

Historicizing “therapeutic culture” – Towards a material and polycentric history of psychologization

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, social theorists have noted the incorporation of psychological interpretation and intervention frameworks into major social realms of North American and European societies. Commonly designated as “therapeutic culture”, this phenomenon has surfaced in child rearing, management models, social work, but also in bookstores, whose shelves are now heaving with personal development guides, or in talk shows and magazines featuring highly emotional life stories. As a result, “therapeutic discourse,” which fosters “self-examination,” self-expression, and growth, “has become a dominant cultural form, shaping and organizing [the] experience” of many individuals (Stein, 2011, p. 187). Other expressions related to “therapeutic culture” or “therapeutic ethos” emphasize the process rather than cultural effects. “Psychologization,” for example, bears on both the “popularization” of psychology and the “expansion of the academic discipline, while “psychotherapeutization” refers to the spread of therapeutic models and practices into everyday life (Malich & Balz, 2020, p. 24).

While no clear consensus definition of “therapeutic culture” has been reached, three aspects have often been raised in the literature on the subject. First, there is a kind of shared diagnosis that the relatively young mind sciences expanded far beyond their original fields of expertise and traditional locations (academic departments, private practice, hospitals ...). The second aspect concerns the type of psychology that has become a subject of popular interest. “Therapeutic culture” is based on the terminology and explanatory models of psychotherapy. Thereby, it borrows not only from the discipline of psychology but also from medicine, blurring the boundaries between the pathological and the normal around lifestyle and performance improvement. Accordingly, “psychologization” can also be understood as an extension of the notion of “medicalization.” This “therapeutic turn” is mirrored in the discursive popularity of terms such as “trauma”, “vulnerability,” and “personal growth” (Furedi, 2003). Finally, some social theorists have interpreted it as a change in the modes of subjectivation, characterized by the de-valuation of the reference to traditional sources of authority, obedience, and role conformity. Correspondingly, the “therapeutic culture” diagnosis carries negative connotations, associated, as it has been, with erosion of communal bonds, at times inevitably accompanied by a rise of narcissism.

2 | LITERATURE ON THERAPEUTIC CULTURE AND THERAPEUTIC ETHOS

The beginning of a sociological preoccupation for the cultural ramifications of psychotherapy is commonly traced back to the publication in 1966 of Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Madsen, 2014). By triumph, we must understand here that the success of psychoanalysis and its offshoots was no longer only clinical, but also cultural. To Rieff, psychotherapy had become a “worldview” within affluent Western mass societies, epitomized by the United States, sustaining a shift in the predominant character ideal, in sum, from “religious man” to “psychological man” (Ehrenberg, 2012, p. 133). The latter was characterized as “the latest, and perhaps the supreme, individualist,” that is, a model man oriented towards himself (Rieff, 1966, p. 10).

Today, Rieff's book is regarded as typifying a cultural "mode of criticism" originating in "the liberal public intellectual tradition of post-war America, recently termed the "'canonical' critique of therapeutic culture" by Aubry and Travis (2015, p. 10). Under this heading, these authors have also classified the writings of "U.S. critiques of narcissism and therapeutic individualism" (Stein, 2011, p. 189), such as Richard Sennett (1977), Christopher Lasch (1978), T. J. Jackson Lears (1981), or Robert Bellah et al. (1985). A further mode of criticism has drawn upon Michel Foucault's latest work on governmentality, taken as "the contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self" (Foucault, 1988, p. 19), to which have been appended some works by sociologists Nikolas Rose (1990, 1996), Jacques Donzelot (1977), and Robert Castel (F. Castel et al., 1979; R. Castel & Le Cerf, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c).

These varying intellectual traditions have shared a rather negative outlook on the therapeutic. For some, like Rieff and Sennett, the dissemination of psychological interpretive patterns led to a retreat into the private sphere. According to this reading, the therapeutic turn equates to the prevalence of instinct over culture, of individual impulses over social restraints and guilt (Ehrenberg, 2012, pp. 133–135; Koch, 2017, p. 99). It would encourage disengagement from traditional sources of authority, and independence from public ethics and communal purpose, undermining the weight of morality and precipitating the decline of Western culture (Wright, 2008, p. 323).

While reaching similar pessimistic conclusions, Lasch has, by contrast, linked the rise of "psychological man" to the expansion of the public sphere since the early 20th century (Marquis, 2014, p. 17). He considered that the welfare state, bureaucracy, and increasing reliance on experts were among the social forces that had converted "collective grievances into personal problems amenable to therapeutic intervention" (Lasch, 1978, pp. 13–14). The contributions inspired by Foucault's writings have also maintained the link between the therapeutic and politics. Less concerned with the decline of Western societies than with power patterns, they have instead emphasized its ties to governance through self-regulation.

Beyond significant variations, this critical social theory scholarship converges in challenging the promises conveyed by the therapeutic. The new attention paid to the self, its motives, and emotions have been associated with an impoverished and distorted understanding of social problems, their depoliticization, and increased personal responsibility, which threatens to weaken, rather than fulfill individuals (Demailly, 2006; Wright, 2008, p. 325–326).

In counterpoint, other scholars have offered less categorical arguments about the therapeutic turn. Sociologist of culture Eva Illouz (2007) deserves special mention. In a series of works, she has analyzed the role played by psychology in the emergence of an "emotional capitalism," that is, a growing interpenetration of economy and intimacy, of strategic self-interest and emotional reflexivity. Her approach to therapeutic culture has stepped aside from earlier research in two ways. First, rather than taking this "cultural idiom" for granted (Illouz, 2008, p. 238), Illouz has sought to substantiate how it emerged in American society in the early 20th century, the ways it circulated in the family and the corporate workplace, and the kind of institutional and cultural dynamics permitting this. Her analyses have, for instance, identified the mass media as a key mediating cultural agent between these macro-institutions and the public, decisively involved in the "codification" and dissemination of a therapeutic ethos (Illouz, 2003). Furthermore, Illouz has argued that to understand how lay actors use psychological language in everyday interactions, such pragmatic inquiries should avoid a priori political and normative understandings of social relations. On the consequences of the therapeutic turn, rather than a turn inward detrimental to a supposedly common civic culture, Illouz has underlined the blurring boundaries between private and public, and between the feminine and the masculine. According to her, this fading away occurs through a twofold process of "emotionalization of economic conduct" and "rationalization of intimate relations" (Illouz, 2008, p. 239).

Sociologist Anthony Giddens, for his part, has painted an ambivalent portrait of the therapeutic. He has argued that, in late modern and globalized societies, social relationships are being "disembedded" from local contexts of interactions. He has added that traditional social orders are being displaced by decontextualized expert systems as a source of authority, including psychological expert systems. As he views it, de-traditionalization is an ambivalent yet democratic process, a source of both psychological insecurity and emancipation. In enhancing people's autonomy

and equality in the private sphere, Giddens suggests, it also has the potential to consolidate democratic aspirations in the larger community (Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1992 quoted in Gross & Simmons, 2002).

On a more prospective note, legal scholar Angela Harris (2016) has likewise emphasized equivocal implications. The incorporation of therapeutic discourses in institutional settings, from corporate workplaces to the criminal justice system, has “the potential to subvert the aims of the feminist movement”, insidiously by “making the political personal”, but, also more straightforwardly, by bolstering “abuses of power in the name of caring” (pp. 117, 127). And yet, therapeutic culture cannot simply be pitted against feminism. Together with Illouz, Harris recognizes its congruencies with some strains of second-wave feminism. Specifically, therapeutic culture “makes traditionally female skills of emotional intelligence and the work of “emotional labor” and emotion management relevant [...] to public life—just as difference feminists hoped”, but also to men, steering clear of sex and gender essentialism (p. 122). Provided that its “apolitical” and even “antipolitical” tendencies are contained, Harris adds, diffuse therapeutic culture could become a tool in the hands of feminists to mobilize against power inequalities and social injustices (pp. 127, 118).

Drawing on feminist insights, other scholars have expanded on the potential subversive effects of the therapeutic turn, questioning some of the assumptions underlying its received accounts. Among them, sociologist Katie Wright (2008) has argued that Rieff’s declinist account “reflects his conservative view of the necessity of a hierarchically differentiated social order” (p. 327). It is grounded, she explains, in a theory of culture postulating the need for a “cultural elite” acting as a repository and conveyor of moral values to the masses (p. 327). As Aubry and Travis (2015) have added, these assumptions were challenged by the radical political movements of the long 1960s, which have not only dismissed “traditional forms of authority”, but also opposed “a plurality of ethnic, sexual, and affective subcultures” to the “ideal of cultural unity” (p. 13). From a feminist perspective the trends associated with the therapeutic turn can be interpreted in a different light. Wright (2008) has suggested that the erosion of authority vested with the clergy, the husband, or the father, together with the weakening of a gendered public/private divide have “opened up new discursive space” for women and other minoritized groups (p. 328). In the same vein, sociologist Arlene Stein (2011) has proposed to reverse the image of a depoliticizing process. She claims that, at times, “the popularization of therapeutic discourse” has instead “energiz[ed] social movements” (p. 189). Against readings of therapeutic culture as a vector of subjection, to which Stein includes those of Rose and Illouz, she argues that it has facilitated the public expression and recognition of “shame and suffering” (p. 189). As examples of such “narrative communities” that linked “therapy and politics” (p. 192), she has highlighted the movement to combat child sexual abuse and that of children of Holocaust survivors in the United States (Stein, 2009; Whittier, 2009).

Eventually, in addition to those studies suggesting that therapeutic culture can be as much part of an individualistic and depoliticizing rationale as it can be a source of political mobilization that reconnects individuals, a series of recent works carried out in different geographical areas such as Finland (Salmenniemi, 2019), China (Yang, 2021) or the Caribbean (Nehring & Kerrigan, 2022) have contributed to undermining the idea of a single and univalent therapeutic culture. Taken together, these works point to a multiplicity of therapeutic cultures marked by regional, national, and local particularities in terms of the psychologies involved, the modalities of dissemination, the privileged targets of intervention, and the resulting effects.¹ This multiplicity complicates sociological accounts of the rise of a ubiquitous therapeutic culture in contemporary Western societies.

While sociological studies have highlighted the existence of a therapeutic culture to the point that it has been described as a major phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century, it has not received in-depth attention from historians of psychology and psychotherapy. Exceptions include the works of Tändler (2016) and Maasen et al. (2011), and Malich and Balz (2020), which propose a first historical synthesis of the psychologization process and its critics. Pache (2022) and Ruck et al. (2022) have focused more specifically on its historical ties to the women’s movement and feminism, Gerber (2023) to continuing professional training, while media scholar Stark (2017) has addressed the question of how psychotherapy has been disseminated to the public through the historical case of Albert Ellis’ “mediated” Rational Therapy.

3 | AIMS AND PRESENTATION OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

In line with recent work on therapeutic culture, this special issue takes a historical perspective on the processes of psychologization and psychotherapization through a series of empirical case studies. Following two main axes, we aim to question the meaning of therapeutic culture as a ubiquitous, uniform, and univocal phenomenon. First, selected papers emphasize practice, materiality, and tools in the formation, dissemination, and appropriation of psychological schemas, specifying how therapeutic epistemologies have been enacted in situated contexts. Second, the attention paid to the situatedness of therapeutic culture allows us to move beyond the Anglo-American-centric view of the phenomenon, and approach it from a “polycentric” and international perspective (Danziger, 1996; Marks, 2018; Nehring et al., 2020; Shamdasani, 2018). To do so, we chose to explore different geographical areas and socio-political contexts, ranging from North America to Europe and North Africa, from liberal democratic societies to centrally planned economies and authoritarian societies, and from times of peace to times of conflict. This collection thus aims to contribute to a better understanding of the process of formation of therapeutic cultures, by paying attention to the specificities drawn from the time and place in which it unfolded, as well as to the movement of psychological constructs, forms of intervention, or theoretical currents between social fields, institutions or countries.

In the first article, Christopher Rudeen takes a step away from classical, abstract, accounts of the rise of therapeutic culture in the United States. Instead of postulating the spread of therapeutic discourses from academic and clinical settings into everyday and institutional life, Rudeen takes the relatively untrodden path of examining how theory became practice by highlighting the mediating cultural role of market research. Drawing on Ernest Dichter's papers, this article uses the case of his motivational research to uncover the materiality of this cultural phenomenon. It focuses on a study of fur coats conducted by Dichter's Institute for Motivational Research in the late 1950s that articulated the consumption of goods with the ambivalent—expectation-raising yet anxiety-provoking—repercussions of post-war prosperity on middle-class subjectivities. Through his study on fur, Dichter observed, above all, a shift in the needs of white middle-class American women from the satisfaction of basic physical needs to attending to their inner lives. Psychologically informed market research thus emphasized clothes as a medium for both self-realization and gender performance. The article also shows that it became a place where tensions around shifting notions of gender roles and femininity unfolded, as illustrated in the categories used to develop a projective test and a typology of fur owners for advertising purposes. Attentive to the materialization of therapeutic culture in tools and objects, this case study shows how scientific marketing both recorded and shaped new conceptions of the self and thereby contributes to locating this cultural trend in US consumer society.

Alongside the developments described by Rudeen, “dance-movement therapy” was flourishing on the West Coast of the United States, the history of which is addressed in Janka Kormos' contribution to this special issue. It examines how this therapeutic method successively, but independently developed in the second half of the 20th century in the United States and Hungary. In this way, Kormos moves towards what could be called a somatic history of therapeutic culture in which the body in movement was itself a channel of psychological interventions and worldviews. The article draws on the writings and oral testimonies of protagonists of this method, who were psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, but also theoreticians and practitioners of modern and postmodern dance. It adopts a comparative perspective in psychotherapy history and reconstructs the distinct Hungarian and American cultural settings that were conducive to the professionalization of dance-movement therapy. In both countries, a dual process was at play: one of “therapeutization” of dance, and one of “psychologization” of the body. However, as Kormos argues, this process was shaped by the degree of institutional recognition of the psy-disciplines in those different socio-political contexts and times, as well as by the different prevailing dance esthetics. Thus, by contrast with the American example, in Hungary, the development of dance-movement therapy in the last decade of state socialism rested on its depoliticization, and a predominant focus of its promoters was on the somatic aspects of their practice and on group dynamics.

The following two articles (Lehmbrock, this issue; Tillema, this issue) are centered on psychological expertise in the workplace and social skills-oriented continuing training in the long 1970s. They both address the interrelations between psychology, governance, and subjectivities from a historical perspective, but in different societies and economies.

As Verena Lehmbrock argues in her contribution, scholarly discussions on the relations between social psychology, psychotherapy, and styles of governance in the workplace have so far been largely circumscribed to Western liberal societies, overlooking comparable dynamics in real-socialist societies. Delving into the centrally planned economy and authoritarian society of the German Democratic Republic, Lehmbrock identifies in Social Psychological Training (SPT) the expression of a therapeutic culture of its own. Developed by Jena psychologists oriented toward Marxism in the late 1960s, SPT was a group intervention for improving the social skills of the “cadres” of state enterprises and organizations. This article provides an intellectual and socio-cultural history of SPT articulated to a polycentric approach of therapeutic culture. Drawing on hitherto unexplored archives, it reconstructs the transnational networks in which SPT formed and recovers its components borrowed from Western group methods of change. While making the official image of SPT more complex, Lehmbrock remains attentive to the creative adaptation of knowledge circulating between the blocs. The differences between Western and Eastern group dynamics are highlighted, particularly with regard to the prioritization between self-knowledge and -growth and the fulfillment of societal duties. SPT was nevertheless open to individual appropriations, at a distance from its official rationality, and in affinity with the liberal philosophy underlying its Western counterparts. In pinpointing the unintended individualizing effects of SPT, this article draws attention to the polyvalence of social-psychological interventions, their adaptability to different societies and political economies, and, hence, to their mobility and longevity.

Linnea Tillema also brings into relief the neglected place of group dynamics in the transposition of psychological and therapeutic schemes to the business workplace. Her article examines the importation from the United States to Sweden of “sensitivity training” in the 1970s, at a time when the governing Social Democratic Party and blue-collar trade unions pursued radical labor market reforms. It unravels the entanglement between American therapeutic culture and domestic struggles for the democratization and humanization of work. Drawing from social psychology and humanistic therapies, sensitivity training was introduced in the corporate sector to cultivate a new leadership style for managers and executives that stressed emotional awareness, self-expression, and actualization. This case study raises questions of periodization, challenging established narratives of governmentality studies. As Tillema argues, Swedish sensitivity training represents an unexpected early example of management models that have elsewhere been conceived as symptomatic of the impact of the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s on the organization of work. As this “authenticity technique” has been promoted in Sweden by the business sector and trade unions, rather than by counter-cultural actors, the article also questions the enabling historical ties between a therapeutic culture of self-growth, an individualistic critic of capitalism, and managerial discourses. In Swedish sensitivity training, “The crying boss” further identifies a variant of the “emotional capitalism” theorized by Eva Illouz, which emphasized emotional liberation, rather than control, for the sake of economic efficiency and competitiveness, but likewise blurred the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine.

The last article by Mélanie Henry further expands on the socio-political contexts and the geographical areas covered in this special issue. It examines the development of a therapeutic culture in Algeria since the 1980s, in its relation to the decade-long civil war that followed the bloody uprising of October 1988 and to the 2019 *Hirak* protest movement. Taking a social and cultural history perspective, and drawing on oral history interviews, professional literature, and press articles, it investigates the interactions between promoters of psychotherapy, the state, and popular mobilizations, particularly the women's movement. The primary areas of inquiry encompass the application of psychotherapy in various contexts, the influence and potency of psychopathological and psychoanalytical discourses, and the ethical considerations and implications of interpersonal connections and behaviors within the sphere of politics. Henry observes a change in the approach to psychological suffering, towards legitimization of trauma, and subsequently of less extraordinary problems, which went hand in hand with

the politicization of psychotherapy over the course of these political events. Specifically, the emphasis on testimony in procedures for preventing posttraumatic stress disorders in victims of terrorist violence has been a vector of politicization by bridging individual and collective histories. The war and its aftermath thus appear here as sites for the development of forms of psychologization. Far from a historiography in which Algeria appears only as the “other” of Europe, this article describes a therapeutic culture specific to this country, while making this case study a paradigmatic example of an “empire of trauma” (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009).

4 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the empirically grounded analyses of the “psychologization” of subjectivity and social life conducted by the authors of this issue provide valuable results for understanding “therapeutic culture” in hitherto little explored ways. The collected articles point out the need to examine these processes by decentering from an analytical model patterned on the North American and Western European cases. In contrast to earlier scholarship that emphasized a ubiquitous and sometimes uniform movement, this issue invites us to consider the notion of therapeutic culture in the plural, whose sources and valence varied depending on the places and times considered.

The therapeutic cultures described here in a comparative or transnational perspective emerge as complex phenomena, resulting from the hybridization of locally situated conceptual and practical frameworks with psychological currents that originated elsewhere. The history of “psychologization” or “psychotherapeutization” is not conflated with the triumph of “American” mind sciences. The latter underwent creative adaptations in response to specific circumstances, while other locally elaborated knowledge became involved in international dynamics not strictly linked to North American psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, and self-growth therapies and movements.

The attention paid to continuities and differences also raises the question of the polyvalence of psychological interventions. Several articles highlight the apparently paradoxical involvement of social psychology and group practices in the formation of therapeutic cultures, uncovering complex articulations between the individual and the collective at the level of the techniques themselves, but also in their purposes and unintended uses. Such entanglements are especially apparent in psychological interventions in the workplace, where the group provided a vehicle for effecting personal change in conformity to the requirements of a business or organization. Yet, the contributions to this issue remind us that techniques can find uses and roles distinct from their primary purpose. They suggest that the individualizing propensities of frameworks and techniques derived from psychotherapy may align or stray from the existing social and political order. At times, as Henry's contribution argues, psychotherapy has even contributed to the aggregation of individual problems and to their political framing, favoring public engagements. Taken together, these contributions call for a more dialectical and contextualized appreciation of the social and political implications of the therapeutic.

Equally, this shift away from a model rooted in the North American and Western European histories of the second half of the 20th century has implications for periodization. The identification of a therapeutic turning point around the 1960s deserves further clarification and qualification, as do explanations constructed in terms of the determination of therapeutic culture by liberal or neoliberal capitalism. One of the key contributions of the present articles, which cover a period from the 1950s to the 1990s, indeed lies in the reassessment of the links between psychological expertise, governance, and liberal or neoliberal rationale and contexts.

From a methodological point of view, the cultural history proposed in this issue makes use of original sources, offering ways of accessing *practices*. The problematic of the self is enriched by a history of the body and objects in psychologization processes; oral history interviews allow us to get close to the actors' point of view, which is often difficult to document due to a lack of sources. Finally, this special issue invites historians to take a critical look at the concept of “therapeutic culture” and to join and develop the recently initiated historiographical debates that explore the characteristics and scope of this phenomenon.

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ENDNOTE

ⁱ For an example of differentiated dissemination of psychotherapeutic practices and knowledge, see Amouroux et al. (2022)'s examination of the introduction of behavior therapy in the European Francophone context.

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