

Helping Ourselves:

The Limits and Potential of Self-Help by Ann Withorn

Self-help has emerged as a widely acclaimed "major thrust" of the eighties. Popular magazines, *The New York Times*, and the federal government have all recognized the potential of the "self-help movement" to influence human-service policies and programs. Hundreds of thousands of self-help groups now exist across the country. Some are affiliated with nationwide organizations, while others are more isolated local efforts where people join together to help themselves cope with and cure a wide range of human problems. Ideologically they range from the conservative piety of an AA to the radical feminism of feminist "self-health" activities.¹

These developments raise serious questions for the left in the United States. Is this activity simply an extension of the self-absorption of the seventies? Is it a retreat into individual solutions and a ploy to keep people from demanding what they need from the state? Or does it reflect a growing, healthy skepticism toward professionals and the welfare state bureaucracy? Could it be a sign of a potentially

important rise in commitment to popular democracy? What, indeed, is the proper response of socialists and feminists to this growing phenomenon?

The simple magnitude of current self-help activity, especially among working-class people, calls upon us to have, at least, an analysis of its political implications and an understanding of its appeal. Further, the experience of feminist self-help suggests that there may be ways to combine selected self-help activity with a broader socialist and feminist strategy. At its best, self-help may even serve as one way to formulate a left politics that is more grounded in the daily experience of working-class life and that thereby helps define socialism more broadly than the economic formulations that so often characterize it. In addition, an understanding of the power of self-help as a means for individual change may also go further in comprehending the fundamental inadequacies of the social services provided by the modern welfare state.

WHAT IS SELF-HELP?

The nature of self-help itself gives rise to the contradictory questions raised above. Self-help is the effort of people to come together in groups in order to resolve mutual individual needs. Today this activity consists of individuals sharing concerns about personal, emotional, health, or family problems. Sometimes community or ethnic groups that organize to improve their

neighborhoods or social situations also call themselves self-help groups. The major reasons for defining an activity as self-help are that it involves group activity and meetings of the people with the problem, not outside experts or professionals, and that the main means by which difficulties are addressed are mutual sharing, support, advice-giving, and the pooling of group resources and information. Members benefit as much from the sharing of their problems and the process of helping others as they do from the advice and resources provided by others. In most cases there is a strong ethic of group solidarity, so that individual members become concerned about the progress of other group members as well as their own "cure."

Within this broad common definition, however, there is wide variety in focus and emphasis for self-help groups. At one end of the spectrum are the politically aware feminist self-help efforts in health care, rape crisis, battered-women shelters, and other service areas. Here self-help is conscious, empowering democratic efforts where women help each other and often provide an analysis and an example from which to criticize and make feminist demands on the system. At the other end are groups that focus on the specific problem only, like AA, other "anonymous" groups, or disease victim groups, with self-help used only as a means for coping with a problem, not an alternative model for society or

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even service delivery. In between are groups that have selected self-help as a means to help themselves but that also come to draw from the process ways to suggest broader changes, often in the social services system. While all share key aspects of self-help and all may teach certain critical lessons about the importance of social networks and group solidarity, their differences are crucial and need to be understood and evaluated as a part of any left critique of self-help.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SELF-HELP

Some of the comforts and supports now provided by self-conscious self-help groups have always been available. Prior to industrial development, village and family networks were the primary means by which people helped each other survive the economic, health, and other social difficulties associated with a hard life. As industrial disruption made such supports less accessible, early nineteenth-century workers began to band together in new forms of "mutual aid" organizations composed of individual craft workers or, in America especially, of groups of ethnically homogeneous workers. These early groups formed to provide for the basic economic and social needs not cared for by employers, the state, the church, or geographic community. Meager resources were pooled to provide burial and family insurance, limited food, clothing, and

economic support in times of ill health, disability, and family crisis. In Britain and the United States, the emergence of these "burial societies," "workmen's aid" associations, "friendly societies," and immigrant aid associations reflected constant efforts by workers to help each other and help themselves to cope with the health and social problems associated with capitalist development. The remaining records of such groups show a growing sense of collective responsibility within the groups and the gradual creation of social networks that performed wider social functions than only the assurance of economic survival.²

It is easy to admire these self-conscious workers' efforts, like that of Workmen's Circle, to form "an organization that could come to their assistance in terms of need, and especially in case of sickness, that would provide them and their families with plots and decent burials in case of death and extend some measure of help to their surviving dependents, that would, finally, afford them congenial fellowships and thereby lessen the loneliness of their lives in a strange land."³ It is important, however, to avoid romanticizing this early self-help activity. Some groups were controlled by the more conservative and established elements in the craft or community who kept the groups from gaining a more broad "class" identification. Others served as a base from which to distrust or ignore, rather than identify with, the needs of other workers not in the same craft or ethnic group. And, at best, these early groups could only provide the most minimal assistance to their members, still leaving them with major social disadvantages. Of course, in times when public aid was extremely punitive and largely nonexistent, even such limited efforts were crucial to the survival and strength of workers and their families. But they were also, perhaps, the only means of survival. Self-help was the only help available. It was not developed as a better, more humane, alternative means of support; originally it was the only means of support. This is a crucial difference between early self-help and current efforts.

It was exactly these limits to early

self-help efforts that were what led early unions and socialists in Britain to agitate for greater public responsibility for social needs. In response to this pressure, the British government began to assume, however poorly and unfairly, many of the health and welfare functions of the self-help groups. Unions, too, developed more bureaucratic, but also more extensive, services that met the immediate service needs addressed by the self-help groups. The type of care provided by the unions and the government was, however, generally hierarchical and routinized, not imbued at all with the principles of democratic sharing and mutual dependence that had also characterized early self-help efforts. (Here we see the trade-off that continues into today when small-scale self-help efforts are assumed by large public bureaucracies. The service aspects are made more widely available, but the mutual aid features are replaced by expertise and bureaucratic priorities.)

In the United States the recognition, however grudging, of public responsibility for human needs did not take place until much later, and always in a more limited way. Instead, the capitalists, the trade unions, and the mainstream leadership of the emerging social work profession became united in their arguments that public services might weaken individual initiative and independence. While these forces did not especially appreciate the democratic social roots of self-help, they did support the ideal that the needy should "help themselves" without looking to public budgets for support. The work ethic, the Horatio Alger ideology, and the lack of a broad-based socialist or labor party meant that the very success of worker and Black self-help efforts was used to deny the necessity of broader public responsibility for major social needs. Self-help became a conservative term, an end in itself, which was invoked to keep workers and minority groups from demanding social assistance. The price of democratic self-support became limited material rewards, which were seen as noble and a part of the American tradition of individual effort. Samuel Gompers was a leader in the popularization of a highly conservative understanding of

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self-help:

Doing for people what they can and ought to do for themselves is a dangerous experiment. In the last analysis the welfare of workers depends upon their own initiative.⁴

Given such a climate many socialist and radical Blacks grew to be skeptical of self-help. They could see the limited material results of asking the poorest workers and Black people to care for themselves in their communities, whatever the psychological benefits of local control or mutual aid. Most evolved a strategy of making demands on the state for services and support and then always agitating for more control and input into what was provided. While socialists, communists, and Black militants of the 1920s and 1930s did not totally oppose self-help strategies, they did generally view them as a limited tactic.

The unemployment councils and leagues of the 1930s did support numerous self-help activities: clothing exchanges, rent supports, housing and food assistance, transportation help, et cetera. These groups also organized and made demands on local welfare authorities, however, and never viewed self-help as an end in itself—as did certain less political self-help groups that arose during the early Depression years. Communist-led organizations particularly were critical of their members for falling into work that was “only” self-help. Their internal press supported its use only when it accomplished two goals: (1) identify-

ing and developing local activists and providing them with meaningful local work and (2) providing a base for making political demands on the emerging public welfare system. Otherwise the party never explicitly valued self-help as a form of organization, even though it supported certain self-help-type efforts for its own members—camps, child care groups, even therapy groups. For nonparty-members the basic criticism remained: that self-help efforts necessarily avoided class struggles and confrontations with the enemy unless highly limited in scope and directed toward more “political” work by dedicated party members.

SELF-HELP AS A SERVICE ACTIVITY

There is an interesting parallel to these attitudes in the professional developments of the period. Just as the more conservative trade unionists and Black leadership supported self-help as a means for worker and community independence, so did the more conservative doctors, lawyers, and social workers who worked in the private sector. The private health and welfare establishment saw individual and group change coming out of self-help activities. More liberal professionals argued that this strategy abandoned the poor and they therefore allied with leftists in demanding more public programs. They argued that it was unrealistic to expect the victims of society to help themselves and that outside intervention—from expert professionals funded by the government—was the only reasonable hope for change. These liberal social workers and medical experts gained power in federal and state programs throughout the 1930s and 40s, so that by the 1950s the public health and welfare establishment had become as critical of self-help as a service strategy as leftists were of it as a political tactic.

Self-help came into its own as a service activity during the 1930s and 40s in spite (or perhaps because) of increasing professional hostility. As the private and public insurance and welfare establishments grew, self-help changed form, moving from group

provision of welfare insurance and burial services to a process of social supports for dealing with a range of personal, family, and emotional problems. The process of self-help became important not for itself, as a model and base for democratic self-support, but as a means to achieve personal goals for change or to come to terms with unavoidable difficulties.

The poverty of the Depression gave rise to many self-help service projects. Food, clothing, and housing exchanges developed; European refugees and internal immigrants organized mutual aid groups. Most important, however, was the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in 1935; it has served as a primary model for self-help service activities since its inception. It was founded by a pair of midwestern doctors who found the medical, social work, and psychiatric professionals to be of little help and who began to develop a behavior-oriented, religiously imbued program of group support and pressure for alcoholics. The model consisted of admitting the extent of one's problem and drawing help from fellow alcoholics, as well as from a “higher power,” in order to learn to stop drinking. This was to be done by developing a network of fellow alcoholics, by attending frequent—even daily—meetings where discussions take place about personal experiences with alcohol and where the goal of sobriety is to be achieved “one day at a time.” Drawing upon such basic, simple principles, AA grew rapidly, reaching 400,000 by 1947 and currently involving more than 700,000 alcoholics a year.

It is easy for socialists and professionals to criticize Alcoholics Anonymous. Its religious pietism is fundamentalist and limiting. Despite its proclaimed organizational refusal to take federal money or political positions, its veterans have increasingly designed and defined alcoholism services across the country in harmony with AA principles. These programs often exclude women and those who have not “hit bottom” with their drinking, as well as intellectuals or more educated middle-class people less comfortable with the somewhat simplistic “Twelve Steps.” Yet AA

does appear to have a higher success rate than other forms of professional help with the complex problems associated with alcoholism. It does attract a largely working-class population who have little recourse to private services. It also offers alcoholics the experience of a nondrinking community where they can learn to like themselves better, admit to their problems, trust others, and begin to rebuild their lives. One feminist alcoholism counselor summed up its potential:

AA cannot be everything, especially for women. It can be conservative and rigid. But for many women AA is all there is. It's free. It's nonjudgmental but it pushes them to stop drinking. It offers the companionship and support of others who have been through the same things. It gives people hope to go on . . .

I'm not saying there couldn't be something better, more political, less religious. But on the other hand you have to realize how difficult and complex a "drinking problem" is. It takes incredible energy, patience, and fortitude to cope with alcoholics. Maybe only other alcoholics can. And this is an organization they have created which works better than a lot of other things. So what we try to do is supplement AA for women with a more feminist analysis and content, day care services, and so forth. The whole process of getting yourself together and stopping drinking is too fragile a thing for us to undermine AA.

Other self-help services have formed using the AA model where the focus is on the problem faced and the process of mutual help and support is valued as an effective means to that end, not as a goal in itself. Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and Parents Anonymous (for people who have abused their children) are only three of the dozens of groups that are modeled closely on AA and that attempt to help people admit that they have a problem and get help from others in the same situation to overcome it. All groups rely on "recovering" victims to help others, a helping role that is often a major form of continuing improvement for the old-time members. Although some groups make greater use of professionals than

others, in all of them peers assume primary roles. Outside social networks often grow out of such groups, providing people with a wide range of supports. While there is no hard data, such anonymous groups (most of which, except AA, have been founded since the mid-fifties) seem to attract a largely white, working-class population and create strong loyalties among those helped.

Since the 1940s other services that use self-help as a major means of helping people cope with or resolve personal difficulties have emerged. Many drug programs have used self-help activities to create "alternative communities" characterized by mutual disclosure, support, and pressure. Since the 1940s (and mushrooming in the 1970s) there has been a steady increase in health-oriented self-help programs for the families of victims of cancer and other diseases, and for the victims themselves. Stroke victims, cancer victims, heart disease patients, parents of children with Down's Syndrome (to name only a few of thousands), have come together to discuss their feelings, reactions, and symptoms and to help each other emotionally. While these programs are often supported by the medical system, they frequently come to share vocal and strong criticisms of professionalism and professional care.

The social welfare and medical establishments have reacted to all this increasing self-help activity with different types of responses. Sometimes groups have been criticized (often during the initial phases) for "resisting professional treatment" or for avoiding reality. The more critical the groups become of the quality of professional care (a component of almost all self-help groups, no matter what their origins), the more they are resisted by doctors and social workers. However, until this happens they are often supported by professionals as another form of service, especially for people with "difficult" problems, i.e., those problems like alcoholism, drug abuse, "incurable" cancer, senility, and other afflictions not amenable to conventional intervention. Indeed, the federal government has become enamored with self-help approaches,

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providing funds for certain efforts and even identifying the existence of a "continuum of care" including self-help at one end and full institutional care at the other, all of which will require some form of public support and monitoring.

As with AA, it is easy to criticize. Most of these self-help service efforts can be legitimately viewed as methods by which the established medical, mental health, and social work professions get people to provide services to themselves that the professionals won't or can't provide. Cheap care and avoidance of public responsibility may be obvious. Yet leftists working in these fields also have supported self-help services, in recognition of the limits of professional care and in order to support the creation of a stronger, less fearful consumer consciousness among clients or victims of problems as varied as alcoholism, drug abuse, cancer, and chronic disease. In addition, many members of such self-help service groups find them much more helpful and acceptable forms of care than other, more professional services. Such groups may provide release and support that come from sharing and comradeship. These results cannot be disregarded, especially for people who felt desperately alone before the experience. A working-class veteran of AA, Overeaters Anonymous, and Smoke Enders reflected similarly on what self-help meant to her:

Self-help groups really help. They make you feel like you are not alone with yourself or your problem. You share with others and find out you are not the only one who smokes in the shower or bakes two pies for

is to meet it.

PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL OF SELF-HELP

Given all this, how should leftists respond to the likelihood that self-help services are likely to continue to grow and re-form in the future? The current momentum and recognition of existing programs seems unstoppable and will probably be even more appealing to administrators wishing to support an image of continued service provision in times of real cutbacks. An increasingly popular answer to anyone with a problem will predictably be: "Join, or form, a self-help group."

Once again serious questions must be asked: Should more socialists join with feminists in sponsoring overtly political "dual self-help activities?" Can we join with existing self-help programs and "work from within," seeing them as working-class organizations needing a left presence in order to achieve a progressive potential? Or should we remain outside the whole effort (except perhaps for pure feminist services) and provide only a critically correct analysis of the hopeless "mass phenomenon?"

These questions are only partly facetious. As advanced capitalism lurches along, services and the service economy will become more important. Self-help services may play an increasingly important role in this. On the hopeful side, self-help activity has the potential to become a base from which people can criticize, demand, and affect the nature of the service system in a positive way and out of which progressive workers and clients can form meaningful alliances. On the negative side, self-help services may help to provide an opportunity for another professional cover-up. See, we have a humane system; we even let people take care of each other, when they are near death or incapacitated by emotional and personal problems.

The problem, assuming these options, becomes one of how to assist self-help efforts in achieving their potential as a base for criticism and change rather than providing tacit reaffirmation of professional hegemony and the capitalist welfare state.

In promoting the potential of self-

help we cannot, however, ignore certain limits that may be built into the activity. First, we cannot deny that the nature of self-help, and the enormity of the difficulties that bring people to it, often emphasize only the personal dimensions of people's problems. Even if the social components of problems are admitted, as they are in feminist and some other self-help efforts, the stress remains on how the victim can change, rather than on the implications for broader social action. There can even be a new form of victim-blaming: "We are so fucked-up only we can help each other." Admittedly this is an aspect of all psychological services, but the self-help model, with emphasis on social support and reciprocity, may serve to mask the individualistic approach more. It also may make it harder for people to move on to other activities because the self-help group may form the only support system people know. (AA has a strong history of this: people become professional alcoholics, still centered in the group and their problem, long after drinking has ceased to define their lives.) For self-help activity to lead to broader criticism of the social service system or the whole of society, these tendencies must be recognized and alternatives made available, at least to those who can make use of them.

Second, even with self-help set in a broader context, the questions of scope and relationship to the state will still affect us. Self-help activity is probably only a limited service tactic that, while it can form a base for criticizing and pressuring the larger system, can never fully replace the professional, bureaucratized services, at least under capitalism. This is a more difficult proposition to accept in practice than it sounds in theory. We get sucked in, we want to "save the world," and it is difficult to remember the political analysis that tells us that the problems we face are generated by social forces beyond our immediate control. It is hard, as those involved in self-help often admit, to have to push the state to provide services that we know will be inferior to what we can do through self-help (but on a limited scale). All this leads to burnout and frustration, especially when broader movements

are not active enough to help us keep our activity in perspective.

Finally, there are some philosophical problems associated with self-help that are similar to those surrounding many populist efforts. Many self-help groups, especially those including feminist activities, become so skeptical of organization and expertise that they become almost mystical and anti-intellectual. While the class origins of current organizations and expertise may lead to this, as an overall approach it becomes self-defeating. In the process of self-help, some people become "experts" in the problem. Must they then leave the group? Or groups tend to "reinvent the wheel," perpetually relearning everything about problems from a feminist, working-class, consumer, or Black perspective. While Barbara Ehrenreich and Helen Mariesskind's suggestion that we "take what we want of the technology without buying the ideology" sounds good, the full criticism of all professionalism that is inherent in health self-help may make this difficult.⁷

Furthermore, we still have to fight rampant specialization in self-help groups. Granted, DES daughters have different needs from mastectomy patients and from ex-mental patients, but to be effective, self-help concerns will need to be linked together in broader analysis of processes and problems. All this must be accomplished while recognizing that people in immediate pain may resent any deviation from their immediate problems.

These are serious drawbacks, not to be ignored. Yet current circumstances suggest that leftists should, still, become involved in many facets of self-help. We have the accumulated experience of feminist self-help to guide us away from some of the worst pitfalls. We have the undeniable broad public interest in self-help to provide a responsive climate for our efforts. Finally, and most importantly, we have a national social and economic situation that may make self-help once again a necessity for survival. Inflation and creeping recession have already made daily living more tenuous and pressured. The Proposition 13 approach to social services will make professional

supports less available, subject to more competition among those deserving service and more bureaucratization and formalities before services can be delivered. Given such a set of factors, it is not unreasonable for leftists to support and initiate self-help efforts as both a broad base for criticism and change in the social service system as well as favorable settings for people to become exposed to socialist and feminist ideas and practice.

The primary basis for our involvement in self-help groups can be personal. As feminists and socialists, most of us experience problems in our lives as women, men, parents, children, lovers, survivors, drinkers, procrastinators, shy people, fat people, lonely people. Joining or starting a self-help group can help us as people, not just as activists with an agenda, and, perhaps, serve both to humanize the agenda and make it responsive to people in their daily lives. This has been a major source of strength within the women's movement. Women have helped each other and been helped themselves with some real personal and political issues in their lives. The sharing and loss of isolation that come from self-help activity are real and can provide us with tangible energy and strength. (This is not to say that we cannot foster the creation of self-help groups other than those we join. We can—the history of the battered women's groups proves this—but it won't hurt if we get some self-help too.)

Because self-help groups deal with problems that always contain a political as well as personal component, our political perspectives can be a real asset to such activity. All self-help groups contain an implicit criticism of the bureaucratic and professional services. We can play an honest role in bringing this anger and criticism to the surface. Our perspective on why social programs and experts fail may directly help members of the group to stop blaming themselves for whatever problem they have and speed up the development of a social critique within self-help groups. It may also help individual group members learn about socialism and feminism in a grounded, not abstract way. As one woman—not a socialist—explained:

I was always afraid of that stuff: socialism, feminism. It sounded like violence and anger and at least it meant big changes in the world which were beyond me. Then I became involved in a self-help group here (at school) where some of the women were feminists and one was a socialist. They talked about socialism and feminism as people helping each other, as people trying to make a world where we could relate to other people more equally. That made sense to me and I started getting interested.

Here the natural links between self-help and socialism/feminism re-emerge. At its best, self-help provides exactly the kind of equal sharing, helping, and caring that we believe a socialist society can embody. The participation in such activity may help newcomers understand what we are working toward and offer the collective experience we all need if we are to continue to think that socialism is indeed possible.

As self-help groups grow in their criticism of the health and social welfare system and in individual receptivity to left ideas, socialists and feminists can help to organize the newfound understanding and anger into pressure groups for change. We can help groups make alliances with service workers who do not see themselves as elitist professionals but rather as workers with a natural alliance to clients. Another way to foster such alliances is to foster workplace self-help groups in human service agencies that take up a range of issues, help build new networks, and draw parallels between workplace situations and those of clients. In other workplaces we might use self-help groups as another form of organizing that can strengthen the connections and supports that workers can provide each other on the job.

At a less personal level, we can fight to preserve the victories of feminist self-help—especially the women's shelters and women's clinics—and also oppose federal attempts to professionalize and control such services as a condition of funding. Theoretically we might do some analysis that helps us better understand the nature of self-help activity: How is self-help activity related to the populist trends and val-

ues in this country? Can it actually serve as "prefigurative communism" and allow people to experience, even briefly, the social relations that would exist under socialism? How is it related to anarchism or to the notion of the "counter-hegemony" discussed by Gramsci? Although removed from the fray, such theoretical pursuits could help those engaged in self-help better understand the nature of their activity and perhaps assist them in avoiding the frustration that so often accompanies self-help work.

Finally, at the least, as socialists and feminists we need to view the impulse that brings people to seek self-help instead of professional care as a healthy act that embodies the faith in oneself and one's comrades that is essential if we are ever to have socialism. The left needs to find ways of expressing support for this current widespread energy and to help it grow. Who knows, we might even find a little help for ourselves in the process. ■

NOTES

¹ There is a very large current literature on self-help. The leading figures in this area are Frank Riessman and Alan Gartner, who have written *Self-Help in the Human Services* (Jossey-Bass, 1977) and sponsor the National Self-Help Clearinghouse (City University of New York, 33 West 42nd St., Room 1227, New York, N.Y., 10036).

² For a useful review of this history see Alfred H. Katz and Eugene I. Bender, "Self-Help Groups in Western Society: History and Prospects," in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, XII, no. 3 (1976).

³ Maximilian C. Hurwitz, *The Workers' Circle* (New York: The Workmen's Circle, 1936).

⁴ Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 2 vols (New York: Kelley, 1925).

⁵ Pauline B. Bart, "Seizing the Means of Reproduction: An Illegal Feminist Abortion Collective—How and Why It Worked," Abraham Lincoln School of Medicine, University of Illinois, Chicago (unpublished manuscript).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Helen I. Mariesskind and Barbara Ehrenreich, "Toward Socialist Medicine: The Women's Health Movement," *Social Policy* (September/October 1975).