



THE ROOTS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Positive Psychology is based on a particular model of the individual that was developed in the popular culture of the United States from the end of the eighteen century. This model, that we have called "positive" individualism, started with Emerson's Transcendentalism by defending, against puritanism, that the individual, as a part of Divinity, is an essence capable of self-command, self-exploration and endless self-development. On this basis, but in a more "practical" vein and supported by hundreds of self-help manuals, movements such as New Thought or Positive Thought emphasized the power of the individual's thinking over matter and the world to mentally cure illness, to attract wealth and achievement, and to self-fulfill the promise of happiness. A critical examination and an alternative to this model of individuality was already offered by genuine American academic psychology, such as that of John Dewey, based upon functionalist psychology and anti-essentialist principles and guided by an alternative political agenda. Current Positive Psychology moves away from the most striking metaphysical aspects of "positive" individualism, but maintains its ahistorical, asocial and subjectivist conception of the individual.

Key words: Positive psychology, Critical history, Individualism, "Positive" individualism, Transcendentalism, New thought, Self-help.

La Psicología Positiva se apoya en un peculiar modelo de individuo desarrollado en la cultura popular estadounidense desde finales del s. XVIII. Este modelo, al que hemos llamado individualismo "positivo", arranca con el Trascendentalismo de Emerson y su defensa, contra el puritanismo, del individuo como una esencia capaz de autodeterminarse, autoconocerse y desarrollarse ilimitadamente, gracias a que forma parte de la Divinidad. A partir de aquí, nuevos movimientos más "prácticos", como el Nuevo Pensamiento, o el Pensamiento Positivo, enfatizaron, a través de cientos de manuales de autoayuda, el poder del pensamiento individual para imponerse a la materia y al mundo y curar directamente la enfermedad, atraer la riqueza y la salud y conseguir la felicidad. Enfoques alternativos, también genuinamente americanos, como el de John Dewey, criticaron en su momento ese modelo de individualidad y ofrecieron alternativas teóricas apoyadas en ciertos desarrollos del Funcionalismo y en una agenda política diferente. La Psicología Positiva hoy trata de distanciarse de los aspectos metafísicos más ostensibles del individualismo "positivo", pero mantiene aquella concepción ahistorical, asocial y subjetivista del individuo.

Palabras clave: Psicología positiva, Historia crítica, Individualismo, Individualismo "positivo", Trascendentalismo, Nuevo pensamiento, Autoayuda.

The ways of conceiving ourselves as, and of being, individuals, have profoundly changed throughout history, as well as our ways of seeing the world, and our ways of doing. In the West, in particular, these changes have accelerated since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Ever since the Enlightenment, the call for independence, responsibility for one's actions and, by extension, responsibility for life as a whole, as a process that can be controlled to some degree, and as a personal project, has not stopped growing. Subjectivity has become unfailingly more "dense", so to speak. It has not been a "speculative" process but rather a practical reality, linked to the new psychological demands of organizing production operations and the self-regulation of the

worker, including the demands related to the organization of working time and leisure, the definition of one's identity together with and as distinct from others, the goals of "happiness" or life meaning, and the guidelines of moral judgment when secularism appears on the horizon as a possibility.

It has not been a linear or uniform process. There have been very different developments through the practices and regulatory institutions of life: religious (transformations of Catholicism and Protestantism, especially Puritanism, as we will see here), political (republicanism, anarchism, socialism, communitarianism, progressivism, labor movements, etc.), aesthetic (aesthetic movements in the broad sense such as Romanticism), scientific or philosophical, especially those related to an evolutionist view of organic life and a historical view of the human condition. The emergence of

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the social sciences in the late nineteenth century was a kind of institutional embodiment of the process of which we speak: the social sciences formulate explicit conceptions of the individual in society and its relation to evolution and history, but they also rework old techniques for new purposes and contexts (military, labor, educational, therapeutic, etc.). Both the new theories and the new techniques are being spread and implemented, so the social sciences are beginning to take an active part in this process: the social sciences, which study the self and society, are beginning to be transformative of the self and society. Furthermore, we should remember that the social science theories are not univocal, but rather they show a dynamic "fight amongst schools" in more or less close connection with certain "worldviews" and political, philosophical, or even religious interests.

Positive Psychology, as we will try to show, is the latest episode of one of these historical developments of individuality. It is a very specific development, genuinely North American, whose model of the individual we will call "positive" individualism, following the American tradition of using the adjective "positive" ("positive thought" for example), and with an attempt at semantic distancing through the use of quotation marks. The model of "positive" individualism does not strictly belong to our own cultural sphere (Spanish, Catholic or even European) but it has spread rapidly here. Two vertebral cultural mechanisms of modernity help us to understand this propagation: namely, a therapy culture that is increasingly present in all areas of everyday life, and a new business culture, pertaining to the new forms of capitalism, that progressively permeates language and the popular imagination (Illouz, 2007, 2010, Marzano, 2012), especially through self-help literature, the growing fusion between the fields of economics and psychology, and the recent, but not novel, proposal of Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology clothes itself in scientificistic discourse as a guarantee of the objectivity and truth of a universal conception of the individual and the achievements that, also universally, would bring "happiness" and should therefore be pursued. Thus, it proposes a set of psychological techniques designed to invest time and effort in "oneself" in order to increase one's "human capital": leveraging personal abilities, strategically managing thoughts, emotions and positive affect and avoiding the deployment of negative affect, classified as "harmful".

Positive Psychology defends an ahistorical and asocial notion of "self", due to its tendency to conceptualize individuality as something derived from a "human nature", something that pre-exists its social construction. Evolutionary psychology, socio-biology, computational cognitive psychology and even psychoanalysis also employ, to some extent, an ahistorical conception (linked to the weight that innateness has in them, each in its own way). But the specificity of Positive Psychology is its peculiar way of creating and developing a number of characteristic features of "positive" individualism, which we list here as five points:

- (1) Self-control. The individual is to itself an object of control through thought, where thought is conceived, not as a type of action connected with the effective transformation of reality, but rather as a subjective or "mental" interpretation that the subject forms of reality, and on which it must operate (through psychological techniques) in the search for changes that will directly improve its wellbeing.
- (2) Self-determination. The individual is conceived as a being endowed with its own set of needs, desires and interests that it must satisfy on the road to happiness and achieving its own success. The individual must write its own destiny, find its own path, and travel it with relative independence of the success and happiness of "the other", because society is conceived not so much as the context for meaning where this is possible (or where it appears desirable), as the cumulative result of the deployment of the different interests of independent and self-determined individuals.
- (3) Self-knowledge. The individual understands itself as an object to explore in detail and to discover in its vast wealth. But in the tradition of "positive" individualism this exploration is mainly "practical": it is about knowing those modes of thinking and feeling that lead to unhappiness in order to remove them, and also identifying and promoting those that lead to happiness and a healthy, adjusted life.
- (4) Self-cultivation. The individual sees himself as a project of improvement and growth. In much of the tradition of "positive" individualism this development is presented as potentially unlimited. It is not actually about changing the model of being "oneself", but about being more and better within this model. Simply working on oneself constantly, enhancing one's virtues and strengths with enough tenacity to achieve a constant interior refinement and a significant im-





provement of one's living conditions is what is called for, rather than the reverse, i.e., working on the conditions so that our skills acquire relevance and meaning. Again, in the tradition of "positive" individualism, this improvement and growth relates not so much to a disinterested, universal knowledge, which could for example generate anxiety, discouragement, perplexity and awareness of personal and collective limitations, etc., as to the developing of new practices that continue to contribute to the wellbeing, happiness and success of the "self".

(5) Self-accountability. The pursuit of happiness (health, success and wellbeing) becomes not just a "natural" right, but a universal objective and, above all, a moral imperative. The path towards it is demanding: it implies a continuous self-monitoring, self-control and self-improvement. Since the reality and validity of this "happiness" is taken for granted, and the qualities for achieving it are too, the individual is solely responsible for his success or failure.

The growing demand for autonomy and responsibility, as we have said, has been generalized in the West since the Enlightenment. The features presented above are the characteristics that define "positive" individualism in a combined and unique way; they are the distinctive ways in which this tradition defines and justifies the sense of autonomy, self-knowledge, self-determination and responsibility, as well as the ways it is connected with aspects such as health, personal development, job performance, social success or the national economy. Our main task in this paper is to show how this peculiar way of characterizing and exercising autonomy and responsibility became part of American popular culture and how Positive Psychology fits into this peculiar tradition.

THE MANY CRITICISMS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: SITUATING THIS STUDY

Since its establishment as the academic movement for the study of happiness, Positive Psychology has received many mixed reviews. Expanding the proposal of Binkley (2011), we can group these criticisms around four closely interrelated thematic sections.

The first of these emphasizes a sociological and institutional criticism. Under Foucault's idea of "governmentality" and with a commitment to analyzing the role of Positive Psychology in the production of subjectivities linked to the modes of production in the free

market tradition, this critical block examines how the interplay between the different social and cultural agents (from the corporations, government, academia and the mental and health institutions, including a whole "happiness industry" of popular and self-help literature and television programs, to the final consumers) extends and establishes certain notions of happiness and well-being for different purposes (see, for example, Rimke, 2000; Ehrenreich, 2009; Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2011, and the genealogical studies by Foucault, 1988; Loredo, 2005, or Loredo and Blanco, 2011).

The second block of critical studies explores the history and structure of the conceptual model of the subject that underlies Positive Psychology. It endeavors to clarify its configuration through the effective sense and utility that this model has been acquiring in American cultural practices; it reveals the religious, philosophical, economic or scientific influences with which the model is woven and rewoven, and it attempts to explain how and why Positive Psychology emerges and is assimilated by popular and academic culture (see, for example, Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008, Becker and Marecek, 2008; Christopher, 1999, or Cabanas, 2011). On one hand, these studies highlight the marked cultural character of the movement, emphasizing its debt with a particular Western tradition (modern, liberal and dualistic), and a predominantly utilitarian type of individualist ideology. These same studies refute the positive psychologists' notion that their movement is innovative, claiming that what positive psychology offers is "old wine in new bottles" (Krisjanson, 2012).

The third block of criticism of Positive Psychology points to the theoretical problems of the model itself (tautological arguments, lack of conceptual clarity, simplification of terminology, internal division between the different perspectives, etc.) and to its methodological shortcomings (erroneous attribution of causality, lack of more longitudinal studies, excessive reliance on correlational method and self-reports, difficulty of measuring emotions, etc.), and emphasizes the undeclared difficulties arising from the application of the discipline (see, e.g., Miller, 2008; Norem, 2001; Held, 2004, Fernández-Rios and Novo, 2012). It also criticizes the restrictive differentiation between positive and negative emotions, as well as the evolutionary perspectives on emotions that positive psychologists adopt. They say that, unheeding of the functional and contextual nature of emotions, positive psychologists defend a discrete and static classification of





the emotions, further minimizing the complex psychological process underlying their modification (Lazarus, 2003).

This schematic overview of the criticisms of positive psychology is to show that they certainly do exist, and from many different areas of academic psychology, from the most general (historical, theoretical) to those involving clinical practice or research methodology. It also serves to locate us. If our work can contribute to the critical clarification of Positive Psychology, it is mainly in the historical and conceptual area showing how, as we say, since the end of the eighteenth century, this distinctive model of individuality underlying Positive Psychology has been established and propagated and what it consists of. Regarding the rest of the critiques, Marino Pérez exhaustively reels off those that we mention here only briefly, and many more, adding decisive considerations regarding the highly questionable originality and the conceptual, methodological and therapeutic weaknesses of Positive Psychology (Pérez Álvarez, 2012).

"THE STICK THAT HOLD ITSELF UP": ONLY BEFORE GOD

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism was the first great movement in this history. It covered a century of political turmoil and religious liberalization in the face of the Calvinist view of man and the dogma of predestination (Weber, 2001). It was so instrumental in shaping North American thought that some historians characterize it as a new "American religion" (West, 2008, pp.47).

For Calvinism, the most characteristic religion of the eighteenth century in North America, the "internal", individuality, was considered to be depraved: there was nothing in it that was necessary to investigate, nothing worthwhile "inside": the only assurance was the existence of impurity and the tendency to sin. The guidelines for this Puritan life consisted of rejecting temptation through a relentless self-surveillance and flee from the "internal" through dedication to work. Although hard work has the potential to produce material benefits, that is not its primary purpose, according to the Calvinists, and excessive enjoyment was also considered sinful. Personal destiny was not created through work or even through a godly life for certain. Destiny was beyond acts. Each human being was alone in his or her own distress, among others, against him- or herself, before a demanding God and without certainty of salvation.

Emerson completely reformulated the Puritan dogma and claimed that the first half of the nineteenth century would be "the era of the first person singular" (Mott, 2000). He was not alone in the rebellion. Walt Whitman and the other North American Romantics also turned to the individual as something of value in itself. Emerson integrated a surprisingly diverse set of influences (Neoplatonism, the ideas of Swedenborg, touches of Hinduism, English Romanticism, the work ethic of Benjamin Franklin, Unitarian religion, etc.) among which there is a *sui generis* reading of Kant, from whom he took the term "transcendental" to name his movement. Transcendentalism emphasized the spiritual world that every man should cultivate precisely because it saw the individual as a part of the divinity, not as something alien to it. But the iron Puritan ethic did not disappear. Emerson emphasized more than ever the insistence on self-control and self-monitoring typical of Puritanism and the ethics of Franklin, no longer to combat sin or laziness, but to serve the urgent need to realize the potential divinity of the individual through personal growth: spiritual power and the virtues of each man were constructed through constant "self-cultivation" ("self-culture", in the words of Emerson), which required both good and rational "self-knowledge" ("self-exploration") and correct and exhaustive self-control ("self-command").

According to Transcendentalism the "self" was like a constantly expanding circle that developed through the control and implementation of one's personal virtues. "There is no virtue which is final, all are initial", warned Emerson (quoted in Robinson, 2000, pp.165), emphasizing the fact that the "self" was never finished, and warning us of both the danger of complacency and the moral duty to grow as individuals (*op. cit.*). Having full confidence in oneself was an essential requirement for growth (Mott, 2000).

Furthermore, for Emerson, as for the whole utilitarian tradition that he adapted to his metaphysics, the individual was a being with natural capacities for self-determination in complete independence of any social order. At the beginning of the nineteenth century this idea of autonomy permeated North American popular culture. Menand (2001) describes it with an illuminating metaphor: the individual as "a stick that holds itself up".

HEALTH AND HAPPINESS THROUGH THOUGHT

Under the umbrella of American romanticism and Emerson's Transcendentalism several movements





emerged, many of which were grouped under the term "New Thought" (1875-1920). Despite their differences (for a detailed analysis see Satter, 1999), they all shared an anti-materialist and spiritualist position, based on religion, as well as a set of practices in common: New Thought argued that the mental or spiritual world was an area with real substance, while the material world, the everyday, was a creation of the mind. It argued, like Emerson, that the individual was a being endowed with divine and creative powers with which he could transform himself and the world around him. New Thought also maintained that if people were able to ignore the false information that came from the senses and fully control their thoughts through constant practice, they would be able to cure their ills, control their desires and grow spiritually. New Thought metaphysics remains enormously popular today, as can be seen in the influential American bestsellers of the self-help genre, such as "The Secret", leading the charts in countries such as USA, Argentina and Spain, or popular U.S. "talk-shows" like Oprah Winfrey.

In the beginning, the birth of New Thought was motivated by the proclamation of a new "era of women" from which to break with the systematic gender divide typical of the Victorian era (which, supported by the ideology of social Darwinism, attributed intellect and rationality to men, and disdained the emotion and irrationality attributed to women) and to build a new paradigm of the human mind, spirituality, and the liberalization of desire. But at the beginning of the twentieth century this movement was gaining an increasing commitment to the ideas of self-determination, social mobility and personal success that were already so popular in American culture. No doubt New Thought was instrumental in the growing "emotionalization" of the individual (key in the development of the new liberal subjectivities, as can be seen in Illouz, 2007), and the management of the delicate psychological transition from industrial capitalism dominated by production, saving and sacrifice, to a consumer capitalism dominated by an emphasis on spending, the satisfaction of desire and personal gratification. As many historians of the 60s and 70s have pointed out, this ideology ended up becoming a "religion of success, consumption and social mobility" (Meyer, 1965).

New Thought became culturally consolidated thanks to the resounding success it achieved as an alternative therapy for one of the most serious and widespread

problems in American society at the time: neurasthenia, a "disease of the mind" (anhedonia, depression) with somatic correlates (exhaustion, tiredness, weakness, sleep disturbances) that severely afflicted the middle and upper classes. Unlike the traditional medicine of the time, New Thought proposed psychological techniques based on the healing power of the word and the idea of mental "transfer" between the healer and the patient. Exercises that were in common use among New Thought authors included (1) the scrutiny of one's own thoughts in search of the beliefs that caused our discomfort, (2) the mental rejection of any discomfort or pain from the body, (3) the training of the imagination to generate pleasant feelings and to explore one's own desires, (4) the repeating of positive affirmations to oneself to "scare away" the negative ones, (5) prayer, or (6) the practicing of gratitude and forgiveness.

Beyond the treatment of disease, New Thought also developed a particular view of one of the core ideals of American culture: happiness. With an increasingly "practical and applied" vein, it conceived the management of knowledge and the affective and emotional world as a tool for achieving all that was useful for enhancing individual wellbeing (Dresser, 1919). New Thought, like Transcendentalism, argued that true intellect is that which is directed toward the "self" for the growth and progress of the individual.

For authors such as Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, man's happiness is in himself, not in the development of a nation, social progress or the consolidation of freedom: "Man is the inventor of his own misery" and his happiness "is the result of his own beliefs" (Quimby, 2008). Health and happiness depended on oneself, and they were achieved by managing one's beliefs, attitudes and desires.

NEW THOUGHT AND CONSUMER CAPITALISM

As mentioned before, one critical aspect in the shift to New Thought was the gradual transition from industrial capitalism to consumer capitalism. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a new generation of leaders of the movement began to liberalize the issue of the repression of desire and relate the affective and emotional field with the acquisition of wealth. They argued that both men and women were beings that are dominated by the satisfaction of their own desires, and that women should aspire to be individuals that were as autonomous and self-determined as men. Economic independence was,





without a doubt, the means for attaining both of these goals, they said. One of the pioneers of this change was Helen Wilman (1831-1907), whose bestseller "The Conquest of Poverty" (1899), created a movement which other authors later joined, such as Wallace Wattles (1860-1991), Elizabeth Towne (1865-1960), William Atkinson (1862-1932), Orison Swett Marden (1850-1924) and Charles Fillmore (1854-1948). They all thought that if the doctrine of "mental power" had been able to help with the restoration of health, it could also do the same with achieving success, and they integrated the ideas of New Thought in their texts with the new language of psychology and business management.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, many businessmen began to see that business expansion required a growing middle class that would unleash consumption and the satisfaction of desires, which was until then primarily relegated to a female role. Thanks to the entrance of the psychoanalytical language of the subconscious and human impulses, the tight control of affective and emotional aspects could now be seen as repression, and therefore as something unnecessary and unhealthy. Thus, Freud's "hydraulic" individual was used both by the new requirements of consumption and by New Thought authors to justify the need to break free from old prejudices and to realize that desire was the most healthy way to live. There is no doubt that emotional and affective management, one of the most outstanding and significant marks of modernity, has played an important role in the advancement of consumer capitalism. As Eva Illouz says, "emotional and economic practices and discourses shape one another, producing a broad movement in which affect becomes an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life, especially that of the middle class, follows the logic of trade and economic relations" (Illouz 2007, pp.19-20).

In the thirties and forties, John Dewey, a critical observer of American society, noted that the consumption of everything possible had become an economic "obligation", as in keeping with the era as saving had been in Franklin's day. In fact, it was advocated that a person who was less than cautious in his spending not only increased his potential for development, but was also "doing his duty to the economy, transferring his personal gains to the global output where they could be reused to the highest level of effectiveness" (Dewey, 2003, p. 80). The demand to liberalize desire, the motive for which was initially emancipatory, "ended up leading to the main

ideological and productive force of an increasingly deregulated economic system" (Honnneth, 2004, p. 475) where the core values were constant experimentation through consumption, the imperative of personal development and the application of an optimistic view on the world around us as a means of acquiring individual happiness. As R. Reich stresses,

"Optimism is [...] transferred to our economy, which is one of the reasons why we are a nation of inventors, thinkers, innovators and entrepreneurs... [and] it also explains why we spend so much and we save so little: our willingness to go into debt and keep spending is closely related to our optimism" (quoted in Ehrenreich, 2009, p. 181, our translation).

In 1936 Fillmore, one of the most prominent authors in the shift to New Thought, proclaimed in his books and talks that everyone could be rich if they believed it enough; if they controlled and guided their thoughts toward that goal. For him, the rich had become rich because "their ideas of abundance are so entrenched in their thoughts that they are already part of themselves." For those aspiring to be rich, the following elements are therefore necessary: a careful process of questioning oneself (self-knowledge) and a strict re-education of the emotions, attitudes and ideas (self-control) leading to a deep and stable transformation of the self. If this is not adhered to, "people who get rich suddenly without building a prosperity mentality soon lose their money" (Fillmore, 1936, cited in Meyer, 1965, p. 201). "The Optimistic Life" (1907), "How to get what you want" (1917); "Ambition" (1919) and "Prosperity, how to attract it" (1922), were characteristic titles of these authors and of this new genre that would not stop growing throughout the twentieth century. Its discourse promoted self-confidence in personal power and optimism, and called for investment and consumption, the keys to prosperity of the time. Thus, with the growth of the middle class, these values of prosperity and success were extended to an individual who construed himself from the very categories of "positive" individualism.

One of the most prominent characters in this saga was the Republican businessman Norman Vincent Peale (1898 - 1993). He coined the term "positive thinking" that rapidly became popular. Peale's book "The Power of Positive Thinking" (1956), the bestselling book of its time after the Bible, was a self-help manual that advocated the power of thought and gave instructions on how to discipline and "condition" one's thoughts: the removal of





negative thoughts and the constant repetition of positive ones would end up becoming automatic to the extent that the behavior of the individual, and his vision of himself, would be transformed (Peale, 2006). In Peale's work a greater amount of scientific language can be appreciated, seeking respectability in accordance with the new times. In fact, it was an eclectic jargon. Peale mixed the psychological language of the subconscious, conditioning, learning, attributions, attitudes and other key terminology in academic psychology, all in the name of New Thought metaphysics.

At this point it was clear to the North American follower of these manuals that the only person who could take care of him and know him was himself, and that personal success or failure was an entirely matter of individual merit or demerit. The growing number of preachers, pseudo-psychologists, coaches and entrepreneurs that supported these ideas openly proclaimed that wealth, as well as poverty, were in fact "voluntary conditions": it was not social and political structural conditions which made people rich or poor, but rather the good or bad management of the "self", their thoughts, behaviors and attitudes. Anyone who was not happy or prosperous was this way either because he did not follow to the letter the advice that the holders of the key to happiness and success offered him, or because he did not want to be. A striking parallel is found among many positive psychologists when they argue that "science has been able to build the corrective glasses that can help us find [...] that little island called happiness [...]. Deciding to use them depends only on you"(Vázquez and Hervás, 2009, p. 252).

Especially in the business world, as Michela Marzano explains, these ideas ended up forming the dominant discourse par excellence at the end of the twentieth century, establishing in the conscience of the worker the principal instance of corporate control and surveillance, and making the employee adhere voluntarily to his own servitude: it is the individual (the worker, whether an executive or an employee) who, independently and spontaneously, should feel totally identified with the objectives of the company, even when they are constantly changing; who must maintain a healthy competition with his peers, limiting mutual help and confidence; who must regard the company as a space of self-realization and development of his skills; who must suppress all "negative" thoughts and attitudes, i.e., those conflicting with the objectives set; who must perform his work with

originality and autonomy, even when the targets and timelines set by the company are not to be questioned; who must be willing to make sacrifices and be flexible in the name of his own success ; who must integrate work as the central aspect of his life plans, even if he is continuously exposed to dismissal, and, if given notice, he should accept the dismissal as a new opportunity for personal development, assuming the sole responsibility for it (Marzano, 2011).

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: THE SECULARIZED PRACTICE OF HAPPINESS

Over the course of this journey through the formation and development of "positive" individualism, we have seen aspects that have changed radically, adapting to the new social conditions, and others, more "in the background", which have not changed much. The somber Puritan thinking has certainly been reversed and taken to the opposite extreme, where the "self", through one's thought and following simple instructions, is capable of anything, even of achieving its own secular salvation: conquering health, social success and wealth. However, contemplation of the "self" as a primary, foreign entity, independent of others, i.e., as an essence, remains. In the case of Puritanism, the justification is clear: every soul is a destination, and owes everything to God, not to the other. In Transcendentalism and New Thought the justification is similar, but turned towards its positive pole: we are not essences marked by sin, but luminous parts of divinity, with endless potential for development and perfection. Thus the religious foundation (albeit under unconventional forms of religiosity that may be called "metaphysical" in a generic way) is crucial in "positive" individualism, even though it has adopted an increasingly secular, scientific and practical tone. In Positive Psychology the idea of individuality as a primary essence does not use an explicit religious justification, of course, but rather a scientific justification of "human nature" in evolutionary terms. On this issue, it is worth underlining that the appeal to evolution does not necessarily justify, nowadays a geneticist explanation of behavior. The classical interpretation of evolution during the twentieth century, the neo-Darwinian interpretation, upon which sociobiology and evolutionary psychology were based in their claims to explain behavior on the basis of a genetic program, has been and is being discussed and radically revised by current evolutionary developmental biology, among many other critical fronts. There are alternative





interpretations that are perfectly Darwinian, but not geneticist, such as those following the theory of Organic Selection, that would not support Seligman's claim to justify through evolution the "human nature" that conforms to the model of happiness or wellbeing (see Sánchez and Loredo, 2009).

From the respectability and apparent coherence of a psychological academic movement (contested by Held, 2004), Positive Psychology defends and extends the typically characteristic aspects of New Thought: the fact that well known foundations of Protestant and spiritual inclination such as the "John Templeton Foundation" have financed more than eight million dollars' worth of projects conducted by Seligman and associates, or that one of the five points of the program of the movement is explicitly about the search for meaning and happiness through the development of spirituality, are just small proof of this. As the official text of the "Positive Psychology Center" directed by Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania, says on this point:

"George Vaillant leads two related projects. The first project concerns the role of spirituality in achieving a successful life. Spirituality is defined as a set of six facets: faith, hope, love, joy, forgiveness and caring for (healing) others. The second project concerns the development and comparison of eight models of empirical research on positive mental health. In the project by Vaillant, the findings of cultural anthropology, brain imaging, and evolutionary perspectives are combined with the study of individual lives that reflect a deep spiritual component" (Positive Psychology Center Summary of Activities, 2005; see www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/ppcactivities.pdf).

Although it uses a more appropriate language for the standards of natural science, Positive Psychology is still affirming slogans, recommending practices and promising results very similar to those offered by healers, preachers, coaches, writers and entrepreneurs of previous decades. Here are some examples that show this common root: they establish a categorical separation between positive thoughts and emotions and negative ones, arguing that the latter, a source of anxiety, failure, and depression, are to be located, recognized and changed to more positive affirmations, since "pessimism is maladaptive for most efforts, in such a way that pessimists fail in most areas they set out to accomplish (Seligman, 2002, pp. 178); they promote practices such as the exercise of gratitude and forgiveness as a way to increase the positive emotions and happiness of the individual

(Bono, Emmons and McCullough, 2004); they advocate the cultivation of hope as a strategy to facilitate personal change and to help to clarify, maintain and pursue the desired goals (López et al, 2004); they emphasize the clarification of one's own desires and goals, studying their advantages and disadvantages, as well as the beneficial effect of affirmations (Sherman, Nelson and Steele, 2000); and they advise readers to avoid over-analysis ("over-thinking") as a pernicious activity and distraction that prevents the subject from "allowing themselves to be led" ("flow") by interests and desires that would otherwise be deployed naturally and spontaneously, preventing them from enjoying the small things that bring happiness and increasing positive affect toward the self (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Many positive psychologists argue that their movement filters and improves all these claims and practices scientifically and that, although they may be popular, "they work." Perhaps what "works," what seems intuitively valid in Positive Psychology, is rather a generic feature of any process of dealing with problems, the importance of which all psychotherapy assumes -and common sense as well without a doubt: namely, the desirability of keeping an open mind to provide the individual with a better understanding of his or her situation and the efficient use of the resources at hand to overcome the problems of daily life. It is certainly desirable to deal with a problem looking for alternative response repertoires, refocusing the situation, or maintaining sufficient confidence and hope in order to avoid a precipitous resignation. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Positive Psychology fits so easily with some of the truths of common sense (both that of the street and that of the psychologist's practice) because some of its generalizations are common sense (although many of its specificities, the traits of "positive" individualism, are not, or were not so common).

On the other hand, positive psychologists seem intent on creating a body of psychological techniques that can work universally, under the assumption that the human nature is "universal". But these practices and statements are not independent of the cultural and moral baggage that they are laden with (in this case the specific tradition of "positive" individualism); if they work it is because they do so for certain lifestyles (broadly speaking, civilizations with liberal democracies with a common Western cultural tradition that share a consumer capitalist economic system that is state-controlled to a greater or lesser extent); they





are not for every way of life or every context. Outside of this context, it seems that not only would they not work, but they would not even be intelligible, as shown in a number of transcultural studies (Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) recognize that the foundation of Positive Psychology is "eclectic". Many authors have questioned the supposed objectivity and universality of its notion of happiness and wellbeing. The fact is that the psychological categories through which individuals define and manage their relationships with themselves and with others, especially including their definition of their place in the world, its meaning and, if it were the case, what their "happiness" would be, result from a historical process which, although it undoubtedly involves natural dimensions (of the species), is not derived from, nor solely explained by these natural dimensions. The process is a true socio-historical construction constituting reality, but not the only possible reality. Positive Psychology does not "discover" or "unveil" the "true" human nature. It fabricates it (or collaborates with this) in a certain way. It does not discover; it constructs. And since it does not discover, what it builds is not the only option, it is neither timeless nor oblivious to certain political preferences regarding how to conduct society, the economy, and the role of the individual in the two.

The best and closest example in our favor is also North American, genuinely North American. And it is the benchmark for another psychological culture that Positive Psychology does not seem to take into consideration. Various authors of pragmatism and functionalism, especially the more "progressive" ones and those with a clearer political dimension, such as Dewey, openly criticized the subject model of "positive" individualism since the beginning of twentieth century (Dewey, 1999).

Progressivism ("progressivism") was an essential mass movement in the first decades of the twentieth century in the United States. Despite its great diversity and contradictions, it can be said that it was a reform movement concerned about the huge social inequalities, the poverty in the cities, the deficiencies in education and the excessive power and capacity for exploitation of large corporations, which already at the time many saw as a decisive factor in the degradation of political life and the old democratic ideals. The functionalist psychology and educational and political philosophy of Dewey are one of the faces (not religious, in this case) of progressivism, which had many other religious developments, but unlike

those we have seen so far, much more oriented to social justice and community activity.

Well, Dewey and other progressives criticized the hypertrophy of "interiority" and the excessive emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the "positive" individual, who, in his obsession with "mental" change fails to place sufficient emphasis on both the need for effective, organizational, structural and social transformations to deal with everyday conflicts and the theorizing on the communitarian psychological management of these conflicts. The progressives emphasized, based on scientific research (which has fed into and is still present in many current academic traditions, such as evolutionary and Vygotskian approaches and many cultural studies), the social-formation of the self, the historical character of social values and the actual content of what we call "happiness" or, perhaps a better expression would be "life meaning" (Sánchez, 2005).

They do not see individuality as prior to their social construction, imbued with an inherent psychological and/or spiritual content and a number of needs and natural and universal rights, but rather as a system of action and meaning that "reflects a [specific] state of civilization" in every historical and social moment (Dewey, 2004, p. 112), but which is capable, if given the opportunity and resources, of participating in the social and political transformation of this state of civilization, in a way that new modes of individuality (action and meaning, goals and values) are made possible. In effect, Dewey, faced with the abuses of capitalism (and suspicious of collectivism) sought a renewal of democracy, based on education, and capable of giving birth to a "new individualism".

Through the rapid expansion of Positive Psychology, the subject model underlying it, "positive" individualism, also expands. Academic psychology in general and more and more professionals seem to be leaning towards it as if it were an irresistible fashion. Marino Pérez (2012) incorporates and expands the denunciation and concern of some psychologists who, with some amazement, see what seems to be a new "trend" growing without much academic controversy and without much resistance from professional psychologists. Its scant foundations may very well pay a high price, the "respectability" of the entire profession, as on many other occasions. Without a doubt we share that concern. On our part, we have tried to help explain how and under what conditions the psychological categories of "positive" individualism were generated and





make up the background of Positive Psychology. In the interest of rational and rigorous discussion, it is worth knowing and considering these roots, as well as the fact that alternative psychological models, no less "respectable", have existed and are possible, from which the limitations of positive psychology and its social and political implications can be seen with a little more light.

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