

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-HELP LITERATURE
IN THE UNITED STATES: THE CONCEPT OF SUCCESS AND
HAPPINESS, AN OVERVIEW

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The aim of this article is to show that self-help literature, far from being a trivial aspect of popular American culture, represents a basic pillar which has been present since its beginnings and continues to be present in American society and culture nowadays. This article explores the origin of this phenomenon and the fact that self-help literature can be divided into three distinct phases marked by a shift from a culture of 'industry and effort' – beginning with Benjamin Franklin until the mid-twentieth century – to a culture of 'leisure and ease' – especially after World War II – and the emergence, towards the end of the twentieth century, of a spiritually-oriented literature of partly Eastern influence devoted to the study of the mind and the concept of self-mastery and self-knowledge as basic factors in the achievement of happiness and success in life.

Keywords: self-help literature; American Dream; industriousness; happiness; success; Benjamin Franklin

*EL ORIGEN Y DESARROLLO DE LA LITERATURA DE AUTO-AYUDA EN LOS
ESTADOS UNIDOS: EL CONCEPTO DE ÉXITO Y FELICIDAD. VISIÓN GENERAL*

El objetivo de este artículo es el de demostrar que la literatura de auto-ayuda, lejos de ser un aspecto trivial de la cultura popular americana, representa un pilar básico que ha estado presente desde sus comienzos y que continúa estando presente en la cultura y en la sociedad americana contemporánea. Este artículo explora el origen del fenómeno y el hecho de que la literatura de auto-ayuda puede ser dividida en tres fases marcadas por un cambio de una cultura de 'esfuerzo y trabajo' – empezando con Benjamin Franklin hasta mediados del siglo XX – a una cultura de 'ocio y bienestar' – especialmente después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial – y la emergencia, hacia finales del siglo XX, de una literatura de orientación espiritual con influencias orientales, dedicada al estudio de la mente y del concepto de auto-dominio y auto-conocimiento como factores básicos en la consecución de la felicidad y del éxito en la vida.

Palabras clave: Literatura de auto-ayuda; sueño americano; trabajo; felicidad; éxito; Benjamin Franklin

1. Introduction

While self-help literature is not part of any literary canon nor has any pretensions to be, it is worthy of study because of its cultural importance and its expansion as a socio-economic phenomenon.¹ The pursuit of happiness, which is the subject of numerous treatises and self-help books, is in the US an inalienable right embedded in the Declaration of Independence (*The Declaration* 1979). Over the past decade, the study of happiness, which used to be the domain of philosophers, therapists and ‘gurus’, has further developed into a university discipline. It is possible nowadays to find ‘professors of happiness’ at leading universities, self-improvement and ‘quality of life’ institutes all over the world, and thousands of research papers on the topic (Bond 2003). Happiness even has its own journal, the *Journal of Happiness Studies*² and there is also an online World Database of Happiness.³

In providing new perspectives, self-help literature is necessarily socially constructed and culture-bound. However, few scholars seem to have explored self-help literature as a cultural phenomenon *per se*, and, as a result, this area of study remains largely unexplored, in spite of a huge and growing body of self-help texts in such different areas as education, health, psychology, stress management, psychotherapy, relationships, sports and business, among others. There are few exceptions within this dearth of critical attention: Cawelti (1965), Huber (1971), Covey (1989), Anker (1999), Albanese (1981, 1990), Butler-Bowdon (2003), McGee, (2005) or Harrington (2008). This is why, although we still lack a critical vocabulary pertinent to the analysis of self-help literature, a cultural studies approach may prove beneficial for several reasons. Re-reading American self-help literature from a cultural studies perspective provides the possibility of analyzing a significant number of American self-help texts as cultural documents, reflecting American society’s conceptions of success and happiness as well as its needs and wants. As Simon During affirms, cultural studies “has helped literary studies move on from the production of endless ‘readings’ of individual texts to examining reading as a form of life for different communities and individuals in different times and places”. Moreover, it has “complex and intimate relations with literary studies, media studies, anthropology, sociology, geography, history, political theory and social policy” (During 2005: 30). Therefore, this re-reading of American self-help literature from a cultural studies perspective entails a change of paradigm, that is, a ‘re-vision’ of the text with new eyes, defined by the writer and essayist Adrienne Rich as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (1971: 18).

¹ It is a \$9.59 billion industry as of 2005 and predicted to be a \$13.9 billion industry by 2010. Marketdata Enterprises Inc. <<http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview?id=786161>> (Accessed 7 November, 2007)

² Journal of Happiness Studies (JOHS) <<http://www.springeronline.com>>, affiliated with ISQOLS: International Society for Quality of Life Studies. (Accessed 7 November, 2007)

³ World Database of Happiness - Continuous register of scientific research on subjective appreciation of life <<http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/>> (Accessed 7 November, 2007)

As we shall see, the whole history of the US is impregnated with the message of self-help and personal improvement, the objective of which is, in most cases, implicitly or explicitly, the achievement of happiness. The concept of self-help is related to self-making and taking charge of one's destiny, and this aspect undoubtedly helped to shape what we call the American *self-identity*, which is also closely linked to the belief in canonical American values such as the search for justice, liberty, fairness, democracy and equality. 'Self-making' or being 'self-made' suggests that anyone can be whatever he or she wants to be if they work hard enough to achieve their goals, summarised in the expression *the American Dream*. Historian James Truslow Adams, who used the term *American Dream* for the first time in his book *The Epic of America*, wrote in 1931:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams 2001: 214-15)

The concept of the American Dream can be traced back even further, to the late sixteenth century. It was from this time, and especially during the seventeenth century, that English promoters were attempting to persuade Englishmen to move to the colonies. According to George Samuel Scouten, "their language and promises about what the colonies were like were simultaneously laying the groundwork for three separate, but interrelated persistent myths of America: America as the land of plenty, America as the land of opportunity, and America as the land of destiny" (Scouten 2002).

Nevertheless a clear understanding of the functioning of the American Dream and American society in general is impossible without an appreciation of the powerful religious dynamic that affected and still affects the attitudes and behaviour of many people in the US. A recent study conducted by The George H. Gallup International Institute shows that Americans' concerns about society, democracy and the future are deeply rooted in their beliefs about God.⁴ Historically, the United States' religious tradition has been dominated by Protestant Christianity. A strong puritan tradition, with its emphasis on hard work, education, the need for self examination, discipline and frugality was the soil upon which the beginning of the nation was built. Only through much effort could the American Dream be achieved. This was the setting for the emergence of self-help literature with authors such as Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813), Samuel Smiles (1812-1904), Horatio Alger (1832-1899), Orison Swett Marden (1850-1924) or James Allen (1864-1912), who are all prolific exponents of this religion-based, protestant work ethic in their writings.

⁴ George Gallup, Jr. 'Religion in America: Will the Vitality of Churches Be the Surprise of the Next Century?' <<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0397/ijse/gallup.htm>> (Accessed 12 December 2007)

Other great figures like Abraham Lincoln⁵ or the nineteenth century writers Emerson and Thoreau are also key influences within the self-help literature scenario (Butler-Bowdon 2003:127, 284), although the latter's religious inclinations mark the beginning of a growing interest in Eastern religious thought within the Western world, breaking away from the puritan tradition.

It is generally accepted that self-help literature started in the eighteenth century with the publication of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (Butler-Bowdon 2003:145). Thinkers and writers of the eighteenth century American Enlightenment movement were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man. And Franklin was the person who best embodied the Enlightenment ideal of humane rationality. Although educated as a Presbyterian, "Franklin is seminal in self-help literature because he disregarded any religious conception that we were naturally bad or good people, he saw us rather as blank slates designed for success" (Butler-Bowdon 2003: 146). In Kathryn Van Spanckeren's words, Franklin "tried to help other ordinary people become successful by sharing his insights and initiating a characteristically American genre – the self-help book". Called America's "first great man of letters" by the Scottish philosopher David Hume, Franklin was a "writer, printer, publisher, scientist, philanthropist and diplomat, and was the most famous and respected private figure of his time. He was the first great self-made man in America".⁶ One of his invaluable contributions to society was the fact that he inspired millions of people to focus on self-improvement, to which he devoted one or two hours each day (Franklin 1986: 87). The first part of his *Autobiography* was written as a moral guide to show his son the way to success, while the second part was a kind of short treatise on virtue, which offered efficient and firsthand testimony "that man is not even at present a vicious and detestable animal, and still more ... that good management may greatly amend him" (1986: 84). Like Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), Franklin's *Autobiography* announced the emergence of a view of man as good and capable of becoming better. He took the puritan characteristic of self-scrutiny to its highest degree by contriving a method in which he set up his own chart of virtues, and methodically tried to acquire them one after another until they became a habit. Thus, first he would focus on temperance: "Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation". The following week he would avoid trifling conversation, the next he would try to be orderly, then resolute, then frugal, industrious, sincere, and so on down the list, through justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, to chastity and humility (Franklin 1986: 91-92). Using a system of graphs and daily self-appraisal, he constantly tried to master these thirteen qualities or virtues. His objective was, according to his own words, the achievement of a sense of happiness and fulfillment, "... on the whole, tho' I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavour, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it" (Franklin 1986: 99).

⁵ Lincoln is often mentioned in self-help writing because he embodies the idea of 'limitless' thinking and self-improvement (Phillips 1992: 5).

⁶ Kathryn Van Spanckeren, *Democratic Origins and Revolutionary Writers, 1776-1820* chapter two, from <<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/oal/lit2.htm>> (Accessed 17 December, 2007)

Here we have an early forerunner of many contemporary self-help books such as *You can Heal your Life* (Hay 1984), *Taoist Ways to Transform Stress into Vitality* (Chia 1985), *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (Chopra 1994), *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey 1989) and *The Breakthrough Experience* (Demartini 2002). All these books provide guidelines, similar in some general ways to those offered by Benjamin Franklin over two hundred years earlier: self-scrutiny, establishing goals, monitoring progress.

The religion-based, protestant work ethic of the time also helped to solidify some of Franklin's best-known practical maxims in the American mind, written for *Poor Richard's Almanac* and familiarly repeated by many generations: "Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy, and wise"; "There are no Gains without Pains"; "Diligence is the Mother of Good-luck" and "God gives all Things to Industry" (McMaster 1980).

The puritan ideals of hard work, self-examination, discipline and virtue were necessary ingredients for the development of the nation at that time: "National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice" (Smiles 2006: 2).

Hence, in American nineteenth-century culture, success, hard work and discipline were three inseparable terms, as expressed in *Self-Help* (Smiles 1859); *Pushing to the Front, or Success under Difficulties* (Swett Marden 1894) or *Ragged Dick* (Alger 1867). All these showed a strong puritan-religious influence, as was almost the norm at the time (Anker 1999: 30).

Toward the late nineteenth century and even more during the twentieth century, especially after World War II, success became increasingly equated with wealth. In *The American Myth of Success*, historian Richard Weiss notes that the first definition of success in terms of wealth occurs in the 1891 *New Century Dictionary*, while the first mention of wealth in terms of success occurs in the 1885 *Oxford English Dictionary XX* (Weiss 1988: 98). Andrew Carnegie's *The Empire of Business* (1902) and Russell H. Conwell's *Acres of Diamonds* (1915) proclaimed that creating wealth was a moral obligation and a sign of virtue: "To make money honestly is to preach the gospel" (Conwell 1915: 18).

While the puritanical tradition was present in self-help literature until approximately the second half of the twentieth century it was by no means the only influence which shaped the genre. As we enter the twentieth century, it is important to understand that what we call self-help or self-improvement literature is not a monolithic genre. Throughout most of this century, many different types of self-help literature co-exist, overlap and compete. Thus, the puritan message does not suddenly give way to a completely different kind of discourse, but continues to be present in certain widely read books throughout the century. We can still find deep puritan values in the late seventies, as in Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* (1978), which describes a world where "original sin does exist; it is our laziness" (Peck 1978: 15), a world where goodness comes from self-discipline, hard work, delayed gratification and honesty. Its

phenomenal popularity and its Christian themes made it a bestseller, especially among the Bible Belt readers.⁷

These same puritan values are also important for authors like Stephen R. Covey, who, at the end of the eighties, in his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) considers work on the self as an ‘investment’: “This is the single most powerful investment we can ever make in life – Investment in ourselves” (Covey 1989: 289). And this investment is achieved by constantly renewing one’s resources. Moreover, in the nineties, in his popular *First Things First*, Covey expresses that “The principles and processes we’ve described in this book create paradigms based on true north principles, purposes, and perspectives that help create happiness and peace” (Covey 2003: 280). Covey’s model is that of a rational ethical subject who privileges reason, self-control and hard work as the basic recipe to reach one’s goals and gain inner peace and happiness.

If we look back to the beginning of the twentieth century, nonetheless, the puritan conceptions about work and wealth co-existed with the emergence of the ‘mind-power’ discourse that originated at the end of the nineteenth century in certain circles. Mind-power, also known as *New Thought*, was a movement “which has largely been ignored in histories of American thought” according to Huber, author of one of the most exhaustive surveys of self-help: *The American Idea of Success* (1971:98). He points especially to Napoleon Hill *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), the Unity School of Christian Living, and its most outstanding proponent, Protestant preacher Norman Vincent Peale, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). Peale’s own journey from moderate evangelical Protestantism to the embracing of his positive-thinking version of New Thought encouraged millions of followers “who felt a gnawing discontent with the perspectives and promises of traditional Protestantism” (Anker 1999: 10). Mind-power replaced a self-discipline work ethic with a vision of natural ease and prosperity, making way for a consumer culture focused on fantasies of boundless abundance (see Lears 1994). “Philosophical idealism” was, paradoxically, to be used to achieve a “worldly materialism” (Huber 1971: 333).

In the America of the 1930s, affected as it was by the Depression, people were more focused on avoiding poverty than on becoming wealthy. They had to be shown the way to believe in themselves again – and an easy style with practical proven rules and principles that worked was what people were looking for. Since most Americans laboured tirelessly hard in mines, factories and stockyards but advanced not at all, a new formula for success had to be improvised; so, more than ever before, nerve, confidence, willpower and initiative were celebrated and encouraged. The prize now went to those who dared, those who were ready to take risks. The decisive balance had shifted away from ‘traditional moral virtues’ to the ‘qualities of personality’ necessary to acquire riches (Cawelti 1989: 184).

Books like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 1936) effectively popularized the idea of emotional intelligence, decades before it was established in academic psychology, while *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling* (Bettger 1947), suggested, for example, that the practice of regular smiling can create a

⁷ See, for example, Donohue (1997).

feeling of happiness and goodwill, or that you can become excited about something simply by *acting* excited about it.

Especially after World War II, a consumer culture blossomed and Americans became more preoccupied than ever before with material goods. It was an era of unprecedented prosperity. There was a rise of materialism fomenting the 'easy way' to get rich and to achieve one's objectives. For Matthew Warshauer, in his article 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire: Changing Conceptions of the American Dream', there is one component of the American Dream which seems to be fairly consistent: the quest for money. He considers that, after World War II, the original idea of the American dream began to erode, and was to be replaced with a philosophy of 'get rich quick'. We witness an increasing fixation on material goods and on the models represented to foment consumerism, coupled with what in reality are limited possibilities of a society which is thoroughly developed, and in which there are greater difficulties in moving ahead. The entertainment industry, the hours spent in front of television for amusement and/or escapist reasons, absorbing the consumer ideology, together with the lack of real possibilities for many people of being a self-made person, have not managed to suffocate the myth, which is still there. Around that time, *make it big* was often translated as *make it big the easy way*, by luck, without effort. As Warshauer noted, "consumed by desires for status, material goods, and acceptance, Americans apparently had lost the sense of individuality, thrift, hard work, and craftsmanship that had characterized the nation".⁸

Moreover, in her award-winning book *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (1995), Hochschild demonstrates how the promise of the American dream faces severe challenges from real and perceived barriers of class and race. There are numerous people who will never be able to achieve their dreams due to their particular position within the social landscape. The author feels the good health of American society depends not only on belief in the American dream but on its realization, and in particular on repairing its central failure, which is the inability of so many black Americans, for example, to participate in what it promises (Hochschild 1995: 4-5).

For many Americans, the developments which came after World War II had produced less happiness than they might have expected. The 1950s was not just an era of great economic growth, but also, as many historians have observed, the "age of anxiety" (Johnson 2006). Expressions like *rat race* and *treadmill*, which were coined during this decade, "brought attention to the dehumanizing costs of maintaining middle-class lifestyles" (Harrington 2008: 159).

At this time, we witness a proliferation of books which provide quick, easy solutions to one's problems. According to Stephen Covey (1989), especially within business-oriented self-help literature, there is a vast difference between the self-help literature produced from Franklin's time until the mid-twentieth century and the literature produced in the second half of the twentieth century. In the first, authors were more

⁸ Warshauer, Matthew. 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire: Changing Conceptions of the American Dream', <http://www.americansc.org.uk/online/American_Dream.htm> (Accessed 15 September, 2007)

concerned with what he, and others before him, call the *ethics of character*, that is, with the teaching of the basic puritan principles of virtue and integrity which, in the long run, he says, give real success and permanent happiness. By contrast, in a considerable amount of self-help literature produced after the mid-twentieth century the main concern is with the *ethics of personality*, that is, an interest in techniques of Positive Mental Attitude (PMA) and public relations or public image, where people are sometimes encouraged to manipulate other people for their own benefit using certain techniques to be accepted, or to 'pretend' that they are interested in topics they do not really care about, all to achieve a certain goal. This, according to Covey, can never be permanent, nor can it bring peace or happiness because it is not based on solid principles like integrity, honesty, rectitude or dignity (Covey 1989: 26). These 'quick-fix' solutions and human relations techniques mainly focused on high achievement, as in many 'How to' books, such as Bettger 1947, cited above, and *How to Have Confidence and Power in Dealing with People* (Giblin 1956), both of which flourished in twentieth century self-help literature especially after World War II. Countless authors offered (and offer) all sorts of seemingly easy solutions on a large variety of topics, such as on how to make money, raise your children, be a good manager, be a better parent, lose weight, stop worrying, lift your depression or get a date. Many people seemed to be pushed into seeking easy ways to obtain their dreams, not just by buying books which supposedly would offer them a wide range of answers –not necessarily easy to put into practice – but also, for example, through vehicles like "large-prize television game shows, big-jackpot state lotteries and compensation lawsuits" as Matthew Warshauer affirms.⁹

Especially at the beginning of the 1970s, coinciding with the first of the so-called oil shocks and with the beginning of a period of increased competition in the labour market and declining wages, "bald proposals that one ought to 'look out for #1' or 'win through intimidation' marked a new ruthlessness in the self-help landscape" (McGee 2005: 50).

Vincent Peale was one of the first authors who told his readers of the urgent need to do something about a growing problem of modern society, namely, *stress* (Peale 1957). Peale was the primary conduit for the entrance of the mental healing tradition into the mainstream of American culture in the mid-twentieth century. His book appeared at a time when more and more people started suffering from high levels of stress, especially occupational stress, not so much because of their demanding workload as because of the endless demands they placed on themselves. They were competitive, obsessed with deadlines, always in a hurry. "The evidence seemed clear that, unless they changed their ways, such men risked a tragic end: premature death from heart failure" (Harrington 2008: 162). In fact, by the second half of the twentieth century, heart disease had come to be called the silent epidemic of the times, responsible for about 30 percent of deaths in industrialized countries – the largest single cause of death from any disease (Duin and Sutcliffe 1992: 216).

⁹ Warshauer, Matthew. 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire: Changing Conceptions of the American Dream', <http://www.americansc.org.uk/online/American_Dream.htm> (Accessed 15 September, 2007)

By the 1980s the “link between the workaholic lifestyle and heart disease seemed about as solidly established as one could hope for; the relaxation industry was in full swing...” (Harrington 2008: 169). At a time when almost any disease is now potentially at risk of being made worse by stress, this explains, at least in part, why increasing attention is paid to new narratives of self-help literature which focus on *mind-body medicine*. These narratives claim that happiness and success can only be gained when there is physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance inside. They tell us that there are different ways to heal, to recover balance, to boost immunity, and to increase well-being. For cancer surgeon Bernie Siegel, author of the bestselling *Love, Medicine, and Miracles*, the answer was the ability to give and accept unconditional love. (Siegel 1990: 180)

It should be mentioned that around this time, as a clear sign of a shift in interests that is occurring in the world on a large scale, the self-improvement discourse also takes on a greater influence from different sources such as the language of Western science and technology and increasingly of Eastern philosophies with associated applications: models of mind/body, medicine and therapies, as well as self-help techniques based upon them.

From the very beginnings of the genre, and even more toward the second half of the twentieth century, self-help writers appear to take on the role of the psychologist, priest or counsellor. Although privileged in knowledge and wisdom, the authors often express themselves adopting a friendly, easy-to understand and ‘reachable’ tone as if one was talking to a friend who lets you in on a secret. Story writing was the method most self-help authors used, and still use, to communicate their messages best to a wide, mostly under-educated public. In fact, the style of teaching through stories is one of the characteristics of most self-help literature books throughout time. Representative examples of this style which was already so characteristic in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* are Henry Ford’s *My Life and Work* (1922), Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* (1937) or Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s *The Fireside Chat of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (1944), amongst many others.

Interestingly, whereas there is a proliferation of books that provide ‘quick-fix’ solutions to all sorts of problems, simultaneously, we should not overlook the emergence of a more profound, mainly psychologically-based self-help literature in the self-improvement landscape, especially from the 1960s onwards, offering research, documented support and guidelines to its readers, and adopting a discourse filled with psychological, scientific and quasi-scientific concepts and references. But rather than addressing academia, the objective was to address the general public by using a simplified discourse that was easy to understand, yet provided practical applications of research which could not have reached the mainstream otherwise. This branch of self-help literature, following the New Thought tradition, also showed a keen interest in the workings of the mind to achieve happiness. At the same time, there was a profound interest in psychology. Thus, for example, in *Motivation and Personality* (1959), academic psychologist Abraham Maslow laid the basis for a more humanistic branch of psychology that later developed into transpersonal psychology. In 1994, *NLP: The Technology of Achievement* by Steve Andreas and Charles Faulkner, based on the work of Richard Bandler, and Dr. John Grinder, on Neuro-Linguistic Programming, opened

up a new understanding of the workings of the mind. In 1995 Dr. Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* was published, catapulting the idea of emotional intelligence to the forefront of mainstream awareness, showing through impeccable academic research that IQ is not a particularly good predictor of achievement, owing to the fact that it is only one of many 'intelligences', and that emotional skills are statistically more important in life success. In *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (1998) the Dalai Lama claims that the attainment of happiness is 'scientific' and requires discipline of mind to control one's consciousness, which means that one very important way to happiness is through mental practice. As mentioned earlier, more and more self-help books started using 'scientific' concepts, terminology and expressions, (from computer science: the body/ brain as a computer, from communicative science: brain as a broadcasting-receiving station for thought, from physics and Eastern models: concepts of energy, universal law, etc...) to support the validity of the approaches offered, and to give them special weight within an otherwise more 'spiritual' context. *Psycho-Cybernetics* (Maxwell Maltz 1960), for example, was written at a time when behaviourism was at its peak. Its author was the first to explore the machinery of goal-setting, thus providing a scientific rationale for dream fulfilment, and in doing so paved the way for countless writers on success after him. Many of these texts are, nevertheless, lacking in scientific evidence from an academic viewpoint. Throughout the period of the 1980s, in an attempt to help people face the painful realities of their daily lives in a contracting economy, Robert Schuller updated Peale's 'positive thinking', re-coining it *possibility thinking* in his four books *Tough Times Never Last, But Tough People Do* (1983), *Tough-Minded Faith for Tender-Hearted People* (1985), *The Be (Happy) Attitudes* (1985) and *Be Happy You Are Loved* (1986).

The steady growth in scope and depth of the self-help genre has now become a mass phenomenon. Especially from the seventies and the eighties onwards, self help 'gurus' such as Tony Robbins, Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer, John Gray, Chris Griscom, Zig Ziglar, Neale Donald Walsh or Robert Kiyosaki – just a sample of a long list of authors – reach out to the public through the extensive marketing of improvement via books, CDs, DVDs, seminars, newsletters, blogs and webpages, offering their services and acting as psychologists or counsellors. Indeed, Robbins is aware of his own relationship to evangelical tendencies in the culture. His infomercial coproducer Greg Renker noted that "The infomercial boomed because the televangelists ran into problems. We are the new televangelists" (Stanton 1994: 106).

Robbins was one of the first self-help gurus to avail himself of new technologies for spreading his message. As the Federal Communications Commission's ruling deregulated television advertising in 1984 and made way for the infomercial, Robbins produced one of the most successful infomercials in the short history of the form, reportedly selling \$120 million worth of audiotapes in his first five years of broadcasting (Stanton 1994: 106). Rather than relying on the sale of print media, "Robbins has built his empire on the sales of audiotapes and compact discs and the production of charismatic revival-style spectacles" (McGee 2005: 63). His annual sales from seminars and tapes are reported to be close to \$50 million per year (Levine 1997: 53). These figures and the plethora of contemporary 'bestselling' self-help authors expose the irony at the core of the self-help business: the fact that the personal wealth and success of

many figures no doubt comes mainly from their marketing of self-help rather than from other success recipes which are then marketed.

Nonetheless, it is evident that there is an ever-growing public looking for alternative belief systems to quench the thirst for inner peace and happiness in a materialistic-oriented society, devoid, for many, of the religious support systems of the past. As we have seen, rather than being based on Christianity, many self-help books of the second half of the twentieth century focus their attention more on psychology, science and technology and also on Eastern world views and derived applications to find answers in the midst of a world where traditional values and faith in community structure and religious guidelines are in question. The changing economic circumstances with a decline in wages, and an increased uncertainty about employment stability and opportunities, have created a context in which one of the only reliable insurances against economic insecurity seems to be self-improvement. Thus it comes as no surprise that, precisely in this period of declining economic security, we witness an unprecedented increase in the number of self-help titles in the market. And with the emergence of mind-power comes “the belief that one is completely responsible for one’s own reality; that one creates reality” (McGee 2005:60). Then the question that follows is: if success is solely the result of one’s own efforts, then the responsibility for any failure must necessarily be individual shortcomings or weaknesses (Merton 1968: 122).

Therefore, we can suspect that rather than contributing to the achievement of happiness and success, very often “... the literatures of self-improvement, serve as constant reminders of our ostensible insufficiency even as they offer putative solutions”. (McGee 2005: 18). Nowadays, the promise of self-help can lead workers into a “new sort of enslavement: into a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly *belaboured*” (McGee 2005: 12. emphasis mine).

2. Looking Eastward: The Inward Turn

Americans of the late twentieth century tend to regard their own culture, including religion, as:

unusually turbulent, eclectic, and contingent. The countercultural movement that began in the late 1960s gave rise to unconventional, polymorphous religiosity that sought to break through conventional spirituality to explore unknown regions of psyche and soul through such diverse religious resources as Zen, shamanism, and psychoactive drugs, to name but a few. In the 1990s, that search continues in the “New Age” movement. (Anker 1999: 149)

Not satisfied with the ever-growing interest in consumerism and the ego-driven, success-oriented Western culture, there is a clear shift in some of the bestselling self-help literature of the nineties which has its origin three decades earlier, coinciding with different events. On the one hand, during the sixties there was a rise in Eastern practices such as yoga, meditation and martial arts. In 1961 Richard Hittleman brought hatha yoga into American homes via a television program that continued for 30 years (Smith 2000). Transcendental Meditation (TM) was introduced in America by Maharishi

Mahesh Yogi, who became popular in the West through his association with celebrities such as The Beatles, the Beach Boys, singer-songwriter Donovan, actress Mia Farrow and directors Clint Eastwood and David Lynch, amongst others. They all learned and practiced the techniques, often travelling to India to visit guru Maharishi (Woodrum 1982: 94), thus, popularizing Eastern philosophy and practices as never before. At that time, TM found its way into the corporate world and also to the medical establishment because of research into the benefits of meditation and yoga. It was also during this decade (1962) that Timothy Leary started the International Foundation for Internal Freedom (IFIF) to promote LSD research, announcing, four years later, the formation of a psychedelic religion, the League for Spiritual Discovery; he was followed by Owsley, who started an LSD factory in 1965, making large quantities of the drug available to the world for the first time (Lauer 1976: 48-58).

Simultaneously, many Eastern concepts and expressions started becoming common in everyday life. In *Oriental Enlightenment*, Clarke affirms that “throughout the modern period from the time of the Renaissance onward, the East has exercised a strong fascination over Western minds, and has entered into Western cultural and intellectual life in ways which are of considerably more than passing significance within the history of Western ideas” (Clarke 1997: 5). There are countless Eastern expressions and concepts which have now been ‘Westernized’ appearing in such different areas as, business (the need to meditate and do yoga to unwind and get rid of stress not only to feel better, but mainly in order to be more productive); relationships (the introduction of models and expressions like yin and yang applied to the female and male principles); psychology and sports (the use of visualizations and introspection to create and recreate a scene; the popularization of martial arts, thanks mainly to actor Bruce Lee in the seventies); and health (acupuncture, Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine). To ‘Westernize’ an Eastern concept means to use it, out of its original cultural context, to suit certain Western needs. Thus, yoga, a spiritual practice in its origin, started being used in the West as an exercise program to keep fit, toned and healthy, as a way to relieve stress and improve one’s posture or to learn how to breathe more fully. Likewise, meditation and martial arts are also mainly used to fit Western needs, and it is nowadays common to see these practices in movies, television shows, fashion pages, self-help magazines or music videos. According to Paula Smith, “Perhaps this is a critical crossroads, one in which there is the real risk of a profound spiritual practice passed down through the ages becoming watered down as an exercise program. Being the ‘popular’ thing to do may strip away the spiritual depth and sacred meaning” (Smith 2000). Inspired by many ancient Eastern texts from the *Vedas* to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Tao Te Ching*, *The Art of War* (Sun Tzu, 4th century B.C) and the Buddha’s teachings in the *Dhammapada*, an ever-growing number of self-help writers consider that success and happiness can only be attained through inner mastery, that is, ‘private victory’ before ‘public victory’ (Covey 1989), an idea also developed by Chopra (1994), Chin-Ning Chu (1994), Mantak Chia (1985), Tolle (2003) and Byrne (2006). These authors, among others, all New Age inheritors of New Thought, talk about a world in which there is no distinction between self and other, energy and matter, imagination and reality. In such a world “anything one does on one’s own behalf ultimately benefits everyone” (McGee 2005: 70). They describe happiness as something that has to be

found inside and not dependent upon any external circumstance. Inner peace and happiness are achieved through stillness, meditation, visualization and observation of one's thoughts.

In this category of self-help books, writers affirm that only by changing their thoughts will people be able to change their lives, and that those thoughts which receive attention, good or bad, go into the unconscious mind to become the fuel for later events in the real world. In Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret*, Dr. Michael Bernard Beckwith claims "You attract to you the predominant thoughts that you're holding in your awareness, whether those thoughts are conscious or unconscious" (Byrne 2006: 19).

Rather than focusing on the achievement of a dream in the future, these authors remind readers of the importance of living in the present moment. "When you make the present moment, instead of past and future, the focal point of your life, your ability to enjoy what you do – and with it the quality of your life – increases dramatically. Joy is the dynamic aspect of Being" (Tolle 2003: 297).

Thus, we witness a relatively new conception of happiness in the Western world. It is neither an external God, nor a sense of achievement, nor money and possessions of any kind that will bring happiness to the Self, but rather, self-knowledge and the inner mastery of thoughts, emotions and passions as well as the opening of one's heart and the awareness of the 'preciousness' of every moment in life which are the keys to personal success and lasting happiness. This happiness begins when we "cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans, from our family and friends to, eventually, our species" (Devall and Sessions 1993: 242). At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century an ever-growing number of self-help writers offer well-researched 'road maps' to this 'lasting happiness' and readers of the most varied backgrounds who follow their advice report considerable improvement in all areas of their lives. One such road map is the 'happiness model of nine choices' in Rick Foster and Greg Hicks' *How we choose to be happy*. This claims that happiness is a conscious choice that comes from within. It does not require any effort, but rather an attitude towards life, a special awareness that depends on oneself. Aristotle, in the fourth century BC, was aware of this truth when he affirmed that "Nothing can bring you happiness but yourself" (Kenny 1992: 16). Also in the Bible, Jesus proclaimed that "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you" (Luke 17:21) and many others have known and applied this principle in their daily lives. It is only very recently, however, that researchers have turned their attention, through empirical field work, to the construction of a detailed profile of the attitudinal factors involved in happiness. Thus, they are able to provide a road map to be used by individuals and organizations on an empirical basis which is acceptable within the paradigms of a scientifically oriented Western society.

Some researchers argue that self-improvement literature has focused on individual concerns in ways that are largely incompatible with collective political action, and thus contribute to maintaining the status quo (McGee 2005: 23). Other authors affirm that the pursuit of individual self-fulfilment can serve as a catalyst for social change, meaning that individual transformation can and does spur social and political advances. These scholars and activists argue that creating a self, inventing a life of one's own, and seeking one's own desire can be seen as a necessary factor in social and political change,

in spite of the fact that it is usually insufficient.¹⁰ If one imagines self-help culture as a symptom of social unrest that has not yet found a political context, then, “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” (McGee 2005: 191).

3. Conclusion

As we have seen, after more than 150 years of self-help books which encouraged puritan ideals of ‘industry’ and effort in order to achieve success, since World War II there has been an ever-accelerating growth of very different types of self-help books. One need only compare, for example the traditional representations of the ‘rags to riches’ myth through hard work and perseverance in Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick, or the Street Life in New York with the Boot-Blacks* (1867), and the totally different, more psychological, approach to success, blending business achievement and personal development in *Coaching for Performance* (Whitmore 1992), or the more quasi-scientific-spiritual approach to success and happiness of *The Secret* (Byrne 2006), to see how self-help discourse has changed drastically over the years. It is obvious, then, that cultural and historical changes in the meanings surrounding self-help often result in, and reflect back, changes in the literary *representations* of self-help. On the one hand, there are numerous personal-technique manuals focused mainly on achievement, offering specific guidance, for example in relationships, selling, public speaking, etc., often found under a ‘How to’ title. And on the other hand, when analysing the nature of work on the self, we find that the literatures of self-improvement offer two very distinct options: the path of effort versus the path of absolute effortlessness. The former is committed to rational self-mastery, where continuous and never-ending work on the self is offered as a road to success.

The latter is the path of some of the New Age or metaphysical self-improvement literatures (by no means all), which suggest that it is possible to attain one’s goal with a minimum of effort. The realization of the self is, according to these authors, a ‘natural’ process. For them, it is possible to attain “self-acceptance through a mystical oneness” (McGee 2005:142). Often using philosophical, psychological and spiritually-oriented ‘oriental’ discourse, they also use a rhetoric of science and technology to legitimize their approach, in which happiness and success are understood as inner mastery and self-knowledge.

From what has been argued in this article, it is clear that re-reading American self-help literature from a cultural studies perspective should, ultimately, have significant repercussions in understanding the social construction of concepts like self-improvement, success and happiness, and should contribute to the expansion, and redefinition, of existing happiness studies in highly innovative ways. Whereas some authors view the self-help industry as an obsessive treadmill with dubious advantages, rather than a path to a better life (McGee, 2005 or Albanese, 1981), others insist on the positive and inspiring aspects that it provides, offering hope, solace and guidance at a

¹⁰ See for example, Berman (1970); Hochschild (1983); Steinem (1992).

time when there are profound dissatisfactions beneath the landscape of our consumer culture (Butler-Bowdon, 2003). It is evident that this dimension needs to be researched much further, since the field remains almost totally unexplored in academia. One of the objects of these pages has been to provide an overview of the history, scope, variety, and depth of self-help literature, and of its potential to reflect Americans' needs, wants and conceptions of success and happiness through time.

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