Review of 'Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help,' by Eva Illouz

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Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help.

In December 2007, Oprah Winfrey, talk-show host and self-help entrepreneur, endorsed a candidate for president. Using the language of self help, she said, “I want you to think about a man who knows who we are and a man who knows who we can be.” The ensuing national dialogue considered how much influence she would have on the candidacy, how much the endorsement would influence her ratings, and whether a talk show host should have this kind of influence.

Oprah’s candidate, Barack Obama, went on to win. Meanwhile, her ratings declined, and pundits debated the link between the two. As to whether Winfrey “should” have such influence, that horse is already out of the barn. Psychology, self help, and quasi-professionalized mediums of our (American) experience have not just reached a high point of influence. In her new book, Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help (which follows her 2005 book, Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery), Eva Illouz makes the case that “therapeutic individualism” (her catch-all for psychology and self help) is deeply ingrained not just in our individual lives and relationships—including marriage and family—but in our public lives as well, including political and corporate worlds, mass media, and civil society.

Professor Illouz’s book is dense, erudite, and vast. In chapter one she argues for the importance of emotion, especially as processed through psychology, as one of the five guiding perceptions of the sociology of culture (along with 1. culture matters; 2. meanings can swamp reality; 3. culture is not simply causal; and 4. sociology of culture connects meaning and social groups). Her second chapter sets up Freud-the-man as the origin of our therapeutic individualism. “Psychoanalysis . . . was a new creed that revolved around a person who was able to command a discipline as well as love from his followers” (Illouz 2008, 24). The discussion of pervasive therapeutic culture follows from the Freudian origin.

Saving the Modern Soul is full of surprises: while I was half expecting a clever examination of the follies of psychology, what I found were original well-developed claims about the impossibility of modernity, feminism, and capitalism without therapeutic individualism. Illouz does not slip into the derision that sometimes
occurs when writers observe how morality has been supplanted by self-help. Contra those who argue that the self-help culture is necessarily corrosive, she states, “... this claim is mistaken and fails to recognize that therapeutic culture has marked a major advance in the ethos of self-reliance; although it takes a stance of victimhood and moral disculpation for the past, it enjoins a voluntarist responsibility for the future,” (186).

Such voluntarist responsibility works well for business, Illouz points out. A chapter titled, “From Homo economicus to Homo communicans,” walks us through the corporate world with history and then interpretation of the psychological management style that has dominated for at least the past 60 years. An enormous division of the American Psychological Association is dedicated to organizational psychology, and consultants “help” managers and workers by helping them individually. Now we do “emotion work” that is good for business, and that is more broadly a component of “social competence writ large” (63). Illouz explains, “For the first time, each single individual and his or her emotions were scrutinized, and the language of productivity became slowly intertwined with that of the psyche,” (73). Workers’ problems are not problems of structure or resources and are not to be solved by group action; rather they are personality problems to be addressed one at a time. In later chapters she returns to the theme of “emotional stratification”: the emotional competence recommended by therapeutic individualism may be a cultural capital associated with privilege.

The book highlights both how psychotherapy is incorporated into power structures, like business or politics (hence Oprah's psychological testimony for Obama makes perfect cultural logic), but also what a great business model therapeutic individualism contains. Repeatedly, psychology defines identity as a set of problems, glorifies “authentic” identity as our destination, and then provides a service that can and must be used ad infinitum—as there no longer is such a thing as a self without problem. Her discussion of couples therapy and marital advice columns in the chapter, “The Tyranny of Intimacy,” is an example: psychologists reformed our view of close relationships by simultaneously casting marriage as a site for “intimacy” and then rationalizing intimacy through measurable skills to be endlessly studied and perfected. In “Triumphant Suffering,” she generalizes, “... once an emotional state is defined as healthy and desirable, then ... states that fall short ... point to problematic emotions or unconscious barriers, which in turn must be understood and managed in the framework of the therapeutic narrative,” (174).

One particularly breathtaking surprise of this book was the kinship Illouz finds between feminism and psychoanalysis. Illouz argues that in the first place the whole business of making talk and communication essential cultural capital—at home and at work—is a pro-woman stance. Furthermore, because psychoanalysis made “family into an object of knowledge and into the prime site of self emancipation” feminism could more easily make family “into an object of emotional and political emancipation,” (122). As much as feminism expressed hostility for Freud and orthodox Freudianism, Illouz shows us how feminism and therapeutic individualism are allies. In doing so, she does not dilute or embarrass the cause on either side, and in fact shows the advantages and sense of the alliance.

This book is packed with ideas and examples of how the psychotherapeutic
culture in marital therapy, advice books, support groups, and corporate communications doesn’t simply promote itself, but is suffused within our culture, and is synonymous with our culture. The book is also packed. That is to say, it is not a light-hearted read, and its density may turn some readers away who might otherwise value the cornucopia of ideas and the good story Illouz tells.

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Governing Passions immerses readers in the political discourse of French elites during the French Wars of Religion. The texts of speeches that French notables presented during Estates General meetings, peace conferences, official ceremonies, and other assemblies circulated in manuscript and printed copies, provoking political debates and promoting reform agendas. Mark Greengrass weaves together an immense body of speeches, reform proposals, lectures, procès verbaux, and pamphlets conserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and various municipal and departmental archives, producing an impressive history of French political culture during Henri III’s reign.

The book examines political speech and rhetoric in the major policy debates held between the meeting of the Estates General of Blois in 1576 and the Assembly of Notables in 1583–1584. Greengrass argues that “the art and practice of rhetoric involved the appeal to both reason and emotion, the use of historical exempla in political argument, an appreciation of performative skills, and an understanding of empathy. This culture of ‘persuasion’ both empowered literary culture and ‘literarized’ political culture” (368). Greengrass’s interpretation of rhetoric relies on contemporary treatises to establish that “eloquence laid out a governing matrix for the passions, as powerful in their own way in civil society as the spread of a contagious disease in a city or the spread of fire” (39). The use of extensive quotations from printed and manuscript sources in their original sixteenth-century French throughout the book provides specialized readers with a powerful sense of the language of Henri III’s court, but limits the book’s accessibility to early modern scholars who have already mastered sixteenth-century French.

The 1576 assembly of the Estates General at Blois offered a perfect opportunity for French elites to advocate moral reform. Greengrass sets the meeting into its historical context, emphasizing contemporaries’ beliefs in the restorative potential of the assembly for the health of the kingdom. Yet, “the estates general became a vehicle for hopes and desires that no such institution . . . could realize” (70). The inability of delegates to agree on a reform agenda prevented the Estates General from working effectively to promote virtue and the common good.

Greengrass explores in great detail Henri III’s Palace Academy, a series of lecture cycles held at the Louvre palace and other locations in 1576–1579 that