SEARCHING FOR AUTHENTICITY: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES AND RADICAL MOVEMENTS IN PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Elena TRIFAN[1]

ABSTRACT. Personal development has become an industry in neoliberal capitalism, used to help employees adapt to the constant pursuit of growth, such as increased productivity, creativity, time management and business development. As part of my doctoral research, I documented how this type of practice works and how it restructures individuals' social lives and their perspectives on the world. Personal development, as shaped by neoliberalism, serves as a tool for personal empowerment and adaptation to the restructuring of the welfare state. It is also a means of promoting neoliberal values among people. However, during the containment measures during the pandemic, criticisms of this growth-based approach emerged, leading to a resurgence of ideas about personal care. Self-care developed particularly in marginalised communities, where it was defined as a form of resistance to capitalism through caring for oneself as a member of an oppressed community, with Audre Lorde (1988) defining the concept as having a power of resistance to capitalism. In this presentation, I will explore what happens to personal development, which is a key factor in the construction of capitalist ideology, if neoliberalism is coming to an end. I will also consider whether this is a good time to reclaim personal development and how it can be used to create tools for self-building beyond the intrinsic individualism of the process.

Keywords: Personal Development, Gender Dynamics, Social Change, Manosphere, Radical Personal Development

[1] ORCID: 0000-0002-3276-6858. SNSPA/ICUB Universitatea București, e-mail: trifan.elena@gmail.com

Introduction

The question of who or what is responsible for driving social change has been a central topic in the field of social sciences. This question has significantly influenced how theories are categorized. Emile Durkheim attributed the entirety of social change to society itself (Durkheim 1997). According to his view, changes in social structures, norms, and values are the driving forces behind societal transformations. On the other hand, thinkers like Max Weber (1965) and similar scholars, argue that individuals play a crucial role as agents of social change. They emphasize that individual actions, decisions, and innovations are significant contributors to shaping society. Karl Polanyi (2013) positions Marx's viewpoint somewhat in the middle. He notes that Marxism emphasizes the working class as the key actor in driving social change. However, Polanyi critiques this idea and instead advocates for political reform as the catalyst for achieving a more improved society, drawing from Durkheim's perspective.

I argue that personal development is a relevant case study for these theoretical discussions. Seen as a tool for the formation of self-governing citizens in the spirit of neoliberalism (Rimke, 2000, Hazleden, 2003, Tie, 2004, Erjavec and Volčič, 2009, Binkley, 2011, 2014) through which they come to manage social problems, but also update their selves to suit the demands of the capitalist labour market (Trifan, 2016a), the concept of personal development is deeply intertwined with the cultural context of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ideology that gained prominence in the late 20th century, emphasizes individualism, market-driven solutions, and limited government intervention within social care (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberalism places a strong emphasis on individual responsibility (Brown, 2015). In this context, personal development is framed as a means for individuals to take control of their lives, make choices, and improve their circumstances. The focus shifts from collective solutions to personal empowerment. Neoliberalism aligns with a market-driven approach to personal development (Rose, 1996). It views personal development as a commodity that individuals can invest in to enhance their skills, productivity, and overall well-being. Neoliberalism promotes entrepreneurial values, encouraging individuals to develop skills and competencies that are valuable in the capitalist labour market. Personal development often includes elements of skill enhancement, productivity improvement, and entrepreneurship training. Neoliberalism forwards a consumer culture where individuals are encouraged to seek self-improvement through consumption (Foster, 2016). This can manifest in the purchase of self-help books, courses, seminars, and lifestyle products. Personal

development becomes a market-driven industry. Neoliberalism's emphasis on adaptability and flexibility in the face of economic changes aligns with the idea of personal development (Harvey, 2002, Beck, 1992). Individuals are encouraged to continually update their skills and knowledge to meet the demands of the ever-changing job market. Neoliberalism is associated with globalization (Harvey, 2005), which has facilitated the global spread of personal development ideas and programs. Personal development is not limited by geographical boundaries and has become a global phenomenon creating its own international language (Nehring, 2016). Neoliberalism often promotes the idea of meritocracy, where individuals can achieve success based on their efforts and abilities (Littler, 2013). Personal development is seen as a way to enhance one's merit and competitiveness in a globalized, competitive world.

It's essential to understand that personal development can take various forms, catering to different individual goals and aspirations. Whether it's spiritual well-being, skill enhancement, or wealth accumulation, personal development is framed within the neoliberal context as a means for individuals to navigate and succeed in an increasingly market-oriented and individualistic society.

While the notion of 'betterment' is subjective and varies from one person to another, it does not take infinitely diverse forms. As my previous research (Trifan, 2016a) revealed, personal development can generally be categorized into three main types: spiritual, primarily centred on enhancing well-being; scientific, with a focus on skill enhancement and increased productivity; and financial, emphasizing wealth accumulation and entrepreneurial competencies. These categories may occasionally overlap, yet they serve a valuable purpose in providing clarity to the diverse landscape of personal development pursuits. While it was primarily shaped by prevailing neoliberal ideology, the personal development industry exhibits certain aspects that can occasionally be viewed as acts of resistance against the dominant system. In the 80s and 90s individual responsibility replaced systemic and state build social solutions. These were the glory years of neoliberalism enshrined in the Washington Consensus and the measures that states took as consequence. Tested with countless victims in South America, neoliberalism has moved its experimental grounds in the former communist countries. The consequences of these experiments have been tragic. Millions of people have lost their jobs, their physical and mental health. After the 2008 crisis, neoliberalism still remains the dominant ideology, although serious cracks have started to develop.

In 2023, it appears to have evolved towards nationalist expressions, fuelling the ascent of far-right movements that are gaining popularity. The era of globalist neoliberalism seems to have passed. It's noteworthy that this metaphorical demise of neoliberalism aligns with growing disillusionment regarding its effectiveness

in addressing issues like racism and economic inequalities. Thus, in recent times there has been talk of a 'culture war', especially on the conservative and far right spheres. The term was employed by conservative politicians and intellectuals to attack gender theory and critical race theory. Personal development became part of the 'culture war' early on, critiqued by conservative voices like James Nolan (1998). Nolan identified a therapeutic ethos characterized by an emancipated self, pathologizing of human behaviour, victimization, and an emotivist ethos. These changes were seen as displacing traditional values and expanding state intervention in citizens' lives. Simultaneously, progressive groups employ personal development for resilience and advocacy, reflecting broader cultural polarization. Thus, personal development has become a battleground in the cultural and political debates of our time. In this article I will present how personal development has been rearticulated in this context of the alleged culture war by focusing on three types of personal development: personal development for masculinity and femininity and radical personal development. I will describe each one in the following sections.

Methodology

The present study employs a multifaceted research methodology to explore the dynamic evolution of personal development ideologies over a defined temporal span. With a specific focus on the past couple of years, the research examines the intricate interplay between personal development discourses and their implications for societal change. Central to this exploration is the question of whether personal development serves as a transformative tool for societal advancement or inadvertently diverts attention from prevailing societal issues.

This study addresses the following research questions:

- In what ways has personal development transformed within the context of emerging discussions surrounding traditional masculinity, and what consequences does this transformation hold for both individuals and society?
- How has personal development evolved within the framework of traditional femininity, and what repercussions does this evolution entail for individuals and society?
- What transformations has personal development undergone within the sphere of radical personal development movements, and what are the ramifications of these changes for both individuals and society?

To elucidate the multifarious dynamics at play, the study adopts a combination of content analysis, case studies, comparative analysis, and thematic examination. The primary goal is to glean insights into the evolving nature of personal development and its resonance within distinct sociocultural contexts. This approach facilitates a holistic understanding of the potential impact of personal development ideologies on sociopolitical paradigms. The content analysis aspect of the research involves a comprehensive examination of various textual and visual sources. These sources encompass a range of mediums, such as written works, speeches, videos, and online discussions, emanating from prominent figures within the personal development sphere. Notable among these figures are Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, whose ideologies have gained prominence over the past years. This analysis delves into the essence of their messages, the evolution of their perspectives, and their implications for societal discourses.

Furthermore, the study integrates case studies to offer in-depth insights into the cultural specificity and ideological nuances that underlie personal development trajectories. By selecting comparable figures within the Romanian context, the research explores manifestations of personal development ideologies in diverse sociopolitical environments. This comparative approach enriches the analysis by highlighting cross-cultural variations and shared themes that underpin personal development's global discourse.

The study undertakes a thematic analysis of the identified content and case studies. This analytical process unveils recurring themes, ideologies, and discursive patterns embedded within the personal development discourse. By critically engaging with these themes, the study aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which personal development ideologies may influence, challenge, or reinforce societal narratives.

Research Limitations

Content analysis relies on the availability of textual and visual materials. There may be limitations related to access, especially to proprietary or subscription-based content. The materials selected for content analysis may not fully represent the diversity of personal development resources available, potentially leading to a partial view of the field. Content analysis captures a specific moment in time, and changes or developments in the field may not be fully reflected. Case studies are employed to explore how personal development is rearticulated in the context of masculinity, femininity, and radical personal development.

Findings from case studies may not be easily generalized to the entire population due to their qualitative nature and focus on specific contexts. They provide insights rather than statistical representativeness. Case studies involve interpretation, and the researcher's subjectivity can influence findings. Efforts are made to mitigate bias through triangulation and reflexivity.

Theoretical framework

This study employs a conceptual framework rooted in sociological and cultural theories, particularly drawing from the perspectives of neoliberalism, gender studies, and cultural studies. The theoretical lens of neoliberalism is central to this study. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ideology emphasizing individualism, market-driven solutions, and limited government intervention, informs the exploration of how personal development has evolved within this cultural context. It offers insights into the emphasis on individual responsibility, market-driven approaches, and the commodification of personal development.

Gender studies theories help analyse the rearticulation of personal development in the context of masculinity and femininity. They offer a framework for understanding how gender norms and expectations influence personal development practices and how personal development, in turn, reinforces or challenges these norms.

Cultural studies theories provide a lens for examining how personal development is situated within broader cultural shifts, such as the rise of far-right movements and responses to issues like racism and gender discrimination. Cultural studies perspectives highlight the role of personal development as part of a broader cultural discourse. Historical perspectives inform the research questions by highlighting the evolution of neoliberalism and its impact on personal development. The dominance of neoliberalism in the 80s and 90s and its adaptation in response to global crises set the historical context for understanding how personal development has been influenced.

Many investigations into personal development often begin with the Foucaultian notion of governmentality, defined as the state's method of shaping citizens to adhere to its principles (Foucault, 2008). Building upon this concept, Nikolas Rose introduces the idea of neo-governmentality, where the capitalist system and the market shapes citizens in alignment with their principles (Rose, 1996). According to Rose, psycho-sciences, including personal development, play a pivotal role in shaping citizens who can self-govern. In Romania, recent discussions on this topic, alongside my own research (Trifan, 2016b; Trifan, 2019; Trifan, 2020a) have been explored by Sorin Gog (2020), Anca Simionca (2016),

and Sergiu Bortoș (2017). They have examined how the formation of the neoliberal subject in Romania is influenced by spirituality programs, as observed in Gog's work, or through participation in personal development courses. As well, I have addressed the impact of neoliberalism in feminist movement in Romania who employ on personal development as a mean for empowerment (2020b). However, there remains a research gap in understanding the nuanced intersections between personal development, gender, and cultural shifts, especially in response to contemporary challenges such as far-right movements and debates on discrimination.

This study aims to address this research gap by examining how personal development has been rearticulated in response to changing cultural dynamics, with a particular focus on gender roles, and social change and critique. By doing so, it aims to shed light on the unexplored questions and issues related to the role of personal development in contemporary society.

Personal development and gender

Examining personal development literature within the broader context of self-improvement reveals its consistent implications for gender dynamics throughout history. Greek philosophy focused on men, and the correspondences of rulers addressed their male heirs. Women's writings often focused on enhancing their roles as wives. Puritan literature focused on men's financial success, while New Thought literature similarly addressed mostly men.

Self-help literature in United States has evolved in response to changing cultural norms and societal values. In the colonial era, self-help books were influenced by Puritan beliefs, emphasizing values like a strong work ethic and spiritual closeness to God. These texts provided guidance for achieving success in both financial and spiritual aspects. During the 1700s, a more secular perspective emerged, focusing on upward social mobility as a key aspiration. Victorian-era self-help books on marriage delved into the intricacies of marital roles, duties, and sexual dynamics within a rigid moral framework (Jones 2009; Starker 1989)

The history of marriage advice literature can be traced back to 15th-century England. Early marriage manuals were strongly influenced by religious beliefs, addressing various aspects of marriage, including legal elements, marital roles, home management, and comparisons from secular and religious viewpoints. These manuals predominantly targeted middle-class audiences, offering guidance for married couples (Gordon and Bernstein, 1970).

The cultural history of seduction in Europe provides insights into the evolution of seduction techniques. Historically, women used physical charms and erotic dances to seduce warrior-type men. However, during early modernity, this dynamic shifted as aristocratic warriors transformed into refined courtiers. This transformation replaced violence with ceremonial interactions, with men assuming the role of seducers. This shift gave rise to the Gallant archetype, embodied by figures like Don Juan. The 18th century witnessed the systematic development of seduction, particularly among the Parisian aristocracy, characterized by emotional flexibility and calculated behaviour (Kray, 2018).

Contemporary Pickup Artists (PUAs) considers themselves successors to famous seducers, grounding their discourse in cultural heritage. Unlike traditional seducers, PUAs position themselves as teachers helping those with social difficulties. Commitment's role has shifted in PUA philosophy, with PUAs advocating avoidance as a means to increase desirability. Key elements of PUA strategies include reading non-verbal cues and manipulation techniques like 'push-pull'. (ibid). The evolving Manosphere, a collection of online communities focused on men's issues, includes milder groups like Pick Up Artists (PUAs) and Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) to more extreme ones like Incels and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW). Users are migrating from milder communities to more extreme ones, displaying increased toxic behaviour. This migration raises concerns about potential online radicalization. Additionally, the Manosphere exhibits a higher volume of hateful speech compared to other online communities, contributing to online harassment and real-world violence. The PUA community's focus on 'game' can involve objectification and potentially negative perceptions of masculinity and men's relationships with women (Ribeiro et al., 2021). The manosphere is connected with rise of the alt-right movement that focuses on its connection to the nostalgia for a past characterized by fixed gender roles and racial homogeneity. This movement foregrounds these ideals and combines them with rhetoric portraying its followers as victims of betrayal (Kray, 2018). The PUA movement instrumentalizes emotional discourse to promote hegemonic masculinity and oppose feminism. Male suffering is attributed to the perceived threat of feminism and the 'feminization of society', with anti-feminist ideologies serving as a coping mechanism (Crăciun, 2019).

Awaking the real men

One very popular example of character teaching personal development from the 'Manosphere' is Emory Andrew Tate III, a media personality, entrepreneur, and former professional kickboxer of American-British nationality. Tate's kickboxing journey began in 2005, culminating in his first championship victory

in 2009. His profile garnered more attention in 2016 following his appearance on the British reality show, Big Brother. However, he faced controversy and subsequent removal from the show due to a video where he was seen striking a woman with a belt; both parties later claimed the act was consensual.

Tate transitioned into the realm of paid courses and memberships on his website, achieving fame as an internet figure promoting an "ultra-masculine, ultra-luxurious lifestyle." His commentary, often criticized for its misogyny, led to his suspension from various social media platforms. Tate's ventures included Hustler's University, where members paid a monthly fee for instruction on unconventional money-making avenues, employing affiliate marketing and pre-recorded videos. Following the program's shutdown, he launched a rebranded version named 'The Real World'. As of August 2022, its website had amassed over 100,000 subscribers. Tate also established a private network called 'The War Room', touted as a global initiative to liberate men from societal constraints.

In December 2022, Tate and his brother Tristan were arrested in Romania, along with two women. The quartet was suspected of human trafficking and forming an organized crime group, allegedly coercing victims into generating paid explicit content. Tate and his brother faced charges of rape, human trafficking, and forming an organized crime group. In a landscape where personal development and advice purportedly carry no real-life consequences, the alleged crimes committed by Tate provide a counter-narrative. Despite the potential impact of personal growth ideologies, Tate's actions challenge the notion that such guidance inherently leads to positive outcomes.

Andrew Tate has garnered a substantial following in Romania, particularly evident through the emergence of numerous masculinity camps over the past few years. Notably, Cezar Ionașcu is a prominent figure in this context. Presently, Cezar Ionașcu, along with his wife Oksana Ionașcu, markets 'knowledge' through lectures and books on various subjects such as health, womanhood, manhood, and financial success. The pricing for their courses and books varies widely, catering to a diverse range of individuals, spanning from 30 euros to 7500 euros.

An intriguing facet of these initiatives mirrors the affiliation program adopted by Andrew Tate. A pivotal element of this program entails participants incorporating links into video clips specifically designed for social media platforms. If someone completes a purchase through one of these links, the participant receives a percentage of the course's price. While the primary emphasis remains on education, participants inadvertently become promoters of Cezar Ionașcu's content. This method was also employed by Andrew Tate to propagate Hustler's University, which significantly boosted his online visibility. Cezar Ionașcu has likewise found success through this approach, notwithstanding platform restrictions stemming from his contentious remarks about vaccinations

and the Covid-19 pandemic. This was explicitly described in a PressOne article by Răzvan Filip who attended Ionașcu seminar's[2].

To further understand this phenomenon, let's take a critical look at what Cezar Ionașcu is teaching. Ionașcu predominantly targets men, emphasizing the need to increase masculinity in an "authentic way". This raises questions about the meanings of 'authentic masculinity' as masculinity varies across cultures, races, and ethnicities. Ionașcu's programs inherently reinforce traditional gender roles by framing masculinity as something that needs to be increased. This perspective perpetuates the harmful idea that there's a fixed definition of masculinity that men should adhere to, neglecting the vast diversity of gender identities and expressions. Ionașcu's emphasis on fulfilling the needs and beliefs of women regarding physical appearance and masculine style is problematic. It objectifies women by implying that a man's worth or success hinges on how he presents himself to women.

Ionașcu's portrayal of money and women as 'sensitive and debated' topics suggests that men need guidance in navigating these areas. While his programs aim to challenge destructive beliefs, it actually perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes promoting self-worth and confidence regardless of gender. Moreover, it's essential to consider how these issues intersect with societal power dynamics. The discussion around money is presented in asocial void without taken into consideration economic inequalities and disparities, and gendered aspects without its roots in patriarchal structures.

The cost of these private sessions, set at 2,500 Euros for 6 sessions or 5 sessions, is considerable. Cezar Ionașcu's individual consultation service is a prime example of commodifying personal development. Ionașcu's offer promotes the idea that individual success and improvement can be bought, which aligns with the capitalist narrative that personal growth and self-improvement are commodities to be purchased. This commodification of self-improvement underscores how capitalism thrives by selling not only material goods but also intangible concepts like personal development.

While Tate is often revered as an icon for those seeking a stereotypically masculine image, seen in the Pickup Artist (PUA) community, Jordan Peterson's influence has become intertwined with the incel (involuntary celibate) community—a group often associated with introverted individuals lacking social skills. Peterson, a psychology professor, and clinical psychiatrist, gained prominence after 2016, when he released a series of YouTube videos critiquing

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[2] https://pressone.ro/incursiune-in-lumea-pastilelor-rosii-partea-intai-am-participat-timp-de-o-luna-la-cursul-de-barbatie-si-facut-bani-predat-de-cezar-ionascu/ (23 august 2023)

Canada's Bill C-16, which aimed to prohibit discrimination based on "gender identity and expression." Peterson argued that the bill would enforce "compelled speech" by mandating the use of specific gender pronouns. This argument extended to his broader critique of political correctness and identity politics, garnering both praise and criticism. In 2018, Peterson temporarily stepped away from his clinical practice and teaching to publish his self-help book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, which achieved widespread popularity and success.

In the subsequent years, Peterson faced health challenges due to benzodiazepine withdrawal syndrome. He published his third book, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life*, in 2021, resigned from the University of Toronto, and resumed podcasting. Peterson's lectures and discussions, mainly available on platforms like YouTube and podcasts, have garnered millions of views. In 2023 an Ontario court upheld a regulatory body's order for Peterson to undergo social media training due to complaints about his controversial online statements, rejecting his argument that political commentary falls outside the college's purview.

Peterson has visited Romania on two occasions. The first time was during BrandMinds, branded as the largest business summit in Central and Eastern Europe, with many managers from the region attending. His second visit to Romania aimed to promote his latest book, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life.* Notably, Bucharest was just one of 11 European stops where Jordan Peterson introduced his new international bestseller.

Critics of Peterson's ideas have taken issue with his views on subjects such as global warming, his opposition to feminism and transgender rights, and his strict adherence to a beef-only diet. Conversely, for his supporters, these criticisms seem to have only strengthened their affinity for him. In Romania, Peterson has garnered a considerable following. This is evident by looking at how many public individuals met with him George Buhnici, independent MEP (formerly AUR) Anamaria Gavrilă, while other MPs such as PNL MP Titus Corlățean's and other Liberals Sebastian Burduja, Pavel Popescu, and Robert Sighiartău have met with him at Parliament building. There's also a Bucharest-based Jordan Peterson Meetup Group that holds gatherings on a monthly or bimonthly basis, boasting 493 members and having successfully hosted 27 social events.

Jordan Peterson tends to attract a more educated audience. According to a Libertatea article, a significant portion of attendees at his second event appeared to be well-educated and of middle-class background, which is notable

given the relatively high-ticket price of around 100-150 euros[3]. On the other hand, the PUA (Pick Up Artist) community caters to a less educated demographic, offering a plethora of free online content. This contrast is reflected in the themes they address – the PUA community offers straightforward advice such as sleeping on the floor and abstaining from masturbation to enhance masculinity. In contrast to Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson's appeal lies in his ability to engage an elitist middle-class audience by tackling complex subjects. However, it's important to note that his approach might involve grappling with topics he may not fully comprehend and catering to a conservative audience.

Supporters of Jordan Peterson also exist among Romanian intellectuals, Mihail Neamțu is arguably the most similar figure to Jordan Peterson. Particularly in recent years, following the success of Peterson, whom he openly admires, Neamțu began offering courses through an organization called the Neamțu School. These courses delve into various subjects including Rhetoric and Leadership, Science and Faith: Did we genuinely experience evolution, and Babel Tower: Nationalism, globalism, catastrophe. Neamțu and Peterson both touch upon the idea of generational shifts in values and behaviours. They highlight how newer generations may have different priorities and beliefs compared to their predecessors. They both allude to changes in culture, morality, and societal norms. Jordan Peterson often discusses how contemporary culture has evolved, sometimes questioning the impact of these changes. Mihail Neamțu critiques certain values and behaviours of the younger generation, just as Jordan Peterson has critiqued aspects of modern society, particularly when it comes to political correctness and free speech.

There's an implication in both Mihail Neamțu and some of Jordan Peterson's work that traditional values and practices are being replaced or eroded in favour of newer trends and lifestyles. Neamțu engages in a critique of contemporary culture. They point out perceived negative aspects and changes in society, such as shifts in values and behaviours. They both express concerns about the impact of modern ideologies on young people. Jordan Peterson often discusses how political correctness and radical ideologies might affect the younger generation, while the passage criticizes the transformation of young individuals into activists who are seen as misguided. Both are critical of political correctness and its role in stifling free speech and fostering ideological conformity. Both emphasize the significance of tradition, values, and timeless principles. Jordan Peterson frequently explores the worth of religious and philosophical traditions, while

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[3] https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/reportaj-fenomenul-jordan-peterson-in-romania-cu-ce-discurs-a-tinut-in-scaune-4-000-de-spectatori-mesajele-lui-ii-vor-folosi-in-viata-fiului-meu-4533209 (23 August 2023)

Neamțu, who holds a Bachelor of Arts in Orthodox Theology and has authored books published by the Publishing House of the Metropolitanate of Moldavia and Bucovina, as well as created numerous videos on religious subjects, similarly expresses concern about the abandonment of these values.

Another significant commonality they share is their strong opposition to communism. Neamțu has a substantial body of videos and public opinions on anti-communism in Romania, as well as leftist movements globally. Additionally, his close association with the former Romanian President, Traian Băsescu, another staunch anti-communist, during a period when numerous neoliberal policies were implemented in Romania, is noteworthy and helped him gain a spot as the scientific director at the Institute for the Condemnation of Communist Crimes.

The section portrays societal structures and expectations related to gender roles, traditional values, and economic disparities. These structures influence individuals' choices and opportunities. For example, the pricing structure of personal development programs can be seen as a structural constraint that limits access based on economic privilege. Traditional gender roles and expectations are presented as influencing individuals' behaviour and self-perception. The section also acknowledges the agency of individuals in seeking personal development and self-improvement. It discusses how people from various backgrounds choose to participate in programs like those offered by Cezar Ionascu and Jordan Peterson. These individuals exercise agency in their pursuit of personal growth and self-discovery.

The conservative and traditional views of gender roles tend to emphasize the importance of adhering to established societal norms and traditions. In this context, the section portrays conservative views that reinforce traditional gender roles, such as the idea that men should conform to a specific definition of masculinity and women should focus on fulfilling the needs and beliefs of men. These views can be seen as emphasizing structural constraints on individual behaviour, limiting agency. Traditional gender roles themselves are a societal structure that can constrain individual agency. They prescribe specific roles and behaviours for men and women, potentially limiting their choices and opportunities. For example, traditional views of femininity may constrain women's agency by suggesting that their primary role is to attract and please men.

In summary, the section indirectly addresses the structure vs. agency debate by depicting how societal structures, particularly conservative and traditional views of gender roles, influence individuals' choices and opportunities for personal development. It highlights the tension between conforming to traditional norms (structure) and pursuing personal growth and self-discovery (agency) within the constraints of these norms.

Find your true feminine self!

The contemporary notion of personal development imported some of its values from the countercultures of the 60s and 70s. As well, feminism shifted its focus towards personal development starting with that period. An example of this shift can be found in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, which bears significant resemblances to self-help literature. However, in its teachings and values, is somewhat different then the boss-babe stereotype of personal development of today. Besides, with the advent of feminism, self-help literature on relationships took a new direction. Authors like Cuauhtémoc Sánchez and Elizabeth Cantú presented contrasting perspectives on traditional intimacy, with Sánchez advocating for conservative forms of intimacy as part of a wholesome life plan, while Cantú critiqued feminism and advocated for traditional gender roles based on religious doctrine (Gordon & Bernstein 1970).

Conversely, several studies have critiqued the approached based on personal development as mean of liberation and equal representation. Laura Berlant (1988) coined the term 'female complaint' to describe how women in 1980s America expressed grievances while navigating a male-centric ideology that marginalized them. This concept paradoxically allowed women to voice opposition without challenging their alignment with men, recognizing the limits of their struggle (ibid: 243-244). Expanding on this, Schrager (1993) argued that self-help writings acted as channels for female anger. They enabled women to position themselves against men without fearing a loss of status, yet these writings often didn't fundamentally alter societal structures. Additionally, linguist Deborah Cameron (2007), adopting a feminist perspective, explored the link between therapeutic culture and the workplace, emphasizing the role of language. Cameron argued that the issues didn't stem from speech itself but from the commercialization of a form of language attributed to the female gender.

However, Wendy Simonds (1992) delved into how women consume self-help books and found that female readers approached them with scepticism. They often found these books too simplistic, exaggerating their promises, relying on sensationalism, or making overly general claims. Simonds posited that self-help books promoted the idea of the self as a malleable entity open to improvement and transformation, becoming tools for self-modification that aimed to shape individuals into predetermined ideals (Simonds, 1992: 25).

While conservative self-help books for women were not absent during this period, a recent emergence of this discourse, in conjunction with that aimed at men, suggests a growth. To illustrate this, I will introduce two individuals in the realm of femininity in Romania who advocate for conservative ideals: Oksana Ionașcu and Camelia Filip.

Oksana Ionaşcu is a coach and an instructor specialized in addressing women's issues and she is also Cezar Ionaşcu's spouse. Her system of monetization operates in a similar manner as her husband's. In an interview with her for Luxury Magazine [4], her viewpoints reflect an alignment with traditional gender roles. Analysing the interview with Oksana Ionascu from a sociological perspective, several key themes and ideas emerge that shed light on societal attitudes towards happiness, relationships, and sexuality. Oksana discusses distinct energies and roles between men and women, asserting that women are 'predestined' in a feminine manner, while suggesting that men waste time by insisting on being weak. Her focus lies on catering to men. Oksana proposes that women must embody sexuality and attractiveness to sustain male attention and engagement. This notion could potentially imply that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to gratify or captivate a man. She employs stereotypes regarding both genders. In the interview includes phrases such as 'men and money come to women through the same channel', an oversimplification of the intricacies of relationship dynamics and financial matters, Oksana's explanations tend to frame women's actions in terms of attracting or retaining men, positioning women as sources of energy for men. She places a significant emphasis on sexuality and physical appearance, her perspective might imply that a woman's value primarily hinges on her sexual allure and physical looks. Ionaşcu's message centres around the idea that personal happiness is a fundamental driver for achieving one's desires. This perspective aligns with broader individualistic values often associated with neoliberalism, where personal empowerment and fulfilment are highly prioritized.

Ionaşcu highlights that the most sought-after topics in courses and books are money and sexuality. This emphasis on self-improvement and the pursuit of wealth and pleasure can be seen as reflective of consumerist values and the commodification of personal development. Ionaşcu discusses the relationship between women, men, sexuality, and money. Her perspective suggests a complex interplay between gender roles, empowerment, and attraction. It underscores the influence of societal expectations and dynamics on relationships and individual success. Ionaşcu delves into the concept of destiny and free will, emphasizing the role of choice in shaping one's life. This aligns with neoliberal ideas of personal agency and the importance of individual decision-making. The interview explores how individuals can manage crises and hardships in life, highlighting the role of acceptance and gratitude emphasizing the importance of resilience and the ability to adapt to challenges. Ionaşcu challenges the notion that perpetual happiness is a utopian ideal, emphasizing that happiness is about perception

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[4] https://luxury.ro/09/oksana-ionascu/ (23 August 2023)

and the ability to find joy in life's experiences. This perspective questions the conventional view that continuous happiness is unattainable. She also addresses the resistance to change and the comfort of familiarity, suggesting that some individuals find unhappiness and suffering more manageable than embracing new possibilities, that again is not taking into consideration the influence of societal factors on happiness. The interview touches on the dynamics of long-term relationships, eliminating divorce as possible pathway, stressing the importance of maintaining passion and novelty, of communication, mutual respect, and maintaining a healthy sexual connection.

To ensure consistency and relevance, I selected a relationship coach who closely aligns with Mihail Neamtu's views. Camelia Filip, a relationship coach who was promoted on a religious platform, which has critical perspectives about the LGBTQ+ community. The platform also stands as a proponent of traditional family values, a stance harmonious with Mihail Neamțu's beliefs. In one of her blog articles, Filip talks about three types of women, while she repeatedly invokes the concept of God, associating it with femininity. This connection could be seen as reinforcing traditional gender roles where women are often portrayed as nurturing, self-sacrificing, and spiritually inclined. The text suggests that a woman's relationship with God is pivotal to her understanding of herself and her femininity.

The text presents three types of women - the 'real woman', the 'fatalistic woman', and the 'feminist'. Of these, the 'real woman' is portrayed as the ideal, embodying qualities of kindness, unconditional love, and spiritual depth. This portrayal aligns with traditional gender roles that emphasize women's nurturing and sacrificial nature. In contrast, the 'fatalistic woman' and 'feminist' are depicted as less desirable, with the former seen as resigned and unfulfilled and the latter as assertive but lacking in certain qualities.

The text indirectly reinforces traditional gender roles by suggesting that a woman's ultimate fulfilment is tied to her relationship with God and her acceptance of these roles. It implies that women should be self-sacrificing, empathetic, and deeply spiritual to be considered 'real women'. This perspective may be seen as limiting, as it doesn't allow for a broader range of expressions of femininity.

The text also touches on the role of men in women's lives. It suggests that a man's practical emotional involvement is crucial for a woman's development. However, this places the responsibility for a woman's fulfilment on her partner rather than acknowledging her agency in defining her own identity.

The text can be viewed as reflecting traditional gender norms where women are expected to fulfil certain roles and qualities, often tied to their relationship with God. While it emphasizes the importance of women's inner peace and self-acceptance, it can be critiqued for limiting the diversity of women's

experiences and roles. Additionally, it places significant responsibility on men for women's well-being, which can be seen as problematic from a feminist perspective.

This section of the article highlights the conservative turn in personal development that reinforces traditional gender roles and promotes a quest for an 'authentic self' often undermined by modernity. It discusses figures like Cezar Ionașcu and Jordan Peterson or Camilia Filip, who have gained prominence by addressing issues related to masculinity, self-improvement, and societal power dynamics. All of the examples presented reinforce traditional gender roles by suggesting that masculinity and femininity needs to be increased and framing men's and women's worth in terms of their adherence to specific definition of masculinity and femininity.

It objectifies women by implying that a man's success is linked to how he presents himself to women, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. It oversimplifies complex issues like family dynamics, relationships, and success by attributing them solely to individual choices, neglecting societal influences. The commodification of personal development, where success and improvement can be bought, aligns with capitalist ideals. The discussion around money and gender does not consider their intersections with broader societal power dynamics and economic inequalities. Overall, while these figures and programs may seem to offer individuals personal development opportunities, they actually enforce traditional gender norms, economic privilege, and capitalist values, potentially reinforcing inequalities and limiting the scope of authentic self-discovery and empowerment.

These conservative perspectives reflect a turn in personal development that reinforces traditional gender roles and seeks an 'authentic self' often perceived as eroded by modernity.

Radical personal development

The connection between capitalism and contemporary self-help literature is evident in Max Weber's analysis of Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, regarded as one of the earliest self-help books (Blum, 2020), as a means to examine and characterize the essence of capitalism (Weber, 2007). However, Blum (2020) discusses the historical origins, global dissemination, cultural nuances, and critiques of the self-help industry. It highlights how the concept of self-help was not uniquely American, as it had been a feature of the English character over time. She also argues that the term "self-help" was popularized in the UK through guides to working-class radicalism. Despite the misconception that self-help emerged in the mid-20th century, it had a rich history dating back to the early

20th century, with international influences and cross-cultural exchanges. The analysis delves into how self-help evolved as a genre, impacting social class dynamics, and contributing to the middlebrow movement. While critics have challenged self-help's influence on individualism, anxiety, and its erasure of systemic issues, feminist scholars and some marginalized communities have found political potential in the genre. The excerpt explores the African diasporic perspective on self-help as both a tool for empowerment and a means of perpetuating oppressive ideologies.

The text further examines how the self-help ideology resonated in Japan during its modernization period, where it aided industrialization and societal progress, the narrative contrasts in the collective aspirations of early self-help with the compulsive and episodic failures depicted in Flaubert's work 'Bouvard and Pécuchet' and Marxist perspectives on self-help that reveal the tension between the individual's desire for self-assertion and the structural constraints imposed by capitalism. Marx envisions a future communist society where genuine self-help can thrive within a community-driven context (ibid.).

The concept of personal development within the framework of capitalism raises complex and nuanced considerations, particularly in relation to mental health and its connection to leftist ideologies. Under capitalism, the pursuit of personal development has been closely tied to the idea of self-improvement and individual success. While personal development can provide tools for individuals to enhance their skills and achieve their goals, it can also perpetuate the notion that success is solely determined by individual effort and ability. This can create unrealistic expectations, intense competition, and feelings of inadequacy, contributing to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Mark Fisher's assertion that mental health is influenced by capitalism points to the ways in which the pressures of an exploitative system can contribute to deteriorating mental well-being (2022). Fisher (ibid) argues that mental health should be considered a domain for revolutionary change. Leftist movements can address mental health as part of a broader critique of capitalism and its impacts on individual and societal well-being.

The pandemic highlighted the pitfalls of toxic positivity – the expectation to maintain a positive attitude in the face of genuine struggles. Though the concept of unrealistic optimism had already been explored by psychologists at least as early as 1980, the term toxic positivity first appeared in J. Halberstam's 2011 *The Queer Art of Failure* to critique the toxic positivity of contemporary life. Beginning in about 2019, the term toxic positivity became the subject of a greater number of Internet searches. Toxic positivity is a psychological phenomenon characterized by the tendency to suppress or deny negative emotions, particularly feelings of anger and sadness, in favour of maintaining a relentlessly positive

outlook. It involves the belief that one should always exude positivity, regardless of the circumstances, even when facing adversity or distressing situations. This concept revolves around the idea that people should avoid negative thoughts and emotions at all costs. Even when faced with events that naturally elicit sadness, such as loss or hardships, toxic positivity encourages individuals to mask these genuine emotions with a facade of unwavering positivity. In essence, it dismisses the importance of acknowledging and processing authentic feelings, which can be detrimental to one's mental and emotional well-being.

While positivity is generally considered a valuable and uplifting attitude, toxic positivity arises when there's an unrealistic expectation of maintaining a perpetually happy and trouble-free existence. When people fail to meet this unrealistic standard, they may experience feelings of shame or guilt for not attaining the level of positivity desired. What makes toxic positivity particularly concerning is that individuals who constantly strive for positive experiences might inadvertently stigmatize their own negative emotions, such as depression, or suppress natural emotional responses, like sadness, regret, or stress. Furthermore, the ability to distinguish between controllable and uncontrollable situations is essential when considering the effects of positivity. In situations where individuals can exert some control, overly positive thinking may hinder their ability to address and rectify negative circumstances. Additionally, one's attitude toward happiness plays a role in their ability to cope with life's inevitable downsides.

In response, especially to the lockdowns during the pandemic there was an upsurge in the self-care movement, which emphasizes the importance of prioritizing one's well-being in a system that often neglects it. Audrey Lorde's (1988) concept of self-care recognized that marginalized individuals must take care of themselves within an oppressive society. However, for privileged classes, it can become a form of indulgence that fails to address systemic issues. She emphasized the importance of self-care as a form of self-preservation and resistance against societal injustices and oppressions, particularly for marginalized communities. One of her famous quotes related to self-care is: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'. This quote underscores the idea that taking care of one's physical and emotional well-being is not selfish but rather a necessary act of resistance against the systemic forces that can harm individuals from marginalized backgrounds.

The anti-work movement challenges the capitalist notion that productivity defines an individual's worth. It advocates for a re-evaluation of work's role in our lives and pushes against the narrative of constant productivity. Similarly, the idea of 'silent quitting' – embracing moments of rest and reflection – counters the capitalist pressure to be constantly active.

The subreddit known as r/antiwork is closely associated with contemporary labour movements, critiques of conventional work, and the broader anti-work movement. Its motto, 'Unemployment for all, not just the rich!' underscores its core ideology. Posts on this platform frequently detail employees' negative work experiences, dissatisfaction with working conditions, and discussions on unionization.

Among the actions advocated by the subreddit are consumer boycotts, such as the 'Blackout Black Friday' movement, and unconventional protests like submitting fake job applications to companies like Kellogg's during the 2021 strike. In 2020 and 2021, r/antiwork witnessed a significant surge in popularity, gaining an impressive 900,000 subscribers in 2021 alone, accumulating nearly 1.7 million subscribers by year-end. It's often linked with ideologically similar subreddits like r/latestagecapitalism and has been likened to the decentralized ethos of the Occupy Wall Street movement, in 2023 it reached over 2.4 million members.

Originally created in 2013 as a platform for discussing anti-work concepts within post-left anarchism, the subreddit has evolved into a broader space encompassing discussions on labour activism and working conditions. The subreddit's rapid growth can be attributed to the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in massive layoffs and reduced work hours for millions. The number of subscribers, which was 13,000 in 2019, skyrocketed to 100,000 in early 2020. This surge in popularity coincided with posts of employees sharing their resignations with employers, reflecting a growing sentiment against traditional employment.

The subreddit witnessed significant milestones in 2021. 'Blackout Black Friday'emerged as a movement initiated by its members, and the subreddit played a role in unconventional protests, such as printing anti-work manifestos through receipt printers. In response to Kellogg's announcement of hiring permanent workers to replace striking employees, the subreddit organized a campaign encouraging the submission of fake job applications, which garnered widespread attention.

For working-class and minority individuals, self-care and personal development can indeed be revolutionary acts. However, as economic pressures intensify due to inflation, job insecurity, and demands to return to the office, the capacity for such practices can diminish. The struggle to meet basic needs makes the pursuit of personal development a secondary concern. Education can be considered radical when it challenges traditional norms, systems, and power structures to bring about significant social, political, or cultural change. Radical education encourages students to question established norms and beliefs. It challenges the dominant narratives and encourages critical thinking about

societal issues, power structures, and inequalities. Radical education aims to empower individuals, especially marginalized groups, by providing them with the knowledge and tools to advocate for their rights and effect change. It often focuses on issues related to social justice, equity, and human rights. It promotes inclusive education that welcomes diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences. Radical educators strive to create an inclusive environment where everyone's voice is valued. Radical education often extends beyond the classroom. It encourages students to engage with their communities, address local issues, and work towards positive social change. It challenges hierarchical structures within educational institutions and advocates for more democratic and participatory forms of decision-making. Radical educators often draw from critical pedagogy, a teaching approach developed by Paulo Freire, especially his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). Critical pedagogy focuses on the learner's critical consciousness and their ability to analyse and challenge oppressive structures.

Radical education goes hand in hand with activism. It encourages students to act on the issues they care about, whether through advocacy, protests, or community organizing. Several other authors and educators have written extensively about radical education and its principles, such as bell hooks, in books like *Teaching to Transgress: and Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) where she explores the intersection of education, race, class, and gender; although not often categorized as a "radical" educator, Dewey's progressive educational philosophy, has outlined in works like *Experience and Education* (1938), laid the foundation for many later radical educational theories or Maxine Greene's work in books like *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988) emphasizes the role of the arts and imagination in education and its potential to promote social change.

Hick and Furlotte (2010) employed Radical Mindfulness (RMT) in an exploratory study with severely economically disadvantaged people they discovered that exhibited positive effects on participants' well-being, as indicated by increased well-being scores. Qualitative results suggested that this increase in life satisfaction might result from a positive shift in how individuals relate to oppressive societal structures. While these findings are promising, the study involved a small number of participants, and further research with a larger sample and a control group is necessary to confirm the results. Conceptually, the RMT program differs from conventional mindfulness programs in two significant ways. Firstly, RMT places a strong emphasis on mindfulness training for addressing personal, interpersonal, and societal issues concurrently. This approach aligns with social work theories that advocate for addressing power differentials, oppressions, and societal structures while assisting individual clients, promoting a transformative and social justice-oriented perspective.

Secondly, RMT includes sociological education to help individuals comprehend the systemic roots of their poverty, while MBSR primarily focuses on psychoeducation and physiology related to stress and the fight-or-flight response. RMT and classical mindfulness programs share common goals of enhancing positive health, wellness, and resilience, as well as increasing overall life satisfaction. RMT, however, represents an expanded version of mindfulness approaches, particularly tailored to its target population.

In Romania, these currents are not notably prevalent, making it challenging to establish a visible social movement. While attempts have been made through small left-wing organizations or NGOs, regrettably, they have not surpassed a certain threshold and have failed to gain widespread public awareness.

As society grapples with the complexities of capitalism, these diverse perspectives on self-help, positivity, work, and education provide valuable insights into the ongoing discourse surrounding personal development within the framework of capitalism. These discussions offer pathways for individuals and communities to navigate and, in some cases, challenge the societal structures that shape their lives.

This section touches on the tension between individual agency and structural constraints, which is a central aspect of the structure vs. agency debate. For example, when discussing personal development within the framework of capitalism, it highlights how personal development can be closely tied to individual success, implying that individuals are expected to exercise agency in self-improvement. However, it also points out that this emphasis on individual effort can create unrealistic expectations, contributing to mental health issues. This reflects the debate's essence - the interplay between individual agency and external structures (capitalism in this case). Radical and leftist politics contribute to the structure vs. agency debate by emphasizing the role of structures, particularly systemic ones like capitalism, in shaping individual experiences and opportunities. These ideologies often argue that the structural constraints imposed by capitalism limit the agency of individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. This perspective aligns with the critical examination of capitalism's impact on personal development and mental health in the text.

In essence, radical and leftist politics contribute to this discussion by highlighting the structural inequalities that can impede individual agency. They often advocate for systemic change to create a more equitable environment in which individuals can exercise their agency more effectively.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration into the multifaceted realm of personal development within the context of evolving gender roles and radical movements has unveiled a complex tapestry of transformation and consequences for individuals and society at large.

Firstly, in the realm of masculinity, there has been a reactionary movement arguing for traditional gender roles and rigid masculinity. The emergence of figures like Jordan Peterson and Mihail Neamtu, while very controversial, reflected this evolution by addressing issues related to masculinity and self-improvement. This transformation encourages men to revert to a notably restricted and conventional understanding of gender, one that confines individuals within narrowly defined roles and behaviours. Instead of embracing the diverse spectrum of human experiences and expressions, it steers them toward a more rigid and traditional conception of what it means to be a man. This can manifest as a return to stereotypical gender roles, where men are expected to conform to predefined notions of stoicism, dominance, and emotional restraint, ultimately limiting their capacity for personal growth and self-expression. Furthermore, it also raises questions about the commodification of personal development and the potential reinforcement of traditional gender norms.

Equally, within the framework of femininity, personal development has undergone a somewhat complementary evolution. While feminism's earlier wave emphasized collective empowerment and resistance to traditional gender roles, contemporary self-help literature has, in some instances, perpetuated conservative ideals. Figures like Oksana Ionascu and Camelia Filip advocate for traditional gender roles, emphasizing the importance of women's roles in catering to men's desires. This evolution has implications for women's agency and how their worth is perceived in society, highlighting the tensions between empowerment and conformity.

Lastly, the study delved into the realm of radical personal development movements, unveiling their profound impact on the intersection of capitalism, mental health, and societal structures. These movements, from the anti-work subreddit to concepts like Radical Mindfulness Training, challenge conventional narratives around work, positivity, and self-improvement. They encourage critical thinking, activism, and a re-evaluation of societal norms. However, they also raise questions about the balance between individual agency and structural constraints within capitalism.

In light of these transformations, it is evident that personal development has not remained static but has adapted to changing cultural dynamics, gender roles, and social critique. These changes come with both promise and challenges. The consequences for individuals include greater opportunities for self-expression and self-improvement, breaking free from confining gender norms, and embracing a broader range of emotions. However, they also entail the risk of reinforcing traditional stereotypes, unrealistic expectations, and the commodification of personal growth.

Societally, these transformations reflect broader shifts in how we perceive gender, work, and well-being. They challenge traditional power structures, encourage a more inclusive and diverse understanding of identity, and offer avenues for resistance against oppressive systems. However, they also underscore the ongoing tension between individual agency and structural constraints, particularly within the capitalist framework.

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the intricate interplay between personal development, gender roles, and radical movements, showcasing how these dynamics continue to shape contemporary society. It is clear that personal development is not merely an individual pursuit but a reflection of the larger cultural, societal, and economic forces at play. Understanding these transformations and their consequences is essential for fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and mindful society where personal development serves as a tool for empowerment rather than conformity.

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