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Rationality, Meaning, and Self-Management: Success Manuals, 1950-1980

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Abstract

How-to-succeed books published in the United States since 1950 offer a glimpse into the subjective experiences of middle-class workers. This paper

analyzes 30 bestselling success manuals to explore how rationalization has affected workers' attitudes towards themselves, their jobs, and their role in society. I divide the formulas these books offer for success into four categories, and relate each of these categories to the changing structure of middle-class work opportunities. The most recent formula encourages workers to retreat from the workplace and find fulfillment in leisure activities. I conclude that modern success techniques encourage workers to view themselves as objects and to manage themselves in ways that hold no threat to prevailing economic arrangements.

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