at any given time are finite—meaning that success eventually depends on inequality. This in turn leads to a justification of success and, in turn, to a moralization, a gendering, and a racialization of failure (or poverty), which is also anticipated in naturalist fiction. A potential way out of the individualist and finally anti-social character of the literature of self-discovery, Dorson suggests, could be a strategy that seeks self-empowerment in the "latent commons" (Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing) or the social ecologies in which we are entangled.

An important (and often underrated) part of self-optimization & self-help concerned nutrition. As Katharina Vester (2023) argues, during World War I, dieting instructions by popular health and beauty experts such as Lulu Hunt Peters, Susanna Cocroft, and Antoinette Donnelly were part of a food dispositif that produced gendered ideas of corporeal citizenship. Dieting was framed as an expression of patriotism and a civic duty. In light of food conservation, organized by Herbert Hoover's *United States Food Administration*, Peters' bestselling manual, *Diet and Health. With Key to Calories* (1918) shaped the idea of body fat as a sign of disloyalty and failed citizenship. As "kitchen soldiers", women in particular were called upon to master their appetites, and were promised at the same time new spaces of authority.

Instructing female readers in self-discipline and self-surveillance, diet discourses initially promised women political and economic equality if they subjected themselves to the new disciplinary regimen. After the war, dieting instructions reframed dieting as a liberating practice for women and associated weight loss with success,



white supremacy, glamour, and self-determination. Beauty experts and fashion designers replaced politicians and efficiency experts in advocating lean bodies.

Hollywood and fashion design helped dieting to become a wildly popular practice with which women asserted control over their own bodies and lives. This produced a backlash staged by media and doctors, claiming female dieters to be irrational, in danger and in need of supervision. Katharina Vester's essay explores the role of advice literature in the mobilization and subjection of female bodies.

With Martin Klepper (2023) we take a look at the most popular book series for children and adolescents in the interwar and immediate post-war years: the *Nancy Drew Mysteries* and the *Hardy Boys Adventures*. Klepper argues that these novels introduce the reader to values like self-reliance, perseverance, self-assertion, and physical and mental mobility. These values, combined with self-improvement techniques such as motivation, auto-suggestion, self-reflection, organized planning, and agency, are tools to manage radical contingency, the malady that came with modernity and that is at the same time the ground on which the detective novel thrives.

Klepper points out that the interiorization of these values and the vicarious exercise of techniques which mould the individual to be a more flexible, adjustable, and malleable self can be read as a program of subjectification. The relation the self develops to itself, i.e. the demands, expectations, and convictions have their place in a specific mode of subject formation. Class and privilege play a large role in it, as the gospel of self-improvement became the preferred technology of the self of the rising white middle class.

The essay explores how the books of the Stratemeyer Syndicate create affective attachments to the protagonists, who subtly (or not so subtly) police the borders of the white middle class. The subjectivities championed in the books allow for a modicum of liberation (allowing Nancy Drew to become an icon for feminists), while the normalizing tendencies in the books champion rather conservative attitudes towards masculinity, femininity, family patterns, and most definitely race.

In revisiting Progressive Era and interwar discourses in the United States about the nature of human beings as well as the possibilities and strategies of self and community improvement, the essays assembled in this collection defamiliarize convictions and practices around self-fashioning that have become tacit knowledge. By looking more closely at the complex tensions within the discussions about the self and the modes of self-optimization, these essays reveal some of the myriad strategies by which subjects have come to imagine and perform their relation to themselves and society, and, in so doing, how these subjectivities accomplished collective identities and collective ideological shifts. In a certain way, then, this collection of papers is an attempt to understand how we became what we have become today.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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