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Therapeutic politics: critique and contestation in the post-political conjuncture

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses forms of political engagement in the therapeutic field. Drawing on ethnographic research on popular psychology self-help, alternative and complementary health practices and new spiritualities, the paper takes issue with the dominant interpretation of the therapeutic as a depoliticizing force. Although this interpretation captures important facets of the phenomenon, the paper suggests that something more complex is afoot. It argues that therapeutic practices may also animate political contestation and critique, and challenge the prevailing grammar of political conflict. It substantiates this argument by identifying two modalities of politics in the therapeutic field: collective mobilization through a political party, and therapeutic practices as a form of lifestyle politics. It goes on to suggest that, together, these modalities constitute a subaltern counterpublic politicizing the political economy of health and the erosion of democratic governance. The paper concludes by suggesting that analysis of the therapeutic field may shed light on the shifting logics of political contestation at the contemporary political conjuncture.

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The traditional infrastructure of politics has been challenged in recent decades. Widespread disenchantment with electoral democracy, manifesting itself in falling voter turnout rates, erosion of trust in political institutions, declining membership of political parties and the rise of populist politics, has profoundly reconfigured the political landscape. This has animated debates about a post-political condition in which democratic institutions are formally retained but political power and decision making are relocated to arenas where corporate interests rule, largely insulated from democratic participation and accountability (Blühdorn, 2014; Koch, 2016; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014).

Simultaneously with this post-political disenchantment, the therapeutic industry of happiness and wellbeing has been rapidly growing on a global scale. Self-help books, life coaching, life management courses and alternative medical and spiritual services increasingly saturate the terrain of everyday life, corporate culture and mass media (Davies, 2015; Illouz, 2008; Madsen, 2014). Critics have seen the therapeutic industry as centrally contributing to neoliberal, post-political forms of governance by offering

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individualized regimes of self-management in lieu of collective political mobilization. As Cloud (1998, p. 10) has suggested, the therapeutic industry ‘subverts potential opposition to the social order’ by encouraging people ‘to adjust to life as it is rather than to attempt to change the structure of society’.

In this article, I address this intersection of post-politics and therapeutics by investigating articulations and practices of politics in the therapeutic field. More specifically, I explore how ‘therapeutic’ translates into ‘political’, and the types of political engagements that are put to motion by therapeutic engagements. In so doing, I take issue with the conventional wisdom of the therapeutic as a depoliticizing force and a form of neoliberal governmentality that produces self-governing and enterprising subjects disinterested in social change. Although this interpretation captures important facets of the phenomenon, I suggest that something more complex is afoot. Rather than merely cultivating political quiescence, the therapeutic field may also serve as a site of political contestation and critique.

I substantiate this argument by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among practitioners of popular psychology self-help, alternative and complementary health practices and new spiritualities in Finland. Through this ethnographic approach, I seek to advance our understanding of shifting logics of political contestation and the role of therapeutic practices in the post-political conjuncture in two ways. First, previous research has focused predominantly on the ‘interpellative structure’ (Hall, 1988) of therapeutic culture, detailing the ways in which therapeutic discourses mobilize individuals for neoliberal and depoliticizing projects (see e.g. Binkley, 2011; Cloud, 1998; Foster, 2015, 2016; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015); however, few studies have addressed the lived experience of therapeutic engagements. In this paper, I home in on this experience by highlighting how politics is practised and made sense of ‘on the ground’, by therapeutic practitioners themselves. Second, by drawing into dialogue the literatures on therapeutic cultures and social movements, I propose that the therapeutic field constitutes a symbolic and material site of contention (Crossley, 2006), in which participants may challenge the dominant cultural codes that organize the meaning of action in contemporary societies (Melucci, 1996). I illuminate this by discussing two modalities of politics: collective mobilization through a political party and therapeutic practices as personalized lifestyle politics. I then go on to suggest that these modalities give rise to a subaltern counterpublic (Fraser, 1997), challenging the political economy of health and the erosion of democratic governance and echoing political critique put forward by anti-austerity, leftist and libertarian movements (see Fadaee & Schindler, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2017).

I begin this paper by discussing how the relationship between politics and therapeutics has been understood in previous research and explaining how I approach it in this article. I then describe the ethnographic fieldwork, after which I explore the two modalities of politics emerging in my research materials. I examine collective mobilization through a political party called the Crystal Party, followed by a discussion of therapeutic practices as lifestyle politics. Finally, I probe the dynamics of the subaltern counterpublic, before drawing conclusions.

The vexed question of politics and therapeutics

The relationship between therapeutics and politics has been intensively debated in previous research. Irrespective of the theoretical and methodological starting points,

there is a broad consensus that therapeutic discourses and techniques tend to have a depoliticizing effect. In interpreting all sorts of issues through the language of psychology and emotions, the therapeutic operates as an insidious form of power that turns structural issues into individual psycho-pathologies to be remedied by commodified regimes of self-management. It provides individual consolation as a substitute for political and economic compensation, replaces collective mobilization with quests for self-fulfilment, and legitimizes deep-seated social inequalities (Cloud, 1998; Furedi, 2004; Madsen, 2014; McGee, 2005).

Two bodies of scholarship have been particularly influential in advancing this argument. First, a longstanding strand of cultural critique, drawing mainly on both communitarian and Marxist thought, ascribes a range of detrimental effects to the rise of the therapeutic ethos. It proposes that the therapeutic ethos promotes individualism, self-reliance and narcissism, erodes commitment to social institutions, privatizes social problems, promotes withdrawal from politics and the common good, undermines civic responsibility, and helps to serve the interests of the dominating classes and deflect collective protest against structural inequalities (Cloud, 1998; Foster, 2016; Furedi, 2004; Lasch, 1979; MacNevin, 2003; Madsen, 2014). The 'triumph of the therapeutic' (Rieff, 1966) has allegedly entailed a shift from 'politics to self-examination' (Lasch, 1979, pp. 13–14), and rather than politicizing the personal, it has personalized the political (Kitzinger, 1993, p. 488). Although many therapeutic practices have their roots in the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, critics suggest they have lost much of this countercultural character and have become commodified and aligned with capitalist imperatives (Höllinger, 2004; Redden, 2002).

The second body of scholarship is the Foucauldian tradition of governmentality studies, which proposes another critical interpretation of the therapeutic. Rather than being viewed as a sign of retreat from or repression of politics, therapeutic knowledges and techniques are understood as profoundly political. They constitute technologies of power that open up the psyche and subjectivity to new ways of regulation and normalize the idea of individualized psychic interiority (Rose, 1990). In particular, therapeutic knowledges and practices have been identified as being intimately entangled with neoliberal governing projects that call on individuals to understand themselves as self-governing, enterprising and autonomous subjects disinterested in collective action (Binkley, 2011; Foster, 2015, 2016; Nehring, Alvarado, Hendriks, & Kerrigan, 2016; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Rimke, 2000; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015). This has decidedly depoliticizing effects, as 'the zone for political work remains at the level of the self' (Matza, 2009, p. 513).

There is much merit in these arguments, and they have significantly advanced our understanding of the operations of power in contemporary capitalism. Depoliticization and the cultivation of neoliberal subjectivities is certainly an important aspect of therapeutic engagements, and something that I also encountered during my fieldwork. However, my fieldwork also alerted me to narratives that sat uneasily with the depoliticization thesis. Many of my research participants voiced substantial political critique and a will to engage in attempts to change society. However, few studies to date have addressed this politicizing potential of therapeutic practices. Exceptions include Wright (2008) and Illouz (2008) who have acknowledged the emancipatory potential of the therapeutic discourse in the politicization of the private realm. They suggest that, by

reconfiguring the public/private division, the therapeutic discourse has opened up a new discursive space for 'speaking out' about suffering and injustices that used to remain unarticulated in public, such as child abuse and family violence. Stein (2011) has made a similar point in suggesting that popularization of the therapeutic discourse has helped to energize movements politicizing violence, sexuality and gender, and has thus empowered individuals who were previously marginalized and voiceless. Finally, Nissen (2011) and Redden (2011), writing on alternative health practices and new spiritualities respectively, have highlighted the critique of social power embedded in these practices, reminding us that such practices do not necessarily foster withdrawal from social engagement (see also Aubry & Travis, 2015; Höllinger, 2004; Honey, 2014).

Taken together, these commentaries suggest that, rather than merely defusing political aspirations, therapeutic practices can also potentially animate political engagement. In what follows, I contribute to this discussion by exploring the diverse forms of politics practised in the therapeutic field. Both social movement scholarship and the literature on therapeutic cultures have often subscribed to a rather narrow conception of politics as collective, public, organized and contentious action. However, this conception has attracted criticism for failing to recognize the diversity of tactics that social groups can mobilize for social change (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012; Edwards, 2014, p. 216). Indeed, I suggest it is this narrow conception of politics that has often led therapeutic practitioners to be characterized as politically passive and imprisoned in false consciousness, and to therapeutic practices being dismissed as not 'properly political', that is, as unorganized, individual, self-indulgent and having no revolutionary potential (cf. Scott, 1989). In order to move away from this conception, I draw inspiration from scholarship on personalized politics and lifestyle movements (Bennett, 2012; Haenfler et al., 2012; Simmons, 2017). According to Haenfler et al. (2012), lifestyle movements are characterized by conscious promotion of a particular lifestyle as a form of political engagement, of identity as a key site of social change, and of individualized forms of action. Literature on lifestyle movements foregrounds the everyday as a meaningful arena of political engagement, and allows appreciation that the small acts of daily life may potentially undermine power and involve deeply political meanings for their practitioners (ibid.; Simmons, 2017). In this sense they can be seen to embody prefigurative politics; that is, attempts to create on a small scale, 'here and now', social relations and norms that it is hoped will characterize society at large in the future (Breines, 1980).

Exploring the therapeutic field

In mapping the modalities of therapeutic politics, I draw on ethnographic research among alternative therapists and users of such therapies. While the overwhelming majority of research on the therapeutic industry so far has focused on Anglo-American liberal regimes, this paper shifts the focus to Finland, a Nordic welfare state. As elsewhere, this industry has been gaining increasing cultural traction in Finland and constitutes an important branch of industry and source of employment (Gustafsson, 2017; Mustonen, 2012). Its growing appeal signals that it clearly captures something essential about people's lifeworlds. Ethnography is a particularly well-suited method to explore these lifeworlds.

My fieldwork targeted therapeutic practitioners in different parts of Finland, both rural and urban, with the aim of learning how and why they engage with, and the political meanings they ascribe to, therapeutic practices. Fieldwork was conducted between 2014 and 2017, and was informed by multi-site fieldwork methodology with its central principle of ‘following’ as a mode for defining the objects of study (Marcus, 1998, p. 84). In this spirit, I followed ‘the people’ – my research participants and the types of practices in which they were engaging – and ‘metaphors and storylines’ – the key symbolic frameworks, such as belief in the power of thought and interconnection between body, mind and spirit, that circulated across diverse sites of the therapeutic field. The participants for this study were identified through the Internet and a range of therapeutic events, as well as through a snowballing technique. In the course of the fieldwork, I interviewed a total of forty-five practitioners, both professional healers and people who used therapeutic practices as part of everyday self-care. All were engaging with a wide array of therapeutic knowledges and practices, including mindfulness, reiki, life coaching, angel therapy, yoga, art therapy, self-help books, Eastern philosophies, folk healing, Rosen therapy, acupuncture, reflexology, aromatherapy, astrology, tarot cards, herbal medicine, homeopathy, and many more. The boundaries between these diverse practices are fuzzy, and practitioners tend to combine and mix them in eclectic ways. All these practices focus holistically on emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing, and operate outside the official healthcare system.

Political critique and engagement did not emerge as a meaningful theme in all of the interviews. Some participants consciously sought to disengage from societal concerns and did not conceive their practice as having political implications. However, most did, and it is this group of participants on which I focus in this article. Accordingly, I draw on interviews with thirty research participants, and on my participant observation of a range of therapeutic events. My analysis focuses on the interview narratives, with ethnographic observations providing contextual sensitivity and background information for the interpretative work. Twenty-eight of the research participants were women and two men, ranging in age from early thirties to seventies. This profile reflects the fact that the field is deeply gendered. It is culturally signified as feminine, as therapeutic practices are associated with femininely-marked qualities of care, softness, emotions and embodiment (Sointu, 2013, p. 73). Also, as numerous studies have shown, women predominate as both service providers and clients (see e.g. Eardley et al., 2012; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).

However, while previous studies have highlighted that alternative therapies are consumed predominantly by the educated middle class (Eardley et al., 2012; Nissen, 2011; Sointu, 2013), the profile of my research participants was more mixed. A large number of participants were in economically precarious situations, working in low-paid occupations as single parents, living on social assistance or struggling economically to maintain their practices. Only six had university education, while others had intermediate or little formal education. Sixteen worked as professional healers or therapists, either full- or part-time. Others worked in some form of care work or office work, or as teachers, HR managers, bookkeepers, entrepreneurs and school assistants, or were unemployed, on pensions or studying. All participants were white and had been born and raised in Finland. Two participants had lived abroad long periods of time, but were residing in Finland at the time of the interview. The participants’ names have been anonymized.

The Crystal Party: love and feminine energy

I now move on to analyse the institutionalized form of political participation in the therapeutic field through the case of the Crystal Party. This was not, however, the first party in Finnish political history to promote therapeutic concerns. The Party of Natural Law, established in the 1990s to promote the ideas of transcendental meditation, can be seen as a predecessor, but it was largely unsuccessful and had gradually withered by the end of the 1990s. Similar efforts have also emerged elsewhere in Europe, most notably in Germany, where political party, *Die Violetten* (The Violets) was founded in 2001 to promote spirituality and holistic health issues. It has participated in national and EU elections, but has been unable to secure seats in parliament.

The Crystal Party was established in December 2014 by a group of women living in a small Finnish town. The spark for the initiative to establish the party originated in the women's dissatisfaction with the official healthcare system and orthodox medicine. Some had seen their loved ones die of serious diseases; some had unsuccessfully sought help for their health problems from orthodox medicine; and others were concerned about the recent discovery in the region of significant damage caused by swine flu vaccinations, which they claimed the authorities had refused to acknowledge. All of these women were interested in alternative medicine and holistic spiritualities, including energy healing, homeopathy and meditation, and some of them had trained as alternative healers. They felt profoundly frustrated and silenced by the medical and political authorities. As Anna, one of the founding activists in her forties, put it: 'The voice of an ordinary person does not get heard by the system.' The activists also felt that there was a lot of political frustration and resentment bubbling under in society, and they wanted to provide a 'constructive channel' for it so that it would not translate into hate speech and racist protests. Anna recounted the process leading to the establishment of the party as follows:

I had this feeling that I'd really like to influence, but there was not a party that I could join and really stand behind its agenda. [I was calling to a friend] and we were like, well, should we establish a party? We were just laughing about it: what a crazy idea, definitely not. And then we thought, well, why not? Who else is going to do it? Are we now establishing a party? We said it aloud and we cannot take it back anymore.

The core group of party activists consisted of around ten people, predominantly women. Only one had any prior political experience, while others were getting involved in party work for the first time in their lives. However, although they were highly critical of the prevailing political system, they had clearly not lost belief in electoral politics as a meaningful channel for social change. On the contrary, they specifically wanted to register as a party, as they saw this as the most effective way to influence society. Maria, a founding member and a single parent in her forties, reasoned: 'The government is the one that dictates everything. One can influence better through formal politics.' However, the ultimate goal of the party was to dismantle traditional party-based politics and advocate more direct forms of democracy.

The party's activities take place mainly on the Internet, where it distributes information, statements and blogs through its own website and Facebook page. It nominated candidates for the national parliamentary elections in 2015, which brought it some visibility. It also organizes regular group meditations and has arranged yoga sessions.

According to the activists, the party is consciously seeking to avoid traditional ways of doing politics in which ‘you sit in a meeting and wait to be called upon to speak’.

The political agenda of the party is grounded in ideas drawing on new spiritualities and popular therapeutic discourse. Although health, wellbeing and spiritual development constitute its key political concerns, the party seeks to profile itself as a more ‘general’ party. Accordingly, its programme has several policy sections, such as ‘wellbeing of the environment and animals’, ‘development of the welfare state’, ‘work and wellbeing’, ‘health promotion’, ‘promotion of non-violence’, ‘education and learning’, and ‘being independent as part of Europe’. The party platform highlights, as key values, the promotion of equality, human rights and environmental values, as well as widening avenues for democratic participation and reducing income inequalities. The platform subscribes to therapeutic individualism (Rimke, 2000) by underlining individual responsibility and change:

A positive change begins from the individual; through her self-appreciation and self-respect awakens a will to get the best for herself. Then she will not let herself be treated badly and will not want to treat other people badly either. The more the people feel they can influence their own quality of life by taking more responsibility for themselves and their lives, the more their consciousness grows, as well as a wish to change the surrounding world.

As is characteristic of new spiritualities and self-help discourse, self-responsibility is posited as a way to liberate oneself from the oppressive power of social institutions (Redden, 2011). However, at the same time, with this emphasis on self-responsibility the party also embraces the Nordic welfare state with its universalistic social protection system. Moreover, despite therapeutic individualism, the political goals and strategies do not merely occur at the individual level, but also involve structural elements, such as integrating complementary and alternative therapies into the official healthcare sector, state control of the pharmaceutical industry, and funding for impartial health research.

Social justice issues are central to the party and attracted considerable critical discussion in the interviews. Many activists made scathing critiques of the austerity politics under way at the time of the interviews, entailing significant cutbacks to social expenditure. Anna and Pia, the founding activists of the party, talked at length about the need to defend the egalitarian model of the Nordic welfare state and protest against the government’s ‘cold shoulder’ toward socially disadvantaged groups:

Pia: These cutbacks, they are taking away from those who really don’t have anything in the first place. We’ve already received complaints from the EU that our level of social security is too low, but they’re still cutting more.

Anna: Yes, and at the same time there are billions and billions going to the tax havens. The leading group of men dressed in tails and smoking cigars is just enjoying itself, [saying to others] just suffer over there, go to work and slave.

Pia: They [politicians] are saying all the time that everyone must contribute.

Anna: Well, it’s hard to see everyone contributing equally isn’t it, if one ladder doesn’t do anything and another is slaving away. And then those worst off in society are put in an even worse position. It’s unjust, heartless, I’d say sadistic.

The activists were highly critical of the close intertwinement of political and economic interests, amounting to a kind of ‘power elite’ (Mills, 1956), dictating policies that promote their vested interests in lieu of the common good. The party members

positioned themselves frequently as contesting this power elite and shaking up the existing status quo. According to Pia, the Crystal Party is ‘stepping on big toes. Pharmaceutical industry, food industry. We are confronting big wallets here.’

Although criticism of the corrupt power elite working against the interests of ‘ordinary people’ resonates, in part, with the populist discourse, the members explicitly disassociated themselves from populist politics. This disassociation was drawn in gendered terms. The populist parties were characterized as representing disruptive ‘tough guy energy’, revolving around hate and ‘rumbling around and breaking everything up’. The Crystal Party, in contrast, was defined as ‘pushing pink feminine energy’ into politics in the form of compassion, love and tolerance. Although not identifying with feminism as such, this gendered articulation echoes the symbolic repertoire of second wave woman-centred feminism that emphasises female experience and caring femininity (Anttonen 1997).

As these examples illustrate, the party is often conceived of as a specifically gendered form of politics. The feminine imagery occupies a central position in constructing and communicating the political message of the party. Love, spirituality and ‘doing things with heart’ are the key symbolic categories through which the party ideology is articulated. Love, in particular, operates as a seminal political category. The party platform states, for example, that ‘lack of love’ is ‘the biggest problem in the world’ and that ‘When your love awakes, you want equality and the best for everyone else, too. Then the ego-centric management culture can transform into a heart-centric way of doing things.’ Love is assigned an empowering role, as Anna explained:

We have been resigned to thinking that life is a misery and we can’t do anything about it. We think in this way when we don’t really care about ourselves. But when your love awakens, and you realize that, gee, I’m a great person ... then you won’t be resigned anymore.

This feminine symbolism is articulated as a conscious, subversive strategy aimed at ‘challenging dominant codes’ (Melucci, 1996), showing that the Crystal Party practises politics differently from existing parties. Pia explained that ‘many were terrified and said that you can’t just go to politics like that; you simply don’t do politics in that way’. Many of the activists had had experience of their political agency being dismissed. The party had been labelled as ‘humbug’ and the activists as ‘foil hat grannies’. As Sointu (2013) has argued, the alternative therapeutic sphere has historically been marked as feminine and devalued as irrational, and it was clear that this representational legacy affected how Crystal Party activities were received. The members had to grapple with prejudices, and struggle for recognition as legitimate political actors.

Although the activists were enthusiastic about engaging with politics, their path to an official party turned out to be thorny. They faced similar difficulties to many other social movements in mobilizing people for action and finding resources to carry out their work. The Party did not manage to register officially, as it failed to collect the 5,000 signatures required for registration, but it continues to exist as a social movement mainly operating on the Internet. When I met Pia and Anna in the aftermath of the abortive registration process in 2016, although still enthusiastic about politics, they felt exhausted and wanted to take ‘time-out’ to reflect on strategies for the future. The party was ‘in abeyance’ (Taylor, 1989) for a while to gather strength. In the official party

meeting in spring 2017, with a handful of activists participating, the party elected a new chairman, this time a man with a political background in another political party, and decided to try again to collect signatures for official registration, as well as nominating candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2019.

Despite remaining small-scale, the example of the Crystal Party shows how therapeutic and spiritual concerns may translate into collective political action. During my fieldwork, I also encountered therapeutic practitioners who were contemplating going into politics through mainstream political parties or actively engaging in non-governmental organizations (environmental organizations, the Red Cross, child protection organizations, associations of alternative medicine, etc.) and trade unions. However, for many others, therapeutic practices themselves constituted a more meaningful form of political engagement, which is the theme to which I turn next.

Therapeutic practices as lifestyle politics

While the Crystal Party activists established a party to advance their ideas, other research participants were deeply frustrated and disillusioned with electoral politics. For example, alternative therapist, Susanne saw voting as futile because ‘after all, it’s always the same old people sitting there and their hands are tied in so many ways’. Formal politics appeared to many to be something that constrained agency and threatened to corrupt the self. Marcus, an alternative therapist in his forties, thought he would have had to ‘sell his soul’ if he had accepted the invitation of one of the major political parties to run as a candidate in local elections. According to him, ‘I couldn’t have led the life I wanted if I had gone into politics, because in order to achieve things in politics, you need to give up something from yourself, act against your own principles. I don’t want to do that.’

While there was a strong sense of political disenfranchisement among the research participants, there was also an equally strong will to engage politically and make a difference. As traditional channels of participation seemed ineffective and corrupt, therapeutic practices as a form of personalized lifestyle politics offered a feasible and meaningful form of political engagement and social change. A number of practitioners explicitly framed therapeutic engagements as ‘societal work’, having profound political consequences. For example Katarina, an alternative therapist in her fifties, told how her work involved ‘twelve hours every day for the benefit of this society, in order for this society to become a better place’. Therapeutic engagements offered them a meaningful way to make life more bearable and embody values important to them, with an understanding that they could ultimately contribute to social change (cf. Haenfler et al., 2012). Practising and embodying particular ethical and moral values in daily life was thus understood in itself as an important political act (see also Stein, 2011, p. 190), giving a sense of agency amidst political disillusionment.

Lifestyle politics also included a set of other practices in addition to alternative therapies. Food and eating were for many highly political and ethical issues. Many were vegetarians or vegans, ate only organic or raw food, or followed other dietary choices. They also sought to avoid or engage only selectively with pharmaceuticals, vaccines and biomedical treatments, and preferred alternative treatments. Ethical consumption, voluntary simplicity and making ecologically sustainable choices in the

everyday were also an important part of lifestyles, as well as a range of creative activities, such as dancing, painting, photography and writing poetry.

For many, such lifestyle politics was crucially about expressing identities, of 'who I really am'. Participants felt that they were better able to advance their values and identities in the therapeutic field than in formal politics, as it allowed them to better follow their own inner truth as a source of meaning and authority (see Redden, 2002; Sointu, 2013). Sara's case is illustrative in this regard. An alternative therapist in her thirties, she had previously been involved in local politics. She had grown frustrated with politics and considered her work as an angel healer to be a more rewarding way of realizing what she called her 'do-goodery conviction':

At one time, I thought I would have liked to be engaged in politics, and I still do want to influence and make the world a better place, but now I have given up the idea of party politics, at least for the time being. Because in my youth I felt it so corrupt. I really saw the wretchedness of all that when I sat on a municipal board. Looking at it as a young girl, I was like, hello, what is this? I'm not going to spend my time in all these meetings; I can try to find better ways to influence. Politics is a game, and you must play it if you want to work in there. And I think that there's very little room, in a way, for those things I want to do, for achieving my own vision, because it's teamwork, and your own thoughts somehow get easily trampled there. I like to be self-employed because then you can create your own vision and no one is telling you that you cannot do this or that, or now we tell you what to do, end of story.

Therapeutic engagements were also mobilized as a form of resistance to the logic of neoliberal capitalism, revolving around the valorization of waged work, competition, materialism and subjecting human wellbeing to the calculus of economic utility. Many were frustrated with 'money dictating everything' and 'everything turning into a business'. In therapeutic practices, they sought alternative ways of being in the world. As Simmons (2018) has pointed out, lifestyle movements often seek to 'opt out' of and distance themselves from what they see as immoral systems. In this study, the practitioners sought to 'opt out' of the work-centred ethic of neoliberalism by withdrawing from waged work. During fieldwork I met women in their thirties and forties who had left their former secure jobs and had embarked on a 'spiritual path' involving economic insecurity. Some were living on social assistance, doing occasional odd jobs or receiving economic support from their spouses or families. They felt that their previous careers had been in conflict with 'who they really were' and wished to live 'true' to their newly discovered spiritual ideals. Some had also 'opted out' by becoming professional healers. Although this involved being drawn into the realm of the market, many nevertheless perceived therapeutic work as more easily reconciled with their values than waged work, and perceived the therapeutic field as less regulated by corporate interests than other sectors of society. Thus, entrepreneurship as an emblematic practice of neoliberalism emerged here not in terms of embracing the neoliberal ethic, but rather as an attempt to escape its grip.

While critical commentators have argued that therapeutic individualism 'does little to change or challenge the pre-existing macro-social conditions' (MacNevin, 2003, p. 22), lifestyle politics shows that the picture is more complex. Although there was a deep-seated belief among the research participants in the transformation of individual consciousness and conduct as a means of social change, it did not preclude

consideration of structural changes. Individual and social change were understood not as mutually exclusive but rather as intimately enmeshed and mutually reinforcing. While transforming one's daily practices and subjectivity was often perceived as the most feasible and meaningful way to make a difference and remake social life 'here and now', many also talked about the need to integrate alternative treatments into the public healthcare system, secure more public resources for child and elderly care, devise policies to reduce income inequality, increase citizens' political participation through forms of direct democracy and reorganize the parental leave system. Although structural forces and solutions were acknowledged, many nevertheless sought change via ethical work on the self and personalized lifestyle politics. This was not because they did not believe that structural changes were needed, but rather because they felt politically powerless and saw few meaningful channels for involvement in formal politics.

Politics of knowledge in a subaltern counterpublic

In this final section, I explore the seminal role of knowledge and consciousness-raising in political engagements in the therapeutic field. I suggest that the Crystal Party and lifestyle politics together give rise to a subaltern counterpublic (Fraser, 1997), a political arena in which the practitioners invent and circulate counter-discourses and formulate oppositional interpretations of identities, interests and needs. This counterpublic unites like-minded people and serves as a basis for social critique and activities directed toward wider publics and social change (Fraser, 1997, p. 82). It operates as an epistemic community, producing and disseminating alternative forms of knowledge, and thus creating 'counter-expertise' (Hess, 2004). Through this counterpublic, the therapeutic practitioners are engaged in a struggle to determine who can be a knowing subject, what counts as legitimate knowledge and who has the authority to speak and impose 'the legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions' (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 15).

This subaltern counterpublic is organised through social media, websites, therapeutic fairs, seminars, courses and events, alternative bookstores and the like, which operate as platforms for formulating and disseminating counter-expertise. As with activism in general, new digital technologies play a particularly vital role in engendering and sustaining political contestation in the counterpublic, especially as it is felt that the power elite of politicians, corporations, biomedical authorities and mainstream media deliberately restrict access to knowledge and marginalize critical voices. Thus, counter-expertise in the subaltern counterpublic comes to be signified as subjugated knowledge and contributes to creating a collective identity as 'subaltern subjects' determined to expose the workings of power.

As we know from social movement studies, a crucial way for activist groups to pursue social change is through consciousness-raising activities. Indeed, 'awakening' was a key trope through which the therapeutic practitioners made sense of their political role. They shared a firm belief in knowledge production as a tool for empowering and mobilizing people. Consciousness-raising was aimed at cultivating critical citizenship, calling for a need to 'think for yourself', 'not to take anything in life at face value' and 'use your own brain' (see also Simmons, 2018, p. 8). The research participants frequently posited social institutions, such as mass media, school, organized religion, corporations and biomedicine, as 'brainwashing' people and socializing them to accept the fundamentally unjust social reality as natural. The

way in which this critique was formulated often echoed the Althusserian idea of ideological state apparatuses exerting ideological domination and reproducing and legitimizing the interests of the ruling classes (Althusser, 1985). Production and dissemination of counter-expertise was viewed as an essential tool to combat this ideological domination.

Consciousness-raising through production and dissemination of counter-expertise targeted two specific issues: the political economy of health and the erosion of democratic governance. Here, the therapeutic counterpublic finds ample resonance with leftist, libertarian, anti-austerity and populist movements also taking issue with the power of multinational corporations and the erosion of democratic accountability and legitimacy. What, however, sets this counterpublic apart is the emphasis on spiritual development as a seminal vehicle of social change.

Critique of the political economy of health revolved around the idea that wellbeing and health are subject to a market logic through processes of medicalization and commodification. The pharmaceutical industry was criticised for turning health into a commodity and accelerating medicalization in pursuit of higher profits, thus echoing the longstanding social scientific and countercultural critique of conventional medicine (McKee, 1988; Redden, 2011). The deep entanglement of commercial interests with healthcare was seen as casting serious doubt on the integrity of medical research and practitioners. Biomedical care was signified as an ‘assembly line’ and a ‘pill prison’, and doctors as ‘slaves of the pharmaceutical industry’. For example Hanna, a practitioner of alternative medicine and a member of the Crystal Party in her fifties, voiced this criticism:

Our doctors are governed by drug factories, it's one thing that irritates me. We have plenty of diseases caused by drugs. They just medicate and medicate in order to barely keep you alive, and then you need more drugs, since there are always side-effects, and of course it's good that they can keep you alive because then they can sell you more drugs. The pharmaceutical industry has corrupted doctors.

The research participants sought to raise awareness of alternatives to such a biomedical mode of treatment through the networks of the subaltern counterpublic. They questioned the epistemic authority of medical expertise and claimed recognition for experiential, spiritual and non-biomedical knowledge as an alternative source of authority. However, this alternative knowledge was, in their view, often met with delegitimization, which manifested itself, for example, in labelling them as ‘foil hats’ and rendering their knowledge invisible. Pia, an entrepreneur in her forties, explained:

There's so much alternative knowledge available, including research, but because it's not medical research it's not accepted in the healthcare system. Why? Because they just keep repeating that it's not medically proven, although there's loads of studies on functional medicine that have shown, for example, that milk is not good for people. But because these are not medically studied, they do not exist.

The practitioners sought to deal with this delegitimization through recourse to what Foucault (1998, p. 76) calls a ‘reverse discourse’; that is, mobilizing the categories and vocabularies of biomedicine to legitimize the knowledge base of alternative treatments. Nora, an alternative therapist, illustrates this as follows:

And it's scientifically studied that all these emotions and situations that have not been acknowledged and dealt with get stored in the memory of our body. And there's now this epigenetic knowledge that some emotions may derive from previous generations so that

those unprocessed emotions aren't even necessarily our own but from previous generations. And knowledge also moves outside the DNA. There's quite a bit of research on that.

However, many of the research participants also underlined the need to critically assess not only biomedical but also alternative knowledge. Critical dispositions were thus called for in relation to both the power elite and the subaltern counterpublic. As alternative therapist, Marcus put it, 'I think it's healthy to doubt. In these humbug circles, so to say, you see a lot of people who promise you everything possible. Scepticism is really important here, but in a healthy way.'

In addition to the political economy of health, knowledge production in the subaltern counterpublic also takes issue with the flaws of democratic governance. The research participants politicized the symbolic violence they saw as prevalent in society: the deep entanglement of the commercial interests of the food and pharmaceutical industries with political governance which is systematically misrecognized, making people complicit in their own subordination and effectively eroding democratic governance. In many ways, their critique echoed that put forward by social justice movements that problematize 'the exclusive, oligarchic, and consensual governance of an alliance of professional economic, political and technocratic elites determined to defend the neoliberal order by any means necessary' (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 3; see also Fadaee & Schindler, 2014). Timo, a member of the Crystal Party in his forties, felt that power resides in the hands of those 'who own the 98% of this world', making 'the leverage of any party and politician really small at the end of the day'. Some research participants went even further to suggest that the power elite deliberately seeks to keep people docile and prevent them from revolting:

Pia: People are not feeling well these days. We lie on a sofa and medicate ourselves with sweet things, alcohol, watch reality TV. And it's really convenient for this society. For the pharmaceutical industry, for the food industry. No one feels like standing up and raising her voice. It's really like bread and circuses.

In this situation, therapeutic activities were attributed a crucial role in galvanizing political resistance and collective action. Fiona, an alternative therapist in her fifties, and Saija, an angel healer in her forties, explained this as follows:

Fiona: I mean, we need to go to barricades. We are such bloody grumblers. We grumble but we resign. But this grumbling does not get us anywhere. And if we think about changing the external world, then the first thing for people to do is to harmonize themselves so that they dare to demand those things that they are entitled to. To understand and learn to know themselves and to realize that they deserve this and that. Then they will go and demand it.

Saija: But now that all those Eastern things, such as yoga and meditation, are rising, also people's consciousness is awakening and you start to make conscious choices. This is, of course, the worst thing from the perspective of the patriarchal thought, because it doesn't want people to awake and become conscious. But now we are moving to a phase in which everybody begins to think with his or her own brain and act together. All that has been told to us for centuries and decades, it all comes to our consciousness now, and people will stand up and say: 'We won't accept this anymore.'

As these quotations illustrate, therapeutic practices are seen as cultivating subaltern and subversive subjects engaging in collective action to change society. In this way, such practices are assigned a similar role to that traditionally afforded social movements, as agents challenging the structures of power and questioning forms of domination.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the articulations and practices of politics in the therapeutic field. It has identified two modalities of political engagement – political mobilization through a political party and personalized lifestyle politics – and has highlighted how these give rise to a subaltern counterpublic that politicizes the political economy of health and the erosion of democratic governance. In this way, the paper has sought to decentre the dominant narrative of the ‘therapeutic’ as a depoliticizing force, and illuminate how therapeutic practices may also animate political projects and challenge the prevailing grammar of political conflict. Thus, politics and therapeutics should not be seen as mutually exclusive categories but as intimately interconnected.

Critical Marxist, communitarian and Foucauldian research has been instrumental in showing the power of discourse in organizing the symbolic and material worlds we inhabit. However, it has largely overlooked what people *do* with therapeutic vocabularies and techniques and what they are ‘good for’ (see Illouz, 2008, p. 18). This paper has addressed this lacuna by adopting an ethnographic view on the everyday practices of therapeutic politics. It has thus destabilized the conception of the therapeutic as a coherent and unified apparatus producing similar effects, regardless of time and place, and has highlighted the need to appreciate its complex, and often contradictory, effects in specific settings.

Therapeutic politics also illustrates the diversity of tactics and spaces adopted by political engagements today. As Haenfler et al. (2012) observe, widespread disenchantment with formal politics and traditional social movements does not mean that people cease to engage with politics; rather, political engagements may find novel forms and arenas. The therapeutic field is one example of this, calling into question the traditional antinomies between individual and collective and therapeutic and political. The political critique in the therapeutic field finds ample resonance with other social movements that criticize neoliberalism and the erosion of democratic life stemming from the increasing influence of financial and corporate interests. What these diverse forms of political engagement have in common is that they all react to and politicize the contradictions of capitalism as they are lived and experienced at the level of subjectivity and everyday life. Further exploration of these old and new forms of political contention can help us make better sense of the dynamics of political contestation in the current neoliberal and post-political conjuncture.

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