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 **Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural  
History of Psychotherapy (review)**

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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[Access article in PDF]

Cushman, Philip. *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy*.  
Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1995.

In his book, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, Philip Cushman reminds us that the social realm has a powerful impact on the configuration of the self, and he presents a sweeping hermeneutical analysis of how American culture has constructed the self since the Civil War. While most of the book is dedicated to situating the construction of the self within American historical and cultural contexts, the most challenging implications of his argument come in his critique of psychotherapy, particularly psychoanalysis, in America. It is in this critique of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis as an "objective," "apolitical" science dealing with "universal" and "ahistorical" selves that he persuasively argues that psychotherapy discourse is always about the moral and the political. The challenge, then, is to develop a subversive psychotherapy that refuses to unwittingly reinforce current configurations of the self (which, since World War II, Cushman characterizes as an "empty" self) through its theories and practices. This is not a small task, but Cushman provides an important piece of scholarship promoting the reintegration of the social, moral, and political into psychotherapy.

Influenced by Foucault, Gadamer, and Heidegger, Cushman argues that the self is always a product of the historical, cultural, and moral landscape and is constructed by those in power. The growing power of capitalism, the urbanization of America, and the increasing need to create consumers is kept at the forefront throughout his analysis of the shifting configuration of the self in American history. The differing constructions of the self by those in power are well exemplified in his discussion of the differences between Europeans' and Americans' conceptions of the self during the Victorian age. Contrasting two "illnesses"—Freud's notion of hysteria with American neurologist George Beard's conception of neurasthenia—Cushman argues that Freud's notion of illness arising from uncontrolled sexual or aggressive impulses paralleled the European state's need to maintain a capitalistic economy in areas of limited resources while also controlling the population. That is, in Europe where the political solution was to dominate the population, the interior self was constructed as dangerous and dark and in need of self-domination. In America, on the other hand, Beard's conceptualization of neurasthenia as nervous exhaustion or lethargy paralleled the state's need to get its citizens to work hard, expand into the frontier, and take advantage of America's vast natural resources that could be used for capitalistic gain. Thus, the solution for Beard was to strengthen and liberate the self so that it could be free to find its fulfillment in work. Whereas the European self had too much inside and needed to be dominated, the American self had too little inside and needed to be strengthened and liberated.

The construction of the American self as having too little inside and needing liberation plays an important role for Cushman in the banalization of psychoanalysis in America. American psychiatrists latched on to Freud's idea of the unconscious after his visit to Clark University in 1909 because it offered an interior "frontier" that could be explored limitlessly, but promised pragmatic and liberating results. This allowed psychiatry to establish itself as a major player in the cultural landscape, giving creditability to a young profession and beginning the ethos of the "therapeutic." With this turn towards what Cushman terms the "enchanted interior," the unconscious became an important concept in the American capitalistic framework as it lent itself easily to a consumerist construction of the self.

In what is perhaps the most innovative piece of his hermeneutical analysis, Cushman discusses the ascent in America of psychoanalytic [End Page 165] object relations theory over and against Sullivan's interpersonal psychoanalytic framework. He uses Melanie Klein and Harry Stack Sullivan as examples of two different "roads" with which psychoanalysis was confronted. One "road," the interpersonal psychoanalytic theory of Sullivan, led to an evaluation of the social...

## Reviews

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