

The Secret of Her Success: Oprah Winfrey and the Seductions of Self-Transformation

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Abstract

This essay considers Oprah Winfrey's rise from mere TV talk show host to global cultural icon in relationship to the rise in the 1980s and triumph in the 1990s of the neoliberal political-economic project. It argues that the expansion of Winfrey's media enterprise and her ascent to iconic status are a product of the complex historical relationship between capitalism and the distinctly American fusion of psychology and religion captured by the term "mind cure." Drawing on Raymond Williams's sociology of culture approach, which looks for the "indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness" (1977, 80) and Douglas Kellner's (2003) method of "diagnostic critique," the essay argues that situating Winfrey's enterprise in relation to major currents in American political, economic and cultural history provides a means to critically examine the intersection of American politics and culture over the past quarter century. The essay explores tensions inherent in Oprah Winfrey's professed mission to "empower" her followers – in which she routinely favors private initiatives and individual self-improvement over public funding and collective responsibility for societal needs, and thereby deflects attention from larger issues of social inequality and distributional politics – and considers the class and gender basis of the appeal of this project for her predominantly white, middle- and upper-middle class female following.

Keywords

Oprah Winfrey; mind cure; neoliberalism

Media treatment of Oprah Winfrey is inevitably laced with superlatives. She is routinely described as the most powerful woman in media, in America, in the world. Her legendary ability to sell products, ideas, causes, and people is now widely referred to as the *Oprah effect*. (Kinsella, 1997; Max, 1999; Oprah Effect, 2009; Ulrich, 2006). It is increasingly common to see her credited—in part or in whole, for better or for worse, depending on the political loyalties of the source—with helping put the first African American in the White House. Writing in the *Nation*, Patricia Williams described Winfrey's presence at

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Barack Obama's South Carolina campaign rally as a partnership of "one of the world's most influential black men" and "the world's most powerful black woman" (Williams, 2007). Moreover, a postelection *Time* article on "Comedy in the Obama Age" included the following joke: "There's nothing bigger than Oprah. Oprah can do anything. 'Betcha can't make a black man President.' 'Watch me!'" (Zoglin, 2009).

Such assessments of Winfrey's place in U.S. culture have not always been the norm. In the early 1990s, she and her fellow talk show hosts were the focus of mounting public denunciations of the genre as "talk rot," "trash talk TV," and worse. In 1994, as condemnation of talk shows escalated and her own ratings were slipping against competition from *Ricki Lake* and *Jerry Springer*, Winfrey announced she would cease focusing on dysfunction and start emphasizing positive topics. By the end of that decade, Winfrey would have managed not only to survive the talk-show wars and retain her program's top-ranked spot but also become a media tycoon and cultural icon (Grindstaff, 2002; Peck, 2008). In 1999, *Time* magazine included Winfrey on its inaugural list of the 100 most influential people in the world; she has since appeared six times on the Time 100 list—more often than any other individual (Time 100, 1999). No longer labeled a mere talk-show host, Winfrey has been proclaimed a "prophet," an "inspirational phenomenon" (Avins, 2000), and "almost a religion" (Lebowitz, 1996, p. 65). The synergy of her talk show, book club, Web site, magazine, radio channel, personal growth tours, YouTube channel, Facebook page, and forthcoming cable TV network have made Winfrey not only one of the "most trusted brand names" in America but also "The Queen of All Media," as *Forbes* put it in ranking her 234 on its list of world billionaires (Feeney, 2000; World's Billionaires, 2009).

Although the efficacy of the Oprah brand is rarely questioned, its consequences come under occasional scrutiny. Such was the case with *Newsweek's* June 2009 cover story, "Crazy Talk: Oprah, Wacky Cures and You." Examining Winfrey's handling of controversial health issues such as hormone replacement and the relationship of child autism and vaccinations, the article pondered the potential for misinformation among fans who "regard her as an oracle" (Kosova & Wingert, 2009). The authors focused at some length on Winfrey's promotion of *The Secret*—a video/book/CD created by an Australian reality-TV producer that promises health, wealth, and happiness to those who master the "secret" of the "Law of Attraction." Winfrey explained in the first of three episodes she devoted to the topic that *The Secret* shows us we all "create our own circumstances by the choices that we make and the choices that we make are fueled by our thoughts." It thus follows, she said, that

everything that happens to you, good and bad, you are attracting to yourself. It's something that I really have believed in for years, that the energy you put out into the world is always gonna be coming back to you. That's the basic principle. (Oprah Winfrey Show, February 7, 2007)

The payoff from Winfrey's thumbs up was immediate. A week later, sales of *The Secret* had shot from 18,000 to 101,000 copies (McGee, 2007), and the book has been parked on the *New York Times* bestseller list since February 2007 ("Hardcover Advice," 2009).

If results of the Oprah effect are easy to see, grasping the source of its power poses a bigger challenge. How should we go about trying to make sense of Winfrey's ascent to prophet status and Brand Oprah's ability to generate stratospheric profits without reducing these to her personal charisma or succumbing to the individualized superlatives tossed about in the popular media? Raymond Williams (1977) counsels students of media and culture to search for the "indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness" (p. 80). It is precisely the "complex unity" of those elements, he says, that demands our critical attention (Williams, 1977, p. 139). An emphasis on complexity and synthesis also characterizes the method Douglas Kellner (2003) terms "diagnostic critique," which locates media texts and institutions within a social and historical context with an eye toward comprehending "the defining characteristics, novelties, and conflicts of the contemporary era" (p. 27).

Applying that method to the Oprah effect means situating Winfrey in relation to the sociohistorical and political-economic processes that have produced her as a cultural icon, spiritual guru, and media mogul. In her initial endorsement of *The Secret*, Winfrey noted its parallels with her own values:

It's what this show is all about, and has been about for 21 years, taking responsibility for your life, knowing that every choice that you've made has led you to where you are right now. Well, the good news is that everybody has the power, no matter where you are in your life, to start changing it today. (*Oprah Winfrey Show*, February 16, 2007)

A promotion for her popular Personal Growth Summit encapsulates her worldview: "You only have to believe that you can succeed, that you can be whatever your heart desires, be willing to work for it, and you can have it." The allure of that message issues in part from Winfrey's conscious framing of her biography as a "black, female Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches story" and her meticulous suppression of any counter narrative (Jones, 2000; Sellers, 2002; Williams, 2007). However, that narrative, like Winfrey's promise of self-transformation and appeals to the power of mind to create reality, must be situated within the larger historical context that has made them meaningful and persuasive. Winfrey's journey to fame and fortune is intimately bound up with major developments in American political-economic and religious history, including the powerful class and gender tensions within those developments.

Winfrey's contemporary mind cure can be traced to an ensemble of religious/spiritual movements that emerged in the late-19th-century United States during a period of religious turmoil in conjunction with the rise of industrial capitalism and a culture of consumption. Whether labeled mind cure, New Thought, positive thinking, or abundance therapy, all strands of the new religion renounced "negative thinking" and promoted the distinctly "American conviction that people could shape their own destinies and find true happiness" (Leach, 1993, p. 227). The success and historical endurance of mind cure reflect its ability to adapt religious themes and practices to the priorities of capitalism. Mind-cure theologies took root and flourished within the rising middle class, whose members, already comfortably removed from the realities

of material deprivation, could readily imagine their material comfort was the natural result of their correct thinking. Mind-cure theology exerted a particularly powerful attraction for White middle-class women—it was at times called the new “woman’s religion”—because it took into account the “emotional and cultural tensions” confronting them in late-19th-century America (Satter, 1999, p. 240). Women comprised the majority of students and followers of the various branches of the movement (e.g., Christian Science, Divine Science, Spiritual Science, Mental Healing, Mind Cure) and were prominent as leaders, healers, teachers, and authors.

Winfrey can be characterized as a contemporary proponent of mind-cure principles who “dispenses her New Thought philosophy daily on a show watched by millions” (Satter, 1999, p. 7; see also Lofton, 2006). For example, for nearly two decades she has been promoting the modern-day New Thought message of *Course in Miracles* guru, Marianne Williamson; many in Winfrey’s stable of experts (e.g., Suze Orman, Martha Beck, Cheryl Richardson, John Gray) preach some variation of positive thinking, and the basic premise of *The Secret*—summed up in its mantra, “Ask, Believe, Receive”—would have been warmly embraced by 19th century mind curists. As with their New Thought forbearers, women are prominently represented across the contemporary forms of metaphysical religion, including as teachers of *The Secret* (Albanese, 2007; Emerich, 2006). White, middle-class women are also a primary target market and the biggest following for Winfrey’s thought-as-power credo—some 73% to 78% of the audience for her program, magazine, and Web site is female, 80% of her show’s viewers are White (Anburajan, 2007), more than half are college educated, most are homeowners, a majority are employed, and advertisers salivate over access to her educated, upscale demographic (Monthly Traffic, 2009; Peck, 2008).

The appeal of mind cure past and present must also be situated in the political-economic conditions that have helped endow thought-as-power cosmologies with their explanatory power and allure. The decades straddling the turn of the 20th century, when New Thought took root, and those leading to the 21st century, when it enjoyed a broad resurgence, were marked by significant political-economic change. The first period witnessed the passage of U.S. capitalism from its “competitive” to “corporate” stage (Sklar, 1988, p. 3), whereas the second brought the displacement of a Keynesian model of the government/economy relationship by a neoliberal model (Kotz, 2003; Pollin, 2003). That the mind-cure theology that suffuses Winfrey’s enterprise originated in the former period and that her journey from talk-show queen to cultural icon/media mogul paralleled the rise and triumph of the latter are of central significance for any serious diagnostic critique of the Oprah effect.

Neoliberalism emerged in the 1980s as a response to threats to U.S. political-economic hegemony stemming from mounting debt from the Vietnam War, competition from the recovered economies of Europe and Japan, and political challenges from Third World national liberation movements. That response entailed a double makeover: first, a makeover of the economy through deindustrialization, growth of the service sector, and shift of investment from goods to finance, and second, a makeover of the role of government within the economy through tax cuts, deregulation, privatization, and reduced spending on public infrastructure and social programs.

Women have played a vital role in the global spread and entrenchment of neoliberal restructuring. The end of the long postwar boom and resulting stagnating wages in the United States from the 1970s onward helped destroy the family wage, making it increasingly necessary to have two incomes to sustain a household (MacLean, 2002). As women poured into the workplace out of necessity, the percentage of women employed outside home rose from 34% in 1960 to over 60% in 2005 (Eisenstein, 2005). Women's mass movement into the workforce led to increased demand for replacement of their labor at home, fueling the commercialization of personal services in the form of low-paying, service jobs—which were filled primarily by female workers. At the same time, deindustrialization involved moving industry from the unionized North to the non-union South to exploit cheap labor. Export processing or free trade zones were created in the global South as production costs in the North were reduced with immigrant labor and automation, and both developments involved heavy reliance on female labor.

The on-the-ground consequences of neoliberal restructuring include reductions in tax rates for corporations and the wealthy, a shrunken public infrastructure and social safety net, the collapse of job security—between 1984 and 2004 at least 30 million fulltime workers were laid off (Uchitelle, 2006), a dramatic decline in the number of good jobs—those that pay US\$17 an hour and include employer-paid health care and retirement benefits (Schmitt, 2005), a marked upward redistribution of wealth and a polarization of “haves” and “have nots,” and the rise of what Naomi Klein (2007) calls “hollow government” (p. 371), where dwindling resources has led to outsourcing government functions, such as education, disaster response, even fighting wars, to become for-profit ventures.

This is the context in which Winfrey has built a media empire and become almost a religion—which brings us back to the problem of diagnosing the historical basis of her power. I suggest it is no coincidence that both the original Gilded Age associated with the rise of industrial capitalism in the United States and what some have termed the new gilded age (Uchitelle, 2007) affiliated with the deindustrialization of America over the past quarter century brought growth and expanded opportunities to a specific sector of the middle class—one which has been labeled the professional managerial class, the upper middle class, service savants, or the new petty bourgeoisie. This class stratum is associated with law, education, business, science and engineering, medicine, social services, and media. It strives to advance and maintain its social power by valorizing higher education, credentials, and specialized knowledge. The dominant values of the new petty bourgeoisie include competitive individualism—due to the isolated nature of professional labor—and a commitment to meritocracy. As a class, it tends to favor expanded decision making and opportunities for promotion, but it is less inclined to support major structural transformation of society. As Nicos Poulantzas (1975) put it, the new petty bourgeoisie “does not want to break the ladders by which it imagines it can climb” (p. 292).

What has been happening over the past quarter century that might help us understand the appeal of Winfrey's mind-cure message for the professional managerial class—as well its particular attraction for women of that class fraction? Mind-cure

theologies in late 19th century appealed to the educated middle and upper-middle classes because they “offered peace of mind and emotional tranquility to those already on the way up” (Quebedeaux, 1982, quoted in Roof, 1999, p. 140). At the end of the 20th century, in contrast, those same class strata are faced with economic insecurity. Corporate downsizing, the expansion of contingent labor, cutbacks in the public sector, and the outsourcing of jobs have presented serious challenges to the 30% of the U.S. population identified as the college-educated middle class—a group that also represents a key target of the Oprah brand (Uchitelle, 2006). As the family wage and the dream of a comfortable middle-class existence became harder to realize in the 1980s and 1990s, competition for the dwindling number of good jobs grew fierce. In such a climate, people become vulnerable to anything that promises the secret to beating or escaping the brute logic of the cutthroat marketplace in what Louis Uchitelle called the go-it-alone world of neoliberal capitalism (2006, p. x). Hence the allure of the makeover in all of its guises, particularly when dressed up in the rhetoric of empowerment by a figure whose professed mission is to empower women and who has come to represent the personification of the empowered woman herself.

Steven Starker (1988) observed that New Thought literature in late Victorian America “told readers in effect to close their eyes and wish very, very, hard, and all would be granted” (p. 39). A century later, the seduction of self-transformation has retained its grip—a parallel that Micki McGee (2007) noted as well:

New Age thinking, like the New Thought that preceded it, provides a ready justification for the vast inequalities in the distribution of resources. But more than that, it offers the hope that you, too, may be provided for—just as long as you stay positive and hold on to your dreams. (p. 5)

During an era when people’s actual power over the material condition of our lives has declined while the power of capital has expanded exponentially, Oprah Winfrey has ascended to the position of cultural icon of mainstream America by telling us we can do anything we put our minds to. This is a promise not unlike that of the lottery. Both are forms of wish fulfillment that owe their allure to the harsh reality of a go-it-alone world, both are ideological practices that help legitimize and reproduce the neoliberal order and forms of social (class) subjectivities appropriate to it, and neither will do a thing to alter the fact that the top 20% of U.S. households owns 85% of the wealth (Domhoff, 2009), that 46.3 million people have no health insurance and 39.8 million are living in poverty (Yen, 2009), or that the 400 Americans with the highest incomes—which definitively includes Oprah Winfrey with her net worth of US\$2.7 billion and earnings of US\$270 million in 2008—paid income and social security taxes at the same rate as those making US\$50,000 to US\$75,000 a year (Tabb, 2007). This is something we card-carrying members of the new petty bourgeoisie might remember the next time we’re tempted by the siren’s call of self-transformation, individual empowerment, and the Oprah effect.

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Bio

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