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CHAPTER 6

The Twelve-Step Movement
and Advanced Capitalist Culture:
The Politics of Self-Control
in Postmodernity

Craig Reinerman

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The largest and longest-running social movement in nineteenth century America was the temperance movement. This movement has been read as a peculiarly Protestant American response to the wrenching change wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.¹ But whatever its structural, class, or ethnic underpinnings, the temperance movement took the phenomenological form of a struggle against booze—specifically against the loss of self-control attributed to drink. Because self-control was central to both the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, its loss was especially feared by nineteenth century Americans, who therefore blamed all manner of personal and social problems on alcohol.

Nearly two centuries after the temperance crusade began and three-quarters of a century after national Prohibition, something strangely similar is afoot. As the end of the twentieth century approaches, the largest movement in America may well be the twelve-step movement based on Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The current movement differs in many ways from the earlier temperance movement. For example, while the temperance movement was in important respects a collective political movement for social change, albeit one focused on alcohol's putative effects on individuals, the current twelve-step movement is predominantly individualist and therapeutic in focus. But there are also some historical parallels between the two. Just as temperance depicted drink as the source of most social problems and was linked to broader reform efforts, so, too, the modern twelve-step movement has been broadened far beyond booze, other drugs, and their attendant problems to encompass a staggering array of human troubles. Moreover, the core problem-

atic shared by each of the groups in this burgeoning movement remains the loss of self-control.

In this chapter I first describe the origins and organizational logic of AA, the model for all other twelve-step groups. Second, I summarize the extraordinary proliferation of non-drug-related twelve-step groups. Third, I offer a beginning interpretation of the remarkable resonance of twelve-step ideology in terms of the postmodern condition. Specifically, I argue that the collapse of traditional communities and cosmologies said to characterize postmodernity has left millions of people without the sustaining cultures and stable identities that help regulate desire. In such a state, they are especially torn by the contradiction between the need for self-control (temperance culture) and increasing incentives for indulgence (the culture of mass consumption). In this context, “addiction” comes to serve as the meta-metaphor for all manner of human troubles, and the twelve-step movement provides the identity, community, and cosmology that are said to be as problematic in postmodern society as they are necessary for a self-regulating daily life.

Beyond its remarkable size and scope, there are several reasons why it is important to understand the twelve-step movement. First, many social movement theorists and activists have remarked upon the centrality of culture and identity in other so-called new social movements.² It may be that older, class-interest-based social movements do not speak as clearly as the twelve-step movement to the identity interests that many people seem to find increasingly compelling under postmodern conditions.³ Second, while the other so-called new social movements are still ultimately concerned with changing social conditions, twelve-step groups define themselves in terms of “self-help” and eschew social change in favor of individual change. Yet, the twelve-step movement is composed of people who often have in the past and might again participate in movements for social change. If my interpretation of the rapid growth of the twelve-step movement has merit, it may shed some new light on those features of our culture and epoch that are pushing millions of people toward changing the self rather than changing the world.

Alcoholics Anonymous and the Birth of the Twelve-Step Movement

After national Prohibition was repealed in 1933, a movement arose that began to redefine alcohol problems in terms of disease. Proponents of repeal had made drinking officially acceptable. The evils of drink could no longer be situated in the bottle, as if the substance itself was inherently addicting. Over time, the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, along with the public-relations experts and scientists who began the alcoholism movement, reconceptualized alcohol problems as existing in the person—that is, as a person-specific “dis-

ease.”⁴ A temperance and Prohibition discourse of moral condemnation began to give way to one of disease, science, and treatment.

Alcoholics Anonymous arose in this context (in 1935) and played a major role in forging it. In 1939, the founders of AA published “Twelve Suggested Steps of Recovery” in the so-called “Big Book” of accounts of recovery from alcoholism. The only explicit requirement for membership was and still is “the desire to stop drinking.” The twelve steps were originally offered as a sort of formula that was a direct distillation of the first hundred members’ experiences with alcohol problems and recovery.

The first step was admitting both that one was “powerless” over alcohol and that one’s life “had become unmanageable” because of it. This was followed by an assertion that “we came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves . . . could restore us to sanity” and by a “decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.” Subsequent steps included taking a “fearless moral inventory,” admitting wrongs, being “ready to have God remove all these defects of character,” making amends to all persons harmed, and so on, up to the final, twelfth step—a “spiritual awakening” that included practicing these principles and carrying the “message to others.”

AA is organized to remain responsible principally to local communities. Its primary unit is the “group,” which retains autonomy and can differentiate itself over a broad range of membership characteristics (for example, there are specific groups for nonsmokers, Hispanics, lesbians, and longshoremen). Groups also vary with respect to their affiliation with one another at the local level as well as with the main New York office. The overall comportment of AA groups is guided by the Twelve Traditions, which clarify AA’s public-relations policy with respect to the “outside” world. Cooperation rather than affiliation is the rule when groups deal with outside issues or parties. The stated purpose of all AA members and activities is to help the “still-suffering alcoholic.” Unlike the for-profit, professional treatment industry, none of this takes the commodity form. There is an explicit proscription against the organization accumulating money, property, or prestige. Anonymity in the non-AA world is the rule. Unlike professional alcohol counselors or psychiatrists, AA members have always believed that only a “drunk” can truly understand and help another drunk.

There are no formal, centralized mechanisms in AA to control members and the ways they “work” their “program.” The national and regional bodies above the group level are conceived as service structures that represent the wisdom of the mass of members or the “conscience” of the groups. The decision-making process within groups is based on consensus after lengthy egalitarian debates over any contentious issue; “politicking” is discouraged. National and regional offices publish pamphlets and flyers that are “conference approved,” but they do not delegate or legislate to local groups or the “fellowship” at large. Leadership of all local groups and service structures rotates.⁵

Attending meetings is the primary activity of all AA members, the purpose of which is to "carry the message to the still-suffering alcoholic." Meetings consist mostly of members' talk about their "experience, strength and hope." Criticism or debate ("crosstalk") about what others say or believe is not tolerated; members hold that all contributions to group discourse have *prima facie* validity. The result is a group process in which learning results from sharing candid stories, reactions, and commonsense strategies for achieving and maintaining sobriety. These shared accounts provide the basis for comparing one's own situation and ways of coping with those of others; further, they stimulate self-examination, deconstruct the "former self," and inculcate a new epistemology.

For many, this process of "recovery" is a spiritual quest for a new way of life and a new consciousness sharply different from those one had during active drinking. The member's life is reconceptualized in terms of "addiction." Members come to believe that this concept explains their past and orders their future.⁶ They learn that abstinence is the first and most crucial step in a long process of personal development. At each meeting members affirm their own recovery and sobriety by working to get others to do the same. Thus, while one often hears twelve-step groups referred to as "self-help" groups, organizationally and therapeutically they might also be seen as mutual-help groups. Nonetheless, responsibility is always assigned to the individual; members believe that belonging to a group, participating in meetings, and giving "service" to fellow alcoholics result in "the program's" real essence: spiritual recovery of the self by means of adherence to a clear moral order.⁷

Members have long insisted that terms such as "God," "Him," "His Wisdom," and "Higher Power," which permeate AA discourse, do not make it a "religious" organization. In my view, it is deeply religious, albeit nondenominational. AA's founders came out of and drew directly upon a religious organization (the Oxford Group), and AA's "steps" have always made reference to God or a Higher Power, although always in ecumenical terms ("God as we understand Him"). They insist that they are a "spiritual" rather than a religious organization, but members are encouraged to pray, and fully half of the twelve steps mention "God" or a "higher power."⁸ In the post-repeal era, AA's founders struggled to remain secular and nonpartisan to avoid the religious and moralistic connotations of temperance and Prohibition discourse. They walked a fine line: seeking to recast alcohol problems in the quasi-medical terms of disease that were seen as progressive at the time, and maintaining an original vision of recovery that was clearly modeled on religious conversion.

The practices of AA and its newer offshoots remain in some sense evangelical.⁹ However, as Harry G. Levine has argued, this evangelicalism was different from virtually all other forms of Protestant evangelicalism in that it included no Victorian proscription of sexual pleasure. It may be that this nod to modern sensibilities helps account for the appeal of AA-based groups and the recent proliferation of membership. Twelve-step groups not only offer real

help for pressing personal problems but they do so in a way that speaks to broader spiritual needs—all without asking for sexual abstinence or old-fashioned moral perfection.¹⁰

AA was never merely religious, however. Its evangelical side was from the start married to a rational, pragmatic psychology that drew on early cognitive psychologists such as William James. Its founder and chief proponent, Bill Wilson, rhetorically recrafted words such as “sin” and “retribution” into “character defects” and “amends” that resonated with modern, anticlerical, and “wet” (post-Prohibition) sensibilities.¹¹

This scientific side of AA is the source of its views of the nature of addiction. Alcoholism (and, later, other substance-abuse problems and compulsive behaviors) is seen as a “progressive disease” that can never be cured, only managed by absolute abstention. If the drinker does not stop drinking, the disease results in death. The defining feature of this disease is “loss of control” over drinking. (Paradoxically, the road to recovery, to regaining control,¹² passes first through an admission of powerlessness and then to turning oneself over to one’s “Higher Power”). The notion that “loss of control” was the quintessential feature of the disease constituted a stroke of genius by AA’s founders, for it absolved drunkards of moral culpability—or at least for their behavior prior to joining and recognizing their disease.¹³ They were no longer immoral but sick, not deviant but diseased. This post-temperance conception added to AA’s allure by not only allowing alcoholics to reconstruct positive selves but also to argue for public policies supporting treatment.

This scientific side of the twelve-step movement is, however, a narrowly psychological one. Addictions or compulsions are not conceptualized as linked to social circumstances. Rather, in keeping with its Protestant roots, AA and its progenitors locate responsibility exclusively within the individual. Any social-structural factors that might be thought of as predisposing people to abuse or addiction are explicitly excluded from the twelve-step worldview.

Members generally do not refer to social context, social causes, or social responsibility. AA members proudly proclaim that their ideology is stringently apolitical. Even comments about politics that are not used to account for personal behavior are defined as “outside issues” and excluded from the discourse of group meetings. Neophyte members who mention, say, race, class, gender, poverty, marital or job stress in their accounts of their drinking are quickly taught that all such factors are irrelevant because they lie outside the corporeal self. Moreover, to invoke such social factors as having something to do with one’s personal problems is often interpreted by members as *prima facie* evidence of “denial.” In the twelve-step “lexicon of recovery,” any attributions of addiction to forces outside the self are regarded as false rationalizations (“denial”) and therefore manifestations of the disease.¹⁴ According to twelve-step ideology, in order to recover members must stop invoking such “excuses” and accept “life on life’s terms,” difficult though those terms may well be.¹⁵

There is in all group meetings an unremitting focus on “personal recovery.” Even awareness of social conditions is actively shunned, along with any mentalities, modes of discourse, or actual efforts to change social reality. The individual is pathologized anew within the disease model of alcoholism. There is a “we” mentality in twelve-step groups that seems to stem from the mutual help and “united we stand” values. Yet there is no systematic analysis or ideology reaching beyond the self. Through the lens of twelve-step ideology, the locus of every problem of every member in every meeting is the individual—not poverty, injustice, skin color, stress, or any other external factors.

Addiction as Meta-Metaphor: The Proliferation of the Twelve-Step Movement

As early as 1840 Tocqueville noted America’s penchant for voluntary associations, but even he might be struck by the exponential growth of twelve-step groups since the 1960s. In 1969, AA estimated its membership at 225,911 in nearly thirteen thousand groups across the United States. Twenty years later estimated U.S. membership had swelled to nearly a million (978,982) active members in 38,276 official groups, a 300 percent increase. These estimates are considered conservative because members remain anonymous and no official need authorize the start of any new group. In fact, a recent federally funded national survey of a representative sample of U.S. households by the Alcohol Research Group found that one in ten adult males and one in twelve adult females had attended at least one AA meeting in their lives (nearly two-thirds of them for a drinking problem other than their own).¹⁶

Perhaps more important, other types of twelve-step groups based upon but not started by AA have proliferated at an even more rapid clip and now outnumber AA groups. The Alcohol Research Group’s national survey found that 13.3 percent of the adult population reported having attended at least one twelve-step meeting in their lifetimes, 5.3 percent in the past year.¹⁷ This is a higher percentage than attended any non-twelve-step form of group therapy for all other nonalcohol problems.¹⁸

The first offshoot was Al-Anon family groups for family members of alcoholics, which Lois Wilson, the wife of AA founder Bill Wilson, took charge of in the early 1950s. Here the “addiction” at issue was not to a substance but was a “process addiction.” Al-Anon’s founders saw wives, for example, as being addicted to their alcoholic husbands’ dependence on them, such that they engaged in behavior that facilitated or covered up for their husbands’ drinking problems and was thus unhealthy for both partners. BY 1980, Al-Anon estimated that nearly twelve thousand such groups existed in the United States. In the 1970s, Alateen was formed for teenagers similarly affected by “alcoholic homes.”

Perhaps the most explosive growth in the twelve-step movement has occurred in groups for Adult Children of Alcoholics. ACA began in the late 1970s and ten years later had thousands of chapters nationwide. According to ACA doctrine, most of the life troubles and personality problems faced by children of alcoholics are the consequences of growing up in "alcoholic homes." For example, with a parent drinking abusively, they had to suppress their own concerns to "cover" for them and/or felt pressured to be "good" all the time. In the ACA lexicon, they were forced by their parent's disease to be "self-denying" and/or "people pleasing"—unhealthy traits according to ACA ideology. The result, adherents claim, is that ACAs are not as happy as they would like to be; they suffer from "stunted emotional development," hence their self-donned label "adult children." The ACA model, in turn, has been generalized into an even broader type of group called Co-Dependents Anonymous—people for whom no substance need be abused by anyone but whose "addiction" is an "unhealthy dependence" on another person caused by "dysfunctional families."¹⁹

A cornucopia of other twelve-step spin-offs have also proliferated. Some of these groups are for people who claim to be addicted to a drug (Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Smokers Anonymous, Chemically Dependent Anonymous, and even Marijuana Anonymous). Other groups of more recent vintage grapple with "process addictions" that involve no substances: Women Who Love Too Much, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Couples Anonymous, Parents Anonymous, Prostitutes Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Credit Abusers Anonymous, Artists Recovering in the Twelve Steps (ARTS), Workaholics Anonymous, CFIDS (Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome) Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, Incest Survivors Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, Racism and Bigotry Anonymous, Survivors of Societal Abuse, Obsessive-Compulsive Anonymous, Shame Addiction Anonymous, and Shopaholics. Now even trichotillomaniacs (people who pull their hair too much) have a twelve-step recovery group. As Room and Greenfield summarized all this, "It is hard to conceive of a problem which a psychotherapist might deal [with] which would not fall within the scope of one or another twelve-step organization."²⁰

This proliferation has generated an astonishing array of "recovery literature," including a number of runaway bestsellers, that occupies several shelves in the "Health" or "Recovery" sections of most bookstores. Moreover, there are separate "recovery stores" that carry this material exclusively. I visited one such store in an affluent San Francisco neighborhood and found, in addition to literature about all of the above groups, books such as these: *Overcoming Religious Addiction and Religious Abuse*; *From Uptight to Alright: A 12-Step Program for Stress Prevention*; *Grandchildren of Alcoholics: Another Generation of Co-Dependency* (apparently for children of Adult Children of Alcoholics); *The Addictive Organization: Why We Overwork, Cover Up, Pick Up*

*the Pieces, Please the Boss, and Perpetuate Sick Organizations; and A**hole No More: A Self-Help Guide for Recovering A**holes—and Their Victims* (written by a proctologist). Nor is the merchandise in recovery stores limited to books. They also carry movement buttons, T-shirts, sweatshirts, jewelry, videotapes, posters, bumper stickers, and talking teddy bears.

Newsweek estimates that the number of such twelve-step offshoots quadrupled in the 1980s, with total twelve-step membership now totaling 15 million. The official archivist at AA's national office reports that over 140 twelve-step spin-offs have formally asked to call themselves "anonymous" groups and to adapt the twelve-step model. He believes this may well be an underestimate because scores of groups use some or all of the AA "program" without ever contacting its guardians for permission.²¹

The proliferation of all these new twelve-step groups has so stretched and gerrymandered the concept of addictive disease that it has now been applied to almost every imaginable personal problem in the modern world. It does not seem too much of an exaggeration to say that addiction, the defining feature of which is "loss of control" has become the reigning metaphor—or meta-metaphor—for human troubles in *fin de millénium* America.²²

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In the remainder of this chapter, I offer a beginning sociological interpretation of this proliferation and the reasons it occurred when it did. AA has been around since 1935 and the essential characteristics of its model have remained the same. Thus, it is curious that the twelve-step model expanded exponentially only in the 1980s.

I want to suggest that understanding the timing of this proliferation may deepen our understanding of recent developments in other social movements and cultural politics. First, as I mentioned at the outset, at a historical moment when more traditional social movements seem on the wane, twelve-step groups have attracted millions of people from all walks of life. Like other movements, twelve-step participation entails time away from private life, discipline, sacrifice, and even evening meetings. Thus it may be useful to explore what it is about the current context that gives twelve-step groups a resonance that other movement groups may lack. If twelve-step groups, say, speak to personal problems, provide meaningful identities, or feed some spiritual hunger, then we may learn something about our times that will help us interpret the fate of other social movements.

Second, the twelve-step movement is unlike other social movements in that it makes no overt attempts to change the conditions under which people live. As noted above, even the mention of such conditions is ritually eschewed in twelve-step discourse. The twelve-step movement thus appears to invert C. Wrights Mill's sociological imagination: Rather than transforming private troubles into public issues or at least linking the two, twelve-step ideology

tends to sever this link or to transform what might be understood as public issues into private troubles.²³ To the extent that this individualist movement competes with or even impedes other collectivist movements, then movement activists and analysts alike may find it useful to ponder its proliferation.

Third, however, it may be that the twelve-step movement can still find common ground with other movements. Like many cultural practices, members can turn twelve-step ideology to a wide range of purposes. Robin Room has argued that twelve-step ideology may not be inherently individualistic or a diversion from movements for social-structural change. For example, he analyzed articles and letters from a San Francisco area twelve-step newsletter, *Recovery*, and showed that many members used the ideology to challenge America's actions in the Gulf War. Twelve-Steppers wrote of the U.S. government's tendency to be "a power and control addict" due to its "institutionalized dependence" on Middle East oil or its "codependent denial" about "economic deprivation." Another contributor to the newsletter argued that because twelve-step programs stress "process not product," and "equality, not hierarchy," they are "our best hope for healing ourselves and our planet."²⁴

Such sentiments may add up to little more than a projection outward of the addictive disease paradigm. And Room correctly cautions that such sentiments may reflect the leftist traditions of the 1960s and 1970s that still hold meaning for the membership base in the San Francisco area. But it is worth remembering that the temperance movement, while focused on demon drink, was also about broader social reform. Room holds out the possibility that "a more outwardly oriented facet of the twelve-step movement might emerge, critical of the excesses of market-driven consumerism, and with a generally ecological, feminist, pacifist, and community-building orientation."²⁵

One of my AA informants, Susan B., noted similarly that twelve-step groups may "indirectly" encourage social change. AA sees alcoholics as having "moved out of the mainstream of social life" into the isolation of their "disease," so the twelve-step recovery process can be read as a "rebirth" that returns people to this mainstream and thus potentially to other civic involvements. If these alternative readings of the politics of the twelve-step movement are plausible, then it seems important to understand the allure of the twelve-step movement because it may work either against the sorts of social change other movements seek or in concert with them.

In what follows I attempt to interpret the growing appeal of the twelve-step model first in terms of the general condition of postmodernity, and secondly in terms of several historically and culturally specific features of American society.

Cosmology, Community, and Identity in Postmodernity

There does not seem to be any agreement on the precise periodization of modernity and postmodernity, and I have neither the space nor the expertise

to settle the question here. I will instead summarize some of the core features of lived experience in the trajectory between these overlapping epochs on which there does seem to be agreement and suggest how these features feed the growth of the twelve-step movement.

Marshall Berman's book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* is a useful place to start, for as a classic defense of the value of modernity it helped define the debate about postmodernity. In his first chapter, Berman cites Rousseau as proclaiming that European society was "at the edge of the abyss" and that daily life in the cities was experienced as "*le tourbillon social*," a whirlwind. In Rousseau's romantic novel *The New Eloise* (1761), for example, the young protagonist moves, as millions of others would, from his ancestral village to the bustling metropolis. There he finds himself awash in "a perpetual clash of groups and cabals, a continual flux and reflux of prejudices and conflicting opinions." Through this hero's eyes the clatter of constant change that was early modernity offered "a multitude of new experiences." In his letters to his lover the excited and bewildered hero wrote that he had to be "pliable" and "ready to change his principles with his audience." He wrote of feeling "dizzy" in "the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into." All this made him "forget what I am and who I belong to." He longed "desperately for something solid to cling to" but found only "phantoms."²⁶

Nearly a century deeper into modernity, Marx's description of the industrial capitalist engine that was driving all this change suggests why Rousseau's hero and all who followed him into modern urban life felt dizzy and looked in vain for solidity: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. . . . All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air."²⁷

This fundamental change animated all the classical social theorists. While Marx wrote of alienation, Durkheim worried about the anomie and pathological individualism he saw arising from the new "organic" division of labor in industrial society. Weber wrote of the disenchantment that followed in the wake of science, rationalization, and bureaucratization. Simmel noted that only by screening out the rush of complex stimuli that is modernity can we tolerate it.

As modern industrial capitalism continued its march toward the twentieth century, Nietzsche, the archetypal voice of philosophical modernity, wrote of the collapse of Christian cosmology and the "advent of nihilism." Despite the opening up of a cornucopia of once-unimagined possibilities, or perhaps because of them, culture imploded.²⁸ Values were either absent or empty, "communal formulas" no longer existed, and myriad "egoisms" clashed to such a degree that they were "unable to find any limitation."²⁹

If I may jump (in postmodernist fashion) to the beginnings of postmoder-

nity in the 1970s, one finds further lamentations of the same sort. Daniel Bell, for example, complains that modernism has seduced us into hedonism, brought disunity to culture, and destroyed the discipline and rationality of the bourgeois cosmology. The irony for Bell is that capitalism gave rise to modernism, which resulted in the "dissolution" of the very "shared moral order" on which capitalism's success was based.³⁰

From a different vantage point, Habermas reaches similar descriptive conclusions. He finds that "radicalized consciousness of modernity" has "freed itself from all specific historical ties." In its "forward gropings" modernism has exalted the present well beyond merely expressing the "experience of mobility in society, acceleration in history, and *discontinuity in everyday life*." Thus the celebration of "the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral" over tradition. In "blowing up the continuum of history," he writes, modernity comes to live "on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative." Habermas finds that capitalist growth and state expansion have led modernism to penetrate "deeper and deeper into previous forms of human existence." The result, he argues, is that "life worlds" are so subordinated to system imperatives that "the communicative infrastructure of everyday life" is deeply disturbed.³¹

David Harvey begins his monumental study *The Condition of Postmodernity* with one novelist's celebratory account of modern urban life, which allows escape from the traps of traditional community. Here, identity can become "soft, fluid, endlessly open." In this view, the city is an "emporium of styles" in which "all sense of hierarchy or even homogeneity of values was in the course of dissolution"; a theater in which individuals performed "a multiplicity of roles"; a labyrinthine encyclopedia of subjectivities in which people were free to become whomever they chose.

But if this plasticity is liberatory, Harvey demonstrates, it also makes people vulnerable, for the very "malleability of appearances and surfaces" that freed personality also gave it a certain depthlessness. What Baudelaire saw as the defining characteristics of modernity—"the transient, the fleeting, the contingent"—have become exponentially so of postmodernity. Harvey concludes with other analysts of postmodernity that the result is unstable subjectivities, fragmented selves, decentered identities. When historical continuity is gone, so is the biographical continuity of the self. Just as collage and pastiche are the leitmotifs of postmodern art and architecture, so are all manner of identity fragments jumbled together in the postmodern character.³²

I have detoured into this literature in order to suggest that however great the liberatory propensities of modernity and postmodernity, sustaining cultures and stable identities has become increasingly problematic.³³ While it is fair to say that identity has always been achieved rather than ascribed—constructed from lived experience rather than given at birth—analysts of postmodernity seem to share the view that this achievement process has become

a more complex and self-conscious one in advanced capitalist societies.³⁴ The logic of profit maximization and capital accumulation from early twentieth-century Fordism on requires the constant cultivation of new needs, the satisfaction of which is channeled into the commodity form.³⁵ Indeed, not only the hardware of social life like food, clothing, and shelter, but increasingly the software of the self—excitement, entertainment, eroticism—become grist for the promotion of wants to be satisfied in commodity consumption. Moreover, under the pressure of advertising, language itself is sufficiently commodified that the bond between signifier and signified is shattered, thus further eroding structures of meaning.³⁶ As Harvey observed, one key characteristic of postmodernity is the increasing “impossibility of representing the world in a single language.”³⁷ In short, postmodern theorists suggest that because the fundamentals of culture and identity have been incessantly colonized by the hyperconsumerism of late capitalism, more people find it necessary to search for meaning and community.

This, I submit, is precisely the sort of world in which people crave membership in social groups that help them still all the ceaseless swirling said to characterize the postmodern condition. To this general portrait I will now add specific features of American history and culture that I think add special appeal to twelve-step groups in modern America.

America as a Temperance Culture

American society has long been characterized as the land of the “self-made man.” As Levine has argued, in such a society self-control assumes extraordinary importance. Indeed, for the middle-class Protestants who settled and defined the United States, self-control was both the characterological sine qua non of economic survival and success and the principal form of social control that held society together.³⁸ In contrast, older European industrial democracies have deeper normative traditions and more external forms of social control such as the church and state.

With Levine, I suggest that in a culture in which self control is inordinately important, the experience of “loss of control” often becomes the object of obsession and inordinate fear. This is one reason why, of all industrialized societies, the United States is uniquely worried about consciousness-altering substances. This is why, when drunkenness was a problem almost everywhere in the industrialized world, the temperance movement arose first, was most passionately expressed, and has lasted longest in the United States. And this is why temperance sentiment persists and periodically reappears here in the form of antidrug crusades.³⁹

All this was visible at the close of the eighteenth century when drink was first problematized and “addiction” discovered. What has happened since is even more relevant to the proliferation of the twelve-step movement. As sug-

gested above, the onset of Fordist accumulation strategies in the 1920s has led American capitalism toward an increasing dependence on hyperconsumption. In their different interpretations of the consequences of this phenomenon, Herbert Marcuse and Daniel Bell both conclude that the United States has become a mass-consumption culture characterized by a genius for producing new “needs” that can be satisfied by the consumption of commodities. Both suggest that the Protestant work ethic and denial of gratification may still be sanctioned in the sphere of production, but immediate gratification and indulgence reign supreme in culture, leisure, and daily life.⁴⁰

For purposes of understanding the rise of so many new twelve-step groups, the point is that the combination of mass consumption and its indulgence ethic have created a culture in which growing numbers of people perceive an increasing number of ways to *lose control*. At the same time, the forms of social control that might offer some counterweight—religion, tradition, community, extended families—have been eroded by mass-consumption culture’s constant trumpeting of the new.

In sum, one part of the explanation for the extraordinary resonance of twelve-step ideology is the contradictory demands placed on the postmodern self: On the foundation of a temperance culture in which self-control has been traditionally and uniquely important, advanced capitalism has built a culture of mass consumption that produces more and more things over which the self might lose control, while simultaneously eroding more and more countervailing social controls.

American Culture, 1960–1990: Pleasure and Postmodernity

The 1960s saw two rather different “revolutions” that together form another piece of the puzzle of the proliferation of the twelve-step movement. First, in the late 1950s there was a pharmaceutical revolution. Modern medicinal miracles brought with them the idea that technology could be applied to human consciousness. Psychiatrists and pharmaceutical companies popularized the notion that pills could improve our moods and fix what ails us. Second, in the 1960s many affluent children born amidst the postwar consumers’ bazaar, the first “television generation,” rebelled against the residues of the Protestant ethic and Victorian morality in what some called a cultural revolution. This rebellion included subcultural practices that removed drugs from the exclusive control of the medical and pharmaceutical industries. (Young drug users even turned DuPont’s corporate slogan, “better living through chemistry,” to new satirical ends.) The so-called counterculture popularized the use of drugs solely for “mind expansion” and pleasure. The word “pleasure” is important, for whether one likes it or laments it, one fact of postmodernity is that the captains of commerce who created mass-consumption culture helped establish pleasure as a standard vocabulary of motive.⁴¹

The guardians of the dominant moral and political order launched a drug scare, but in the charged atmosphere of the 1960s, antidrug warnings were perceived as hysterical, counterfactual, moralistic, and thus "political." Moreover, such warnings carried as their subtext the Protestant ethic of the temperance culture, which cut squarely against the grain of the pleasure ethic of mass-consumption culture. The result was that the warnings were dismissed as one more imposition of ideology by the "establishment." Thus, for purposes of understanding the coming proliferation of the twelve-step movement, I suggest that the 1960s left America with a popular culture in which drug use for pleasure became widespread and warnings about the risks thereof were neutralized.⁴² It seems important to add here that most of those who now attend the new, non-alcohol-related twelve-step groups are of this generation.⁴³

As the movements of the 1960s faded, the optimism implicit in the notion that the world could be changed for the better seemed to give way to a more pessimistic awareness of threat in the 1970s. This threat took many forms. The post-World War II "American century" of economic dominance turned out to be the American quarter century; the affluence that we had been told was our birthright foundered on the shoals of European and Japanese competition, oil price shocks, and inflation. The Pentagon Papers and Watergate scandals took their toll on political legitimacy. Medical research daily discovered more health threats stemming from the sedentary lifestyles of an affluent, service-based, postindustrial society. New environmental hazards proliferated and new forms of cancer appeared. There was a heightening of Cold War tensions and talk from the highest levels of the Reagan administration about the United States "winning" or "prevailing" in a nuclear war. The list went on. In a word, the world seemed more and more out of control.

One characteristic response to the fading collective passions and optimism of the 1960s and to the threats of the new decade was an inward turn. If not society, at least the self might be controlled for the better. Of course, the so-called narcissism of the "me-decade" had firm roots in the traditional individualism of American culture, which had only been deepened by the celebration of self-indulgence in mass consumption. But it seems fair to add that the spread of jogging, Jazzercise, and Jane Fonda workouts, along with the rise of growth industries in diet centers, exercise spas, and therapy, were all part of a broader health consciousness.⁴⁴ And this health consciousness took the form of specific practices centered on individual responsibility—work, discipline, abstention, renunciation. Such practices are in harmony with the twelve-step movement.⁴⁵

Thus, even before Reaganism and a renascent right made self-control central to public policy, it was already extant, already high on the agendas of even those who voted against him. When Reagan moved to replace welfare-state supports with individual self-control, he was on firm cultural ground. Even his "war on drugs" was to some extent facilitated by the broader war for well-

ness being waged by aging hippies cum yuppies with the weapon of self-control. Individualism was a general ideological theme under the Reagan regime. While selfishness was sanctified ("Greed is good") for the middle and upper classes, working-class living standards were reduced, Republican economic policy demanded "belt tightening," and the poor were told that the solution to all their worsening problems was greater self-control. In this sense, the turn to conservatism, too, provided fertile ideological soil for the growth of the twelve-step movement.

Conclusions

At the dawn of modernity in 1761, Rousseau described the decentered identity of his community-less hero. If life then was fragmented, fleeting, and in flux, and if all these phenomena have only intensified in the mass-consumption culture of postmodernity, then there should be little wonder that people look for things like twelve simple steps with which to organize their lives and selves. In this sense, the remarkable growth of such groups may be read as an attempt to retrieve the certainty of a premodern lifeworld as a means of coping with the postmodern one they face, a groping for a way to stop all that is solid from melting into air.

At its simplest, my argument is that twelve-step groups have spread far and fast in recent years because they offer participants two crucial components of a meaningful way of life that seem increasingly difficult to find in advanced capitalist culture. First, twelve-step groups offer participants a clear *cosmology*—a system of commonsense beliefs about how the world works, a sense of one's place in it, a vocabulary or discourse within which one can construct a positive self, answers to unanswerable questions, and a basic strategy for self-control that provides concrete solutions to personal problems. Second, twelve-step groups provide participants with a caring *community*—a fellowship of people who welcome them, know them by name, share their language, have experienced their troubles, listen to their tellings, support their struggles, and care about their general well-being. In short, the twelve-step movement provides a new sort of kinship network to replace far-flung, fragmented families.

In my view, a commonsense cosmology and a caring community are prerequisites for sustaining cultures and stable identities. To the extent that the twelve-step movement provides these prerequisites, its proliferation in the 1980s is no mystery. At bottom, twelve-step groups offer a defense against the rudderless drift toward psychic implosion that postmodernists claim is characteristic of our world. If this interpretation has merit, then it may also help explain why other social movements that fail to provide such personal ballast against the churning currents of postmodernity seem to have lost some of their appeal in the 1980s.

NOTES

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1. Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966); Harry G. Levine, "The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in American History," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 39 (1978): 143–67; Levine, "The Alcohol Problem in America: From Temperance to Alcoholism," *British Journal of Addiction* 79 (1984): 109–119; and Levine, "Temperance Cultures: Concern about Alcohol Problems in Nordic and English-Speaking Countries," in *The Nature of Alcohol and Drug-Related Problems*, G. Edwards, M. Lader, and C. Drummond, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
2. See, for example, Barbara Epstein, "Rethinking Social Movement Theory," *Socialist Review* 90 (1990): 35–66; L. A. Kauffman, "The Anti-Politics of Identity," *Socialist Review* 90 (1990): 67–80; Richard Flacks, *Making History: The Radical Tradition in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
3. The notion of identity interest is developed in Craig Reinerman, *American States of Mind: Political Beliefs and Behavior among Private and Public Workers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
4. See Levine, "The Discovery of Addiction."
5. Mary Dana Phillips, "How It Works: A Discussion of AA from a Social Learning Theory Perspective" (working paper, Alcohol Research Group, Berkeley, Calif., 1990).
6. I draw here on John Rice's insightful analysis of how such groups, particularly a new AA offshoot, Codependents Anonymous, remake the self. He shows how group practices function to induce members to "select [codependency] as a narrative of their lives to acquire a new and more satisfying sense of identity." See Rice, "Discursive Formation, Life Stories, and the Emergence of Co-Dependency: 'Power/Knowledge' and the Search for Identity," *Sociological Quarterly* 33 (1992): 337–64, 338; also see Rice, *A Disease of One's Own: Therapy, Addiction, and Co-Dependency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).
7. See M. E. Donovan, "A Sociological Analysis of Commitment Generation in Alcoholics Anonymous" (*British Journal of Addiction* 79 [1984]: 411–18), on the elements of commitment in AA: sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, mortification, and transcendence.

8. The definitive history of AA is Ernest Kurtz, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden Educational Services, 1979).
9. Note the parallels between the twelve-step recovery process and Juster's description of the "central event" in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century evangelical conversion: "awakening the sinner to the true nature of his or her depraved state and the final regeneration of the soul through a process of self-abasement and unconditional surrender to the will of a gracious God" (Susan Juster, "'In a Different Voice': Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America," *American Quarterly* 41 [1989]: 34-62, 34).
10. I should note that AA folklore, if not its formal Steps and Traditions, advises against entering a new relationship or marriage during one's first year "in recovery" or "sobriety." This is routinely suggested to members by other members, although routinely ignored. Moreover, it should be noted that AA has never proscribed pleasures such as food or tobacco, although the taking of "moral inventories" is a central part of "the program." However, these points do not, in my view, detract from the importance of Levine's observation.
11. Robin Room, "The Party Ends for the Wet Generation: Alcoholics Anonymous in U.S. Films, 1940-1965," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 50 (1989): 1-50; Mary Dana Phillips, "Breaking the Code: Toward a Lexicon of Recovery" (paper presented at the Kettil Bruun Society Alcohol Epidemiological Meetings, Budapest, June 1990).
12. AA and other twelve-step adherents are taught to refrain from using the word "control" because they believe it to be illusory. Indeed, Kurtz's classic history of AA opens with an epigraph from the core AA text, "First of all we had to quit playing God" (*Not God*, vii), which he correctly notes is what AA members are taught about the foolishness of trying to control their drinking. I use the term in spite of this because I think that, functionally, control is precisely what they are talking about. On the latter point, see Herbert Fingarette, *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as Disease* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Stanton Peele, *Diseasing of America: Addiction Treatment out of Control* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989).
13. As Levine shows in "The Discovery of Addiction," Dr. Benjamin Rush invented the disease concept in the late eighteenth century and spoke in similar terms about the drunkard's inability to control "his" drinking. The founders of AA, however, perfected and promulgated this notion.
14. In some of the newer, specialized AA groups, this is less true. While it remains controversial, feminist or women's AA groups sometimes employ gender discrimination, exploitation, or domination in understanding drinking problems. Similarly, AA groups in the gay community sometimes cite "external" factors as contributing to problem drinking; for example, homophobia was one important reason why a gay bar subculture became so central to the gay and lesbian community.
15. Phillips, "Breaking the Code."

16. Alcoholics Anonymous World Survey, "Analysis of the 1989 Survey of the Membership of AA," (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous, 1990); Alcohol Research Group, National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Survey of Drinking Practices and Problems, unpublished (Berkeley, 1990).
17. Ibid.; Robin Room, "Alcoholics Anonymous as a Social Movement" (Toronto: Addiction Research Foundation, 1992).
18. Robin Room and Tom Greenfield, "Alcoholics Anonymous, Other 12-Step Movements and Psychotherapy in the U.S. Population, 1990," (Berkeley, Calif.: Alcohol Research Group, 1991).
19. See Rice, "Discursive Formation" and *A Disease of One's Own*.
20. Room and Greenfield, "Alcoholics Anonymous," 4.
21. *Newsweek*, "Afflicted? Addicted? Support Groups Are the Answer for 15 Million," February 5, 1990. Interview with the AA archivist conducted by Mary Dana Phillips, 1991, personal communication.
22. One pop feminist-psychologist gives new meaning to the plasticity of the concept of addiction by claiming that society itself is an addict: Ann W. Schaeff, *When Society Becomes an Addict* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).
23. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). For this reason, the twelve-step movement probably is not a social movement in the traditional sense of the term, that is, a collective effort by relatively powerless people to alter the conditions under which they must live. See Richard Flacks, *Making History*.
24. Room, "Alcoholics Anonymous as a Social Movement," 18.
25. Ibid.
26. Cited in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 17–18.
27. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto in Political Writings*, vol. 1 of *The Revolutions of 1848*, ed. D. Fernbach (New York: Vintage, 1974), 70.
28. A similar point was made more poetically by Yeats in the famous line from his "The Second Coming": Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."
29. Quotes from Nietzsche appear in Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 22.
30. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), xxvii. Although Bell understands that the impulses to which modernism has given rise have been channeled into commodity consumption, he nonetheless causally privileges avant-garde culture over capitalism (e.g., "culture has taken the initiative in promoting change, and the economy has been geared to meeting these new wants" [xxv]).
31. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 3–14, 4–8; emphasis added.
32. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); quotes are from Chaps. 1–4. Gitlin's review essay on postmodernity is also an eloquent summary of many of the same features: "The . . . subject is fragmented, unstable, even decomposed . . . finally nothing more than a crosshatch of discourses Modernism tore up unity and postmodernism has been en-

- joying the shreds. . . . [In a] homeless world political economy . . . there is no here here, because historical continuity is shattered by the permanent revolution that is capitalism" (Todd Gitlin, "Postmodernism: Roots and Politics," *Dissent* [Winter 1989]: 101–3).
33. See Douglas Kellner's important comparative analysis of the fixed identities of traditional societies versus the "mobile" and "multiple" ones of postmodern societies: "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities" in *Modernity and Identity*, Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman, eds. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 141–77.
 34. I should note that many postmodernists (e.g., Derrida, Lyotard) argue that postmodernity is other than or at least not reducible to advanced capitalist culture. Other postmodern theorists, however, argue that postmodernity is a phase of advanced capitalism (e.g., Jameson, Harvey). While this debate has little bearing on the core concerns here, for purposes of this chapter my argument follows those of Jameson and Harvey.
 35. See Richard Lichtman, *The Production of Desire* (New York: Free Press, 1982); Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Jean Baudrillard, *La Société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976); Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.
 36. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, Marc Poster, ed. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).
 37. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 30.
 38. Levine, "The Discovery of Addiction" and Levine, "Temperance Cultures."
 39. Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, "Crack in Context: Politics and Media in the Making of a Drug Scare," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 16 (1989): 535–77.
 40. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.
 41. C. Wright Mills, "Situating Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," *American Sociological Review* 5 (1940): 904–13; Stephen Mugford and Phil Cohen, *Drug Use, Social Relations, and Commodity Consumption: Report to the National Campaign against Drug Use* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1988).
 42. Gitlin "Postmodernism: Roots and Politics" offers an important related point: "The cultural upwellings and wildness of the sixties kicked out the props of a teetering moral structure, but the new house has not been built" (104).
 43. Room and Greenfield, "Alcoholics Anonymous, Other 12-Step Movements and Psychotherapy in the U.S. Population, 1990."
 44. This would include reductions in the incidence and prevalence of drug taking, a decline in distilled spirits consumption in favor of white wine, less red meat and more chicken and fish, and the rise of a strong antismoking movement. All these trends were especially pronounced among aging baby boomers who had come of age in the 1960s but now faced mortgages, children, and stressful careers.

45. Crawford offers an insightful analysis of the rise of “health as self-control” in what many saw as the “toxic society” of the 1970s: “[T]hroughout the 1970s, numerous health disasters, a multitude of health warnings . . . had transformed our sense of safety. . . . When the macro conditions that affect health appear to be out of control, self-control over the considerable range of personal behaviors that also affect health is an only remaining option. Particularly in a conservative political climate, when both political and corporate leaders repeatedly warn that our jobs are dependent on giving business a free hand.” Robert Crawford, “A Cultural Account of ‘Health,’” in J. B. McKinlay, ed., *Issues in the Political Economy of Health Care* (London: Tavistock, 1984); 74. The author is grateful to Brandy Britton for pointing out Crawford’s work.