

Therapeutic Culture and New Age: communicating the “religiosity of self”

Cultura terapêutica e Nova Era: comunicando a “religiosidade do self”

Cultura terapéutica y Nueva Era: la comunicación de la “religión del self”

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Abstract *In this article we analyze the articulations of the so called therapeutic culture with the practices of cultural and media consumption related to the New Age. In Brazil, this movement, also known as the Age of Aquarius, carries a close connection with the ethos of self-help while providing indications of the contemporary ways of relating to the sacred, which brings the self and the search for self-realization to the forefront.*

Keywords: *New Age; therapeutic culture; self-help; self.*

Resumo *Neste artigo, analisamos as articulações da chamada cultura terapêutica com as práticas de consumo cultural e midiático ligadas à Nova Era. No Brasil, o movimento, também conhecido como Era de Aquários, guarda estreita ligação com o ethos da autoajuda e fornece indicativos das formas contemporâneas de relação com o sagrado, que colocam em primeiro plano o self e a busca por autorrealização.*

Palavras-chave: *Nova Era; cultura terapêutica; autoajuda; self.*

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Resumen *en este trabajo, se analizan las articulaciones de la llamada cultura terapéutica con las prácticas de consumo cultural y mediático vinculadas a la Nueva Era. En Brasil, el movimiento, también conocido como Era de Acuario, tiene estrecha relación con el ethos de la autoayuda y ofrece indicativos de las formas contemporáneas de relación con lo sagrado, que ponen en el primer plano el self y la búsqueda de la realización personal.*

Palabras-clave: *Nueva Era; cultura terapéutica; autoayuda; self.*

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Introduction

Beginning in mid-twentieth century we can notice the spread of an imaginary that puts emotion and subjectivity as fundamental elements to the understanding of issues relating to all aspects of human life. According to some researchers, this phenomenon marks the rise of what the American sociologist Philip Rieff christened as the therapeutic culture (RIEFF, 1966).

According to Frank Furedi (2004), one of the main symptoms of this phase can be measured by the increasing use of therapeutic vocabulary, which no longer just refers to only atypical problems and exotic mental states, but has become common in everyday situations. Expressions such as stress, anxiety, addiction, compulsion, trauma, syndrome, self-esteem, and counseling become a part of the shared imaginary and reveal not only an idiomatic change, but the emergence of new cultural attitudes and expectations.

For Eva Illouz (2008), the Protestant Reformation formulated the symbols of an American identity at the deepest levels. Similarly, the author suggests that today the therapeutic culture plays an equivalent role in Western society. According to Illouz, to be able to take into account the power of such a culture we have to take into account its forms, which go beyond the scope of the texts and theories produced by formal organizations and certified professionals. In Brazil, where much of the contact of the population with traditional therapy techniques is still limited, the therapeutic culture also expands admirably, particularly through knowledge shared through a wide variety of cultural articles and media such as television programs³, radio, movies, series, magazines with the target audience ranging from housewives all the way to businessmen, and especially through the huge self-help industry, which in addition to the books also has a growing arsenal continually more elaborate of audiovisual products, lectures, workshops, courses, experiences, immersion programs, group dynamics, etc.

³ About the psychologizing discourse of the Brazilian TV show *Casos de Família*, see Freire Filho, Castellano, and Fraga, 2008.

The origins of therapeutic culture in the country can be traced back to the first decades of the twentieth century when translations of works considered classics of psychoanalysis began to arrive. However, it is only in the late 1960s and especially in the 1970s that it will reach its peak. Its popularity among the middle and upper classes of the Brazilian metropolitan regions occurred in parallel to the flowering of the movement known as New Age (DUARTE and CARVALHO, 2005).

Parallel to the organization of psychoanalysis as a discipline, the Brazilian publishing market began to publish books aimed at a wider audience in order to meet the interest that the subject aroused. Besides the Freudian-inspired texts and translations from the author himself, there arose books that sought to unravel the meanings of dreams, as well as numerous titles dedicated to sexuality, dealing with sexually transmitted diseases, sex education for children, along with covering all kinds of disorders and diseases including a series of collections with a focus on counseling.

The 1960s and 1970s in Brazil were marked by various attempts at resistance to the military dictatorship that had been established in the country through the 1964 coup. As the traditional paths of social transformation seemed blocked, alternative forms of questioning emerged. The two most significant manifestations were presented in the areas of the leftist armed struggle and the counterculture movement⁴. While the former took straight to action in order to have a direct interference in political issues, the “loafers”, as they were derogatorily called, opted for inner transformation and interventions in everyday practice confined to privacy (RISÉRIO, 2005).

This type of position sought a sort of social confrontation based on individual decisions, and proposed the challenge through practices such as the use of drugs, especially LSD, engaging in artistic manifestations, in the defense of free sex, the struggle for feminism, in ecological thinking,

⁴ For Antonio Risério (2005), the counterculture was an international movement that in Brazil was strongly influenced by this specific time. Thus, according to the author, the counterculture existed in the country *despite* the dictatorship and not *because of* the dictatorship.

creating alternative communities, etc. The adhesion of several segments to psychoanalysis can be partly credited to this cultural moment.

Thus, spirituality and religion could not have gone unscathed. In the United States, where the counterculture appeared more strongly since the 1950s—initially with the *beatnik* movement, gaining momentum later with the challenges to the Vietnam War and with the civil rights movement—the criticism turned mainly against Protestant culture. In Brazil, the Catholic Church became the target of the questioning and in that sense the shift toward religions and spiritual practices of the East was significant, and later toward those of the Indians and Africans linked to Brazilian roots (MAGNANI, 2000).

Labeled as alienated, drug addicts, and vagrants, the individuals linked to the counterculture tried to bring meaning to their lives that went beyond those they could find in a society that showed to be increasingly repressive. The set of practices related to redefining the ideal of the sacred in this context served to strengthen and promote the New Age movement, which, in Brazil, settled mainly in the 1980s when a significant esoteric group began to appear frequently in the media where they published practices associated with the movement (D’ANDREA, 2000; CRUZ, 2010).

The origins of the New Age, however, were from well before. They can be found in the North American transcendentalism of the nineteenth century, in theosophy, and in the esoteric and occult currents of European origin. The counterculture contributed so that this movement would reach a larger audience and it increased the flow between eastern and western currents in building an alternative lifestyle to those existing models at the time (MAGNANI, 2000).

There is great difficulty in presenting a definition, even an instrumental one, of New Age because the movement—also called the Age of Aquarius—is characterized precisely by its heterogeneity. To categorize the phenomenon as a religion is quite complex. Some authors prefer to define it as a “new religious consciousness,” a spirituality without religion, an alternative way to relate to the transcendent. The guiding idea

of the movement is that the time is approaching when men will be reconciled with themselves after centuries of materialism and alienation. The New Age would then be the most striking manifestation of these spiritualities born in a detraditionalization context (RÜDIGER 1996).

Such practices create the possibility of going through religious experiences more freely without the claim of exclusivity of the traditional religions in the Western world, which have a more rigid institutional setting, a hierarchical system that presupposes the existence of some kind of sacred scripture or Supreme Being. According to Anthony D'Andrea:

In addition to the institutional dimension, [post-traditional spiritualities] an individualistic, flexible, and dynamic character is presented whose diffusion expresses an “invisible religion” according to the terms of sociologist Thomas Luckmann. In some borderline cases, these religiosities reveal a sharp magical trait in which individuals turn to solve personal problems without joining their thoughts or commitment to an institution or a defined ethical or religious system (D'ANDREA, 2000, p. 10).

If it is difficult to define the set of practices that make up the New Age, it is also certain that one of the marks of the movement, at least as it was conceived in its origins, is a refusal of the growing secularization of the modern world and its excessive materialism. So the New Age practitioners defend the recovery of the primordial relation between man and nature and the commitment to a number of provisions pertaining to a “divine self” that exists inside each individual. For this reason the New Age is often cited as a “religion of the *self*” (TUCKER, 2002) or the “religion of postmodernity” (MILLS, 1994; TERRIN, 1996).

New Age and the ethos of self-help

The activities, premises, and aspirations of New Age is a “cultural consciousness linked to a disconnected set of cosmological conceptions and spiritual practices” (RÜDIGER 1996, p. 121) are inserted in one of the main merchandising developments of the so-called therapeutic culture: the self-help literature, which claims for itself the task of establishing

practices that enable people to carry out changes in the various domains of their lives. In addition to the changes in the field of practice, the strong theme of these books, and also the repercussions of this genre in the media, is to establish as a fundamental transformation factor the use of internal resources and the remodeling of the relationship we have with our subjectivity. Based on this, New Age can be understood as a kind of religious and mystical reference source from which the self-help culture has fed. During the 1980s and 1990s it was the most profitable branch of this publishing genre in Brazil, which went through fads such as publications about angels, Buddhist practices, Feng Shui, numerology, etc. All this movement in the book market was followed by a media reverberation. While the magazines specialized in horoscope, crystals, and spiritual themes gained more and more space on the newsstands, the presence of “experts” in these areas also became frequently broadcast on television programs, mainly in the afternoon, where teachings were given on such practices.

Those aspects of esoteric self-help that mix counseling and religion, which is still quite an important arm of this kind, can be understood as the culmination of the process of secularization of the relationship with the divine, which refers to a point that also serves as a backdrop to a series of questions relating to the decline of tradition and the disenchantment of the world.

Generally, in the periods before the modern era, the identity did not represent an issue in most societies with which individuals should be concerned because tradition guaranteed to each person the social role into which they fit. The traditional way of life, marked by life in community where social ties exerted a strong influence on personal development, indicating right and wrong, the expected and the impossible, was also shaped by the importance exercised by magic, by the transcendental aspect of existence. Modernity marks the moment when the collective representations lose strength and the individuals, deprived of the assistance that was given them, need to undergo a control and a constant recycling of their manner of acting in order to ensure their

actions as an independent social agent and the preservation of their own identity. There is therefore a transformation of the identity in the area of public scrutiny and subject to internal remodeling, characteristics of the moment that some authors consider as the decline of the inner and the rise of self as a locus of intervention.

If that subject from the pre-modern communities no longer exists in much of the world, if the values, beliefs, and ideals disseminated no longer enjoy the same prestige that they did in the past, individuals seek a new identity that is no longer given to them at the time of their birth. It needs to be built. The materials available, however, are many and varied, and the media's role collaborates toward being directly responsible for creating the profusion of types with which the subject can now *identify* and the ethos of self-help that favors the distinction between good identities (winning, successful, independent) and bad ones (failed, dependent, stagnant).

The decline of tradition opened up many possibilities for individuals, but it also brought in its wake the anguish of the individuation. In modern society, there is continually more the pressure for subjects to become independent, to have a clear project, to discover and define what kind of life they wish to have, and how. In the words of Gilberto Velho (1987, p. 44), "what the individual moral subject wants and intends needs to be defined. It somehow needs to be distinguished and detached from wider units."

Over the past centuries, some of the changes brought about by the weakening of the symbolic order have been accentuated and other institutions that guide individual conduct, such as the family and the political party, have also lost ground, although this varies greatly depending on the social context and geographical location. The connection with the divine, in particular, has undergone remarkable changes in many places. If before the dynamics of the world was likely to be explained by the logic of enchantment—from the social structures to the natural phenomena—today it seems like we cannot find explanations (and answers) to even the most trivial questions about our existence. Therefore,

for a considerable part of the population, the social environment and the pastor (priest, rabbi, or what have you) no longer serves to provide solutions at moments of doubt, neither do they present preconceived models of insertion in the world, and one of the noticeable side effects of this model is insecurity.

For Frank Furedi (2004), the rise of the therapeutic culture and the prominence of self-help gurus are in a large measure a result of this process of disenchantment of the world and the decline of tradition. Commenting on the lack of a sense of historical continuity observed in contemporary societies, Lasch says that it is quite symptomatic that instead of resorting to our own experiences, we “allow experts to define for us our needs, and then we are surprised wondering why these needs never seem to be satisfied” (1983, p. 16).

In the same way that the therapeutic culture is not restricted to the practice of the professionals in the field of psyche, the self-help culture is not only propagated through books. Even though the publishing market remains primarily responsible for disseminating the lectures associated with the themes such as self-improvement, self-fulfillment, and the quest for success and happiness, the media, particularly in the last two decades, has been a platform for the phenomenon defined by Bauman (1998, p. 222) as a “surge of counseling” characterized by the constant presence of experts on television programs, radio, in newspaper columns, and in magazines that incorporate, with specific adaptations, the kind of language heralded by the books.

The phenomenon is quite significant in printed journalism. As to what has been called the “subjectivist shift” of the major weekly magazines in the country that have a special appeal for the theme of happiness and its related topics, Freire Filho comments:

The effort made to adjust the title and the structure of the journalistic texts to strategies of recurrent attraction in the self-help literature is remarkable. Without much concern for the analytical integrity, *Veja*, *Época*, and *Istoé* compile the conclusions of the “latest studies” about the determinants and obstacles of happiness (or of other concepts employed

with a synonymic spirit such as *self-esteem*, *subjective well-being*, and *quality of life*). Brazilian experts in the field of psyche have made brief statements about the results of international surveys (almost always taken in the United States with the use of self-report as the main methodological tool). The analysis of scientific findings often emphasize the beliefs, attitudes, and the prototypical personality traits of the people manifestly happy, reinforcing modalities of becoming an agency and forms of subjectivity (FREIRE FILHO, 2010, p. 9).

One survey in the magazine *Veja*⁵ for example shows that in recent years there has been an impressive amount of issues that bring as cover story reports such as “how to do such-and-such”, “what should you do when”, “how to get rid of”, and “the guide to”. It is significant the appearance of headlines using vocatives or lists such as “the 10 lessons of who...” or “the 10 attitudes that you should...”. Another trend in this movement that has a lot of strength can be translated in the phrase “what *science* can teach you about...”. The *science* in question is usually associated with advances in research in the field of neurology and of psyche. The ascendancy of this kind of knowledge in the texts usually chosen is quite significant in all types of media.

For Charles Taylor (2009), this scenario, defined by him as the stubborn quest for self-realization, is characteristic of a new form of dependence as individuals, who are rather unsure of their identity, and “turn to all kinds of self-proclaimed experts and guides wrapped in the prestige of science or some exotic spirituality” (TAYLOR, 2009, p. 31). In this regard, the use that many religious currents have made of practices related to the field of psyche is symptomatic:

The invasion of the therapeutic ethos in other professions and forms of authority is particularly striking in relation to their former competitors—religious institutions. Recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury affirmed that therapy is replacing Christianity in Western countries. According to Archbishop Carey, “Christ, the Savior” is turning into “Christ, the counselor” (FUREDI, 2004, p. 17).⁶

⁵ For a deeper analysis of counseling in the magazine *Veja*, go to: Castellano, 2014.

⁶ Own translation.

It is certainly an important change in relation to the registration dominated only by magic and the supernatural. According to Charles Taylor (2010), the development of science explains less the process of disenchantment of the world than the “instrumental” forms of religion mainly arising since the reformation and counter-reformation movements.

The perception that society today is undergoing a period of rapid transformations—with consequences that go beyond the social, political, and economic relations affecting the very modes of constitution of the subjectivities—has already been quite consolidated. The second modernity is marked by a growing *reflexivity* of the individual (BECK, 2001; BECK *et. al.*, 1997; GIDDENS, 1991; LASH, 1999), which through scientific advances has become increasingly more aware of the *risks* that plague its everyday life. This perception, according to Ulrich Beck, creates a scenario of insecurity because it allows the existence of a conflict of rationalities.

Simultaneously, this reflexivity acquired during the process of modernization translates into a greater understanding of the very structures of society, thus opening new spaces for individual action. According to Charles Taylor (1997), previously people imagined as if they were part of a “higher order” and sometimes of a “cosmic order”. Operating within a constellation of actions defined by tradition, these “higher orders” restricted the possibilities of the subject, while at the same time gave them greater security (*ibid.*, p. 3). In contemporary times, however, there are no more sacred structures, or even insurmountable ones. Under Beck’s perspective (2001), the collective identities than before played a crucial role in the life of the subject have disappeared. In his words:

The opportunities, dangers, and ambivalences of the biography that before could be faced within the family unit, in the community of the village, and by the resources of the class or social group need to be increasingly understood, interpreted, and handled by the individual alone (BECK, 2001, p. 75).

The market of the sacred

In self-help today, the instrumentalization of the relationship with the sacred reaches amazing levels and begins to be at the service of topics such as how to make money (*Becoming a Millionaire God's Way* by Thomas Anderson; *Money. God provides it. You deserve it. Your family thanks you* by Sergio Miranda), operating in the corporate world (*Lead like Jesus*⁷ by Ken Blanchard; *Jesus: the best CEO who ever lived* by Charles Manz; *Leadership Lessons of Jesus* by Bob Briner), cultivating beauty and a good shape (*You are beautiful: discover the beauty that God sees in you*⁸ by Jenna Lucado; *The diet of Jesus and his disciples*⁹ by Don Colbert), maintaining a loving relationship (*Happy Relationships: tips from God* by Marta Almeida Lopes), seeking welfare and the earthly happiness promised (*Happier than God*¹⁰ and *Conversations with God*¹¹, both by Neale Walsch), or even about finding peace (not the transcendental kind, but the psychic kind, as in *Jesus, the Psychologist of Light*¹² by Cheferson Amaro; *Depression: where is God?* by Roque Savioli; *Jesus, the greatest psychologist who ever lived* and *How God heals the pain* by Mark

⁷ "The culture we live establishes limits between spiritual life and our earthly one. Faith is reserved for Sundays or religious festivals. We want you to experience Jesus in a totally different way than you have experienced Him to date," according to the description on the Submarino site.

⁸ "Jenna Lucado reveals how a girl can become the most popular and happy of girls by just using faith, joy, and confidence, which is what every girl really needs to feel comfortable with herself and make peace between her looks and her personality".

⁹ "If the human body would come with a manual, it would be much easier (...). With this in mind, Dr. Don Colbert went to look for one with the Manufacturer, which are the teachings of God and the example of Jesus Christ—a proposal to care for the body and eating habits."

¹⁰ "Walsch explains how every human being can become a spiritual master and become happier than God. They are messages (...) in which the author shows with simplicity how a new understanding of God's existence can transform our lives forever into an extraordinary experience."

¹¹ "Imagine if you could talk to God and in that conversation you could address those issues that leave you the most uneasy, that excite you, leave you happy, or grieve you. (...) In *Conversations with God*, Book I: A dialog about the biggest problems that afflict humanity, the author reveals that this conversation is possible."

¹² "This book teaches with simple words the truth spoken by Christ and how to apply them in life with excellent results. Through simple and efficient techniques (...) based on a single teaching of Christ: get to know the One Truth of the entire universe!"

Baker, *God knows you've been stressed* by Anne Smollin and *Therapy of God: to cure stress, anxiety, depression* by Leon Hual).

In Brazil, however, as well as in much of the world, the expansion of New Age practices is not restricted to self-help books. Yoga centers, astrology columns in newspapers, fortune teller ads, health food stores, and mysticism books already have a quite familiar presence in the daily lives of inhabitants of large cities in Brazil. Commonly described as part of the New Age phenomenon, they represent practices that have gained more and more space in the contemporary world. The last decade in particular has witnessed the emergence of an unprecedented offer of services and products by professionals of the area, supplying a growing demand for a “re-enchantment of the world” (DUARTE and CARVALHO, 2005; MALUF, 2003).

The publisher Alto Astral, for example, founded in 1986 by astrologer João Bidu, has become such a commercial success that in the 90s it opened a branch in Portugal¹³. Today, with more than 300 employees, its monthly sales are near R\$ 1 million with only its astrology magazines: *Almanaque Astral*, *Astral Dia-a-Dia*, *Boa Sorte*, *Boa Sorte Mini*, and *Guia Astral*. In 1991, the publishing house Record created the New Era seal dedicated to launching esoteric and self-help books. It currently publishes an average of 60 titles per year and has an annual sales increase of more than 10%¹⁴. Bringing cover stories such as “1001 Ways to Find your Spiritual Life”, “Flowers: a treatment to harmonize the entire family” and “To Want is to Have: having ambition is legitimate and brings success,” the spirituality and self-knowledge magazine *Bons Fluidos*, published by Abril Publishing House, celebrated its tenth anniversary in early 2010 with a monthly circulation of more than 61,000 copies¹⁵.

Despite the success of printed publications devoted to the subject, the digital media may represent the main platform of popularization of

¹³ http://www.editoraaltoastral.com.br/site/about_us.php

¹⁴ Article published in the magazine *Isto é* on April 29, 2009 entitled “The Businesspeople of Esotericism”.

¹⁵ <http://www.publiabril.com.br/noticias/tag/118>

the New Age phenomenon in Brazil in recent years. Currently, all major national content portals have large sessions dedicated to esotericism. While traditional printed newspapers bring single columns containing the daily horoscope, websites such as UOL, Terra, and Globo.com offer online services of interpretation of dreams, palmistry, *I Ching*, Love tarot, sympathies, advice on angels, *Feng shui*, phases of the moon, shamanic horoscope, *chakras*, among others. In many cases readers can also access these services through messages sent to their cell phone and programs made for iPhone¹⁶.

The relatively open architecture of Internet has enabled a greater offer of these types of services, giving the opportunity not only to large media conglomerates, but also to independent “experts” to reach an audience that previously they had no access. The holistic and psychic therapist Daniel Atalla gives online courses on magic and charm as well as providing consultations via chat services on the Internet¹⁷. Atalla, founder of the Esoteric School of Light and one of the most prestigious esoterics of today—having given interviews on *Programa do Jô* from Globo TV Network, *Alternative Health* from GNT, on *The Afternoon is Yours* from RedeTV, on *Women* from TV Gazeta, on *Atualíssima* from Band, and on *Program Panic* from Jovem Pan—he has already posted more than 700 videos on *YouTube* that have been watched by nearly half a million people¹⁸. The esoteric portal *Personare*, founded in 2004, now has 750,000 people registered, while the *Guiding Star* sends three and a half million personalized horoscopes every month¹⁹.

For Frank Furedi (2004), the therapeutic culture can also be seen as an ideology that has among its objectives to provide a kind of re-enchantment of the subjective experience because it provides the emotional experience with a special meaning. By promising to provide specific

¹⁶ The magazine *Bons Fluidos*, for example, offers services especially designed for mobile phones with internet access that tell when the moon is off course, sends a “thought of the day”, offers tests to maintain the “high spirits” of the readers, etc.

¹⁷ <http://www.escolaesoterica.com.br/>

¹⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/user/EscolaLuzDaLua>

¹⁹ Article published in the magazine *Isto é* on April 29, 2009 entitled “The Businesspeople of Esotericism”.

knowledge about the inner lives of individuals, the therapeutic ethos allows the encounter with the “real me”, with *self*. The author believes that the “emotionalism” helps rebuild a form of spirituality very *sui generis* where the subjects become the focus of attention. That is why practices such as those promoted in the context of the New Age managed to unite transcendental experiences and appreciation of activities that could provide self-expression and self-knowledge, such as psychoanalysis.

As for the individualistic bias of these new ways of relating to the divine, Livia Barbosa (2003) comments that it was not just from neoliberalism that the notion began circulating that performance should be lived out as a personal experience. What also contributed toward this sense is the philosophy of the sacralization of *self*, essential to New Age principles, which emphasizes self-development as the responsibility of each one and it emphasizes the “inner power” of people as fundamental for obtaining their objectives. Individual results are now attributed to mechanisms that are exclusively inside subjects in a particularized relationship with their own beliefs—that can range from the *do-it-yourself* syncretism all the way to the attribution of all power to the entrepreneurial initiative—thus disconnected from any kind of social, cultural, and political determinants (BARBOSA, 2003, p. 27).

Based on this brief discussion about the New Age and the relationship between the development of self-help and the new configurations of the sacred, we suggest the existence of a process of transformation of the relationship between the individual and society, leading to a reversal of direction. Today the widespread idea and one that goes beyond the scope of the self-help culture is that to get the results desired, the individual needs to put the outside world in harmony with his or her “inner self”:

Everything we obtain over our lives becomes the exclusive result of this fine tuning. Our failures come from our inability to correctly correlate these two worlds. In this logic, the individual emerges as the only one responsible for his or her fate, for his or her success or failure. It is no wonder that the principles of the New Age are so well received within the corporate culture, in business, and in the market place (BARBOSA, 2003, p. 27).

Tucker (2002), for example, proposes a description of the phenomenon as the “religion of the therapeutic culture” (*ibid.* 2002, p. 46) due to the types of services offered by esoteric “healers”, “channels” and “consultants”, as well as the subjective perspective of the “me” present in this New Age. The author suggests that, just as in psychotherapeutic treatments, New Age practitioners establish a commercial relationship of healer/patient with the intent of solving short-term problems. Even more important for Tucker would be the conception shared by both—psychoanalysis and New Age—that people in general have an incomplete *self* that is in need of help.

In this context, the family, society, and institutions are viewed as repressive, as obstacles for you to be able to gain control over your own life. One can see, therefore, a certain harmony with a more traditional speech of psychoanalysis, which is that society exercises an external coercion on man through the superego. The neuroses present in all individuals to a greater or lesser extent, are—quite briefly (and incompletely)—a result of the clash between the “authentic” pulses of the id (unconscious) with society’s current taboos and standards of behavior represented by the superego. In New Age, however, the source of the problems of *self* would be due to unbalanced cosmic energies or transgressions in past lives. The individual is, according to this ideology, fully responsible for his or her circumstances and should be in constant search of his or her “true”, “total”, and “integrated” *self*. It is up to the person to get disconnect from the negative influences and seek within him or herself the resolution to the conflicts of the “ego”, whether they are of cosmic origin or from other lives. Anthony D’Andrea sums up this view by proposing that “the perfect *self* is therefore the main objective of *new age*. The perfectibility is a condition of spiritual liberty and a logical premise of a just and peaceful society. [...] To varying degrees, *New Agers* seek full control of their *self*” (D’ANDREA, 2000, p. 92).

According to the empowerment speech of *self* characteristic of the New Age, people are viewed as fully responsible for their lives. Rather than seeking support in collective institutions such as the family,

associations, or even the government, the individual must find in himself the answer to his or her problems. Each person needs to work on his or her *self* in order to understand the flows of energy that influence them—through horoscope or tarot, for example—and, crucially, to act on these flows either in the space where they live (*Feng Shui*), the name used (numerology), and in the body itself (*Yoga*, natural foods, Bach flower remedies, Ayurveda massage, etc.).

In a recent lecture in Brazil, the director of the *Kabbalah Centre International* and the guru of celebrities such as Demi Moore, Madonna, Marina Lima, and Ellen Jabour, offered tips on how to achieve a “balanced and happy” life. According to Yehuda Berg, one should not “[look for] happiness outside because it is within you. We need to connect with this energy.” The expert suggests that “we are a result of our choices. [...] Not feeling as a victim is the beginning toward dealing with life in another way”²⁰.

Final considerations

Without going into the merit of the possible effectiveness of the formulas proposed by New Age, what stands out is the affinity of its core principles and proposals with the perspective of a typically contemporary individual. In the description that makes up this phenomenon, Giddens argues that currently the subject builds its personal identity through the consumption of lifestyles. Showing loyalty to oneself, this subject (who can look at his or her own narrative) needs to keep current, evolve, and build the self. In this context, the consumption of lifestyles transcends any utilitarian motives to also substantiate particular narratives of personal identity. “We have no choice but to choose,” says Giddens (2001, p. 81). Describing a similar picture, which in a sense can be detected in Madonna’s guru’s precepts, Beck says that the ethics of self-realization prevails in the world today. For the German scholar, “individuals who choose, they decide, mold, and aspire to be authors of their lives, the

²⁰ Article published in the Second Section of the newspaper *O Globo* on May 8, 2010.

creators of their identities, becoming the central characters of our time” (BECK, 2001, p. 9).

As a result of this new ethic, people become insecure about their choices. In a world where former moral and behavioral references have lost their meaning, the individual depends on himself to make the right decisions. People need to revert to their *inner-self* to cope with the challenges imposed by their daily tasks²¹. Put in other words, this individual needs to avoid (or rebalance) inauthentic experiences from both the outside world along with past situations imposed by others.

Attuned to the demands of the contemporary subject, the New Age culture offers a range of recipes and services that purport to help you to (re)discover your “inner self”. If, in the origins of counter-cultures, this movement had as a crucial characteristic the denial of modern society’s dominant values, then today this merchandised form has become its most visible expression. A growing emphasis on striving for success and inner improvement—resulting in a hodgepodge of mystical Eastern traditions adapted within a discourse that seeks to maximize the empowerment of individuals—is the mark of a phenomenon that arises as a response to some of society’s neoliberal dilemmas. Ultimately, the New Age publications, Internet portals, and television programs imply that the problems afflicting both the individual and society as a whole can be solved by the simple pursuit of “inner truths” or “energy rebalancing”. In this context, New Age can be seen as a lifestyle that is perfectly integrated into an ideology that favors the diminishing of a well-fair state and where individuals are increasingly taking on the responsibility for themselves.

²¹ This lack of references for the contemporary individual is also responsible for the emergence of an extensive culture of self-help, which features products based on formulas created by experts that assist individuals to make choices that are continually required in their daily lives.

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