

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*, by Micki McGee, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 288 pp.

In this monograph Micki McGee takes a broad view of the nature of self-help in an American culture committed to an endless frontier and grand individual possibilities. Here individuals are generally seen as autonomous and self-governing with Weberian notions of the Protestant ethic embodied in the American culture and its capitalist system. Her intellectual focus is on the possibilities and ramifications of self-invention or re-invention in such a society—a society with a history of economic stratification and exploitation and an inadequate social safety net.

From this way of framing the situation, it makes sense to see the United States as having a culture of self-help and of individuals having the potential to constantly (re)invent themselves often to the neglect of the wider community. But the practical examples and workings of self-help examined by McGee cut a broad swath: she groups individual efforts at personal change, commercial efforts promoting self-improvement or self-actualization, 12-step organizations, corporate attempts to involve workers in decision-making, and mutual aid societies or groups. Her primary focus across these quite different phenomena is a criticism of the ways she sees self-help efforts dominated by individualistic notions of self-improvement rather than collective notions of mutual aid, support, and mobilization for social change. She argues that those various self-help efforts that are focused on individual transformation or are aimed at particular (situational or illness-based) constituencies often are unconcerned with the need to redress broad social inequalities based on race, gender, and class. “Self-improvement culture, as it actually exists, derails the opportunities for individuals to understanding injuries or grievances as part of systematic social problems” (p. 182). Efforts that focus on remaking of the self make it difficult to create collective, cross-organizational, or cross-identity-based movements for social change; “. . . although the idea of individual self-determination remains a

potent political force, the versions of self-invention offered in the preponderance of popular self-help literature typically maintains the status quo. On the other hand, the ideas that self-improvement is premised on—self-determination and self-fulfillment—continue to hold political possibilities that might be tapped for a progressive, even a radical, agenda” (p. 24).

McGee does a fine job of analyzing the individualistic origins of many popular self-improvement programs. She argues we live in a market-driven form of capitalism where the notion that one should “be all one can be” is an advertising slogan encouraging one to exploit the closest natural resource, in this case, one’s self” (p. 175). Thus, we are likely to take our eyes off the ways oneself and others may be formed, constrained, privileged, or oppressed by inequalities of education, employment, wealth, and life opportunities. The most prominent examples of self-help organizations or programs that McGee examines include Alcoholic Anonymous (as a model of varied 12-step programs) and the varied religiously-oriented-based or self-improvement enterprises represented in the efforts of Tony Robbins, Steven Covey, and Tom Peters. These efforts, she argues, privilege inward-looking vehicles to self-fulfillment. As she points out, for the most part the pursuit of self-fulfillment has not led necessarily to greater fulfillment and progressive social change but certainly to unbridled greed and the consolidation of wealth in the hands of a few people and a few social groups. In her view, for instance, “What is missing from Covey’s (and others’) model is any acknowledgment of the actually existing inequitable distribution of resources and power, any concern about how the gendered division of labor in family (and work) life might lead to limited opportunities for women . . . that conflict is not only likely, but perhaps inevitable, if not desirable” (p. 179).

McGee undertakes a major and quite trenchant riff against the weakening of the public sphere, the diminished commitment to a socially responsible common life, the failure to recognize the power of structural constraints, and the weakened safety net of the public/social welfare system in favor of locating responsibility for personal and social outcomes in the hands of individuals, operating autonomously.

However, bundling of so many different approaches and organizations under the rubric of self-help, and to labeling almost all of them individual-centric and negligent of collective support or mobilization, is problematic. McGee’s approach is overly broad; it is based on extensive analyses of only a few (albeit major and very public) examples, and fails to make clear the distinctions in practice between individualistically orientated self-improvement programs and self-help organizations operating as avenues for social support/mutual aid/collective empowerment. McGee’s concern that self-help actually reduces collective action is contradicted by those forms of self-help and self-help organizations that promote collective action.

McGee rues the lack of attention to communal support and (often local) political action in the “self-help” (read self-improvement) literature, but never seriously

examines the wealth of scholarly literature, organizing efforts, and program development that focus on self-help groups as social movement organizations. Indeed, there is considerable work examining self-help groups and organizations as social movement organizations, acknowledging and often using the possibility and even the positive potentiality of conflict, embedded as they are in a notion of institutional inadequacies, unfairness, or oppression and the need for institutional change.

Her argument is that “The pursuit of self-fulfillment could only lead to progressive social change if the self were to be imagined (not as separate but) as relational and embedded: individuals would have to be understood as members of a society comprising more than just voluntary self-selected groups” (p. 100). Indeed, rather than simply a locale for forlorn hope or unrealized possibility, many self-help groups and organizations are doing just that. In such efforts they are going beyond specific local groups’ self-interest to ally with or create coalitions with other such groups and nascent political organizations.

In her objection to what she sees as the individualized and parochial nature of self-help participants’ effort to rewrite the self, McGee also dismisses efforts at narration as a means of communication and exchange. As she argues, “Whereas one’s identity might have formerly been anchored in (and limited by) a community where one’s story was shared in spoken language and known informally, the self-creating self must create a written narrative of his or her life . . .” (p. 157). But the mandate for creating “written narratives,” while potentially useful, is quite rare. Social identity is always in flux, by circumstance and context, and there are many examples of self-help participants forced by major challenging events in their lives to explore new identities and create such individual narratives—and to do so orally and publicly/vocally—in ways that avoid self-absorption and that see the self as constituted by interaction with others and residing in a set of social and economic networks. Moreover, some self-help groups and organizations help create new master narratives that represent communal efforts at meaning-making about self and society and that challenge both “victim narratives” and “dominant narratives.” The strength (and often origin) of many self-help groups lies in their ability to meet the practical/material and social/emotional needs of people not recognized or satisfied by the operations of contemporary agencies and organizations; among these needs is a desire for voice, empowerment, and change.

While we recognize the validity of McGee’s critique of the potentially self-interested, particularized, localized, and micro-impact of situation-oriented self-help ideologies, let us also take time to focus on and celebrate the courage, activism, and personal empowerment (not the same as solipsistic re-inventions of the self) of people working hard at the grass roots level with themselves and their comrades to overcome societal stigma and social/medical or other debilitating and disempowering conditions and statuses. Indeed, collaborative work at various personal, organizational, and societal levels is necessary for the kinds of social change both McGee and I (and many others) seek.

Finally, in understanding both the strengths and limits of this work it would help to understand McGee's own location, reflexive stance, and process in creating this work. Has she ever been a participant in this grand movement, a member of a self-help group—which and how many? To what extent does she work and write from the inside or outside of these phenomena? As self-disclosure, I write from the standpoint of a former member and leader of a local self-help support group for families of children with cancer, and as a leader of a national and then an international confederation of local and national groups/organizations. These organizations combine mutual support with program and policy advocacy around families and children in an attempt to influence domestic legislation/practice, as well as link to national and international cancer agencies and broader health issues via UNESCO and WHO. I also have written an academic monograph and articles about these groups and a handbook for organizing them and promoting their institutional change foci.

*Self-Help, Inc.* is a worthwhile read, with thoughtful documentation and critique of the U.S. culture's penchant for self-improvement as a cooptation of social challenge and social change efforts focusing on entrenched inequality and institutionalized oppression; but, it throws the baby out with the bath water. It simply does not reflect the totality of the self-help movement, especially those self-help groups and organizations that respond to threat and loss by accepting the possibility, even the positive potentiality, of social conflict and social change. Many advocate for change both at the local level (e.g., vis-à-vis institutions and practices most pressing on their social/medical situations and individual/group concerns) and at the national policy level. In these instances, self-help activities have increased rather than eliminated the possibilities of redress, though not at a macro-societal level and not of a sort that creates or leads to economic and social justice. But why not start here and try to both conceptualize and develop grassroots coalitions across these disparate elements of the self-help culture?

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