

For a decade, he worked to awaken his readers to the privation that lay in the dozen square miles of dilapidated tenements only a few blocks from the city's prosperous avenues. Riis wrote about children dying from epidemic outbreaks of diphtheria, sleeping men falling to their deaths from roofs where they had sought refuge at night from the stifling summer heat, blind beggars living in hovels, and armies of tramps moving through the streets. But his dramatic newspaper accounts failed to stir the public to act.

In the late 1880s, technology offered Riis a new way to reach his audience. Armed with a hand-held camera and a revolutionary flash powder, he retraced his journeys through the Lower East Side. The photographs with which he returned have since become iconic images known to all, from schoolchildren thumbing through textbooks to scholars of American history. By combining graphic representations of poverty with anecdotal tales that humanized the victims and were buttressed with "scientific" statistics, Riis established a new kind of American journalism. The emotionally powerful formula, well suited to the emerging mass media, stoked newspaper circulations and fanned the flames of reform.

At the time, permanent poverty was an unthinkable social ill in the United States. Many in the comfortable classes believed that the worst poverty was confined to a few newcomers who would eventually join the middle class through hard work and frugality, as generations before had done. Those who remained poor did so because of their own failings. Riis's work brought this Jericho Wall of smug reasoning tumbling down. After the publication of *How the Other Half Lives* in 1890, it became broadly accepted that the poor were victims of circumstances, an idea that laid the groundwork for 20th-century efforts to combat poverty.

In this biography, Buk-Swienty, a Danish journalist, chronicles Riis's rise from poor immigrant to famous muckraker. But in doing so, the author condenses the remaining third of his subject's life to a scant 40 pages, implying that Riis rode off into the sunset like a Lone Ranger of social justice whose work was done. In fact, the remaining years until

his death in 1914 were productive: Riis wrote a dozen more books and finally possessed the power and influence—with friends such as Theodore Roosevelt—to make headway in ending the poverty he recorded.

This part of Riis's saga is as important as his rise, for it reveals the limits of muckraking. Riis managed to change some housing laws and raze some of the worst tenements, but beyond those small victories, he found it was one thing to provoke shame in his adopted land but another to bring about true and lasting social change.

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## America on the Couch

Reviewed by Charles Barber

PSYCHOTHERAPY HAS BEEN A series of generally well-intentioned attempts to throw mud against a wall to see what sticks. Over the past century, that method has told us this: Psychotherapy works. Two-thirds of patients improve within six months of starting treatment

(longer treatment yields few further results). The therapist's training and the school or philosophy of therapy in use make little difference. What does matter is the empathy level the patient perceives in the therapist, the patient's willingness to engage in therapy, the severity of the patient's illness to begin with, and the appropriateness of match, or treatment alliance, between patient and practitioner.

The pursuit of therapy—if not happiness—is a largely American phenomenon, Jonathan Engel tells us in *American Therapy*. By the 1960s, the United States had more clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychiatric social workers than the rest of the world combined. "The history of psychotherapy in the United States . . . is a classic American tale of discovery, entrepreneurship, and self-promotion," writes Engel, a professor of health care policy and management at Baruch College.

For it was in America, in the early 1900s, that

**AMERICAN THERAPY:**  
The Rise of  
Psychotherapy in  
the United States.

By Jonathan Engel.  
Gotham. 352 pp. \$27.50

Freudianism and psychoanalysis took hold as nowhere else (despite Sigmund Freud's personal antipathy toward the United States). A therapeutic parade has followed: behaviorism (which views human beings as stimulus-response machines in which only observable, measurable behavior matters); humanistic approaches (which focus on social relationships as the key to wellness); cognitive therapy (which posits that thinking and beliefs drive our behavior and emotions); populist self-help programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous; the largely 1960s-vintage therapies such as electroshock, transcendental meditation, and primal scream (the latter favored, briefly, by John Lennon and Yoko Ono); and so on.

There appears to be some truth to the notion that sick souls have a particular insight into what can make us well.

Engel writes, but does not write enough, about the characters who invented these various approaches. These doctors and visionaries were typically brilliant—and many were famously troubled. The humanist Harry Stack Sullivan (whom novelist Walker Percy called perhaps America's greatest psychiatrist), for example, championed the importance of social relations, but was alcoholic, depressed, and misanthropic. There does appear to be some truth to the notion that sick souls, such as the great early psychologist William James, have a particular insight into what can make us well. (Among the exceptions is midwesterner William Menninger, hugely influential in raising psychiatry's profile and credibility during and after World War II, who appears to have been a particularly sanguine character.)

Psychotherapy's progress did not come without much confusion and excess, and even cruelty—lobotomies, excessive use of electroshock therapy, and charlatanry. A 1970s study by the California State Psychological Association found that more than five percent of male psychologists had had sex with female patients, some claiming that intercourse was a bona fide

therapeutic technique. Today, such excesses have diminished. In recent decades, the profession for the first time has exposed itself to the light of day by objectively examining its actual clinical outcomes, producing what could be called a rational approach to psychotherapy. Good therapists these days are schooled in a variety of techniques and can deploy, with a fair degree of certainty, the appropriate approach for the individual patient.

*American Therapy* is a thoroughly researched and elegantly organized survey of therapy on America's historical landscape. It is a commendable effort and would make a fine ancillary text for introductory psychology courses. But therein lies the problem. Engel's assertion that the rise of psychotherapy is a uniquely American story—one that suits our nation's varying sensibilities of optimism, pragmatism, and reinvention—is absolutely true. Each school of therapy has reflected the particular preoccupations of the era in which it was invented: Behaviorism and cognitive approaches came of age in the rational 1950s, self-help and self-exploratory journeys in the trippy '60s, self-esteem interventions in the battered '70s. Since the '80s, we have seen the rise of approaches (and psychiatric medications, that new adjunct of—or replacement for—psychotherapy) designed to help us function in increasingly competitive economic times. Engel's narrative does not do justice to the fascinating dialectic (or the stimulus-response, if you will) between our exterior and interior landscapes.

But Engel does show that throughout this long, strange trip, psychotherapy has truly mattered in America. Has it served as an antidote to American individualism? Have we used it to refute F. Scott Fitzgerald's assertion that there are no second acts in American lives? Who knows. What we can conclude from *American Therapy* is a truth more universal than it is American: There has always been something unutterably and mysteriously healing about the unburdening of one's soul to another person.

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