



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 27
Issue 4 December

Article 14

December 2000

Review of *Counseling and the Therapeutic State*. James J. Chriss (Ed.). Reviewed by Daniel Harkness.

Daniel Harkness
Boise State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Clinical and Medical Social Work Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Harkness, Daniel (2000) "Review of *Counseling and the Therapeutic State*. James J. Chriss (Ed.). Reviewed by Daniel Harkness.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 4 , Article 14. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol27/iss4/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



An inherent contradiction exists in such a needed book as van Wormer, Wells and Boes have written. Professionalism has contributed significantly to the oppression of lesbian women and gay men. The authors write a text from a strengths perspective which is counter to those professional traditions. Yet, the authors espouse as a response to oppression, hatred, and ignorance, the further promotion of "professionalism." While the beliefs of a strengths perspective and a pathology approach are fundamentally different, the authors use of "professional involvement" is not markedly different from the path taken by the pathology approach used to respond to oppression. Again the oppressed are asked to trust that the past oppression by professionalism will be challenged by a new model of professionalism. While this approach may offer hope, it does so with an inherent contradiction. In reading the richly described "problem focused" approach, it seemed almost mordantly ironic that a strengths perspective would focus so strongly on "problems." This may well be a requisite feature of professional practice, but this poses a challenge to truly view strengths.

Expectations are deservedly high for this book because it provides an important contribution to the understanding of issues related to oppression of lesbian women and gay men. Caring readers will ask why social work literature is so constrained by a lack of quality empirical and theoretical literature on a topic which deserves this attention. What makes this book worth using in the classroom and in practice is that via professional literature, it gives voice to those experiencing oppression. Perhaps it is the strengths perspective which gives professionalism another chance to express its humanness.

Ronald J. Mancoske

Southern University at New Orleans

James J. Chriss (Ed.), *Counseling and the Therapeutic State*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999. \$48.95 hardcover, \$24.95 papercover.

Pakistani army topples the government, a current headline proclaims. A military coup has captured the Prime Minister,

seized the media, closed major airports, and overtaken the nation. Could that happen here too?

It's the thrust of this book that social workers and their allies have indeed mounted a coup. Although we never closed airports or surrounded the White House, our methods were just as effective. Eschewing raw force, we've used infiltration and stealth to campaign. With the media in our pocket, we've captured popular thinking and brainwashed the state. The bootprints of social work are all over the place. Here's how Chriss (1999, p. 1) found us out.

One of the most exasperating experiences of my recent marriage was dealing with the church requirements for premarital counseling . . . We contacted a number of churches of various denominations and were surprised to find that all of them required marriage counseling before they would conduct the wedding ceremony. I made it clear to each of the priests with whom we met that we expected to receive, and even welcomed, traditional rounds of pastoral counseling. Here, the emphasis would be on the awesome obligation that a man and a woman accept when they enter into marriage, and the acknowledgment of the sanctity of such a union as it takes place under the watchful presence of the Lord. What we did not expect, however, and what we strongly objected to, was the requirement that we receive our counseling from an on-staff therapist, typically a social worker or marriage and family therapist. This amounted to a standard six-week counseling session with fees ranging anywhere from \$125 on up. These so-called "licensed" therapists usually had only a masters degree or less, and it seemed odd to entrust the sustenance and care of our mental and spiritual lives to such a person, especially considering that I hold a Ph.D. and two masters degrees in sociology. What was this person going to tell me about marriage, family, relationships, caring, forgiveness, or spirituality that I did not already know? . . . If anything, I would be teaching our "therapist" a thing or two . . .

As a treatise on *therapeutocracy*, this book has an arcane flavor and scatter-gun focus that put me to sleep. In *Children and the civic state: A covenant model of welfare*, for example, John O'Neill argues: (1) *The political subject is an intersubject whose intrasubjectivity is social before it is asocial*; (2) *The political subject is familiarized and gendered*; (3) *The gendered political subject is both intrasubject (with child) and intersubject (with family and community)*; and (4) *The*

spatio-temporal environment of the subject (1–3) is the intergenerational community into which the child is inscribed before birth and which it enters not simply as a subject of desire but as a subject of care, already indebted, enabled/disabled prior to all other life contracts. Maybe I'm stupid, but I don't understand what O'Neill said.

Not all of the eight chapters that follow are quite so opaque, but many are, and their titles are often misleading. Sibeon's *Power and social action beyond the state* is an epistemological exercise in post-modern thought. Tucker's *Therapy, organizations, and the state: A Blackian perspective* examines counseling as a form of social control. The fifth chapter, by Manning, contrasts Erving Goffman's methodological errors with his brilliance and spirit in exposing what once went on in mental asylums, and may still. Sixth, Nolan examines the systematic infusion of therapeutic sensibilities in public-school class room, beginning the best chapter in the book with an inventory of student-counselor ratios required in 21 states. The final four chapters diddle with recovered memory, the concept of the healthy person (misreading Vygotsky), the sociology of counseling, and, returning to Chriss, the "expert" assault on the family. All said and done, this fragmented book is a light-weight (Nolan's chapter excepted), touched here and there with Thomas-Szasz vigor. What's missing is the fresh cogency Thomas-Szasz thinking. Too much invention, too little data.

But Chriss does have a point. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics describes the social work profession as having 600,000 members, a "therapeutic state" with more residents than Wyoming. And if that's not enough for a coup to be mounted, with 41,000 undergraduates and 35,000 graduate students preparing for social work practice each year, reinforcements are coming. Moreover, with a combined annual income of \$17 billion, according to CIA estimates our earned revenues equal the gross domestic product of Afghanistan, or those of Botswana, Iceland, and Haiti combined. Our therapeutic state has numbers and resources.

On the other hand, if the Bureau of Labor Statistics can be trusted, we can't be accused of looting Fort Knox as usurpers. The median annual social-work income, between \$25,000 and \$35,000, is barely enough to retire a small mortgage and put

food on the table. And if three-quarters of the clients receiving our services truly do better than those who do not, as a recent meta-analysis reported, it appears that we're earning our wages, not commandeering the soul of nation. It's too bad that Chriss became angry and bolted.

Daniel Harkness
Boise State University