



Extremist Capitalism: the discourse of get rich books

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Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines
www.cadaadjournal.com
Vol 9 (2): 41 – 61

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Abstract

Get rich books are a staple part of the self-help genre. Like many exponents of this genre, get rich books encourage readers to adopt new practices, worldviews and identities. In particular, the texts examined here all invite readers to exploit the power of positive thinking. Focussing on textual features and construing 'discourse' from the point of view of critical discourse analysis, I examine the rhetorical features of these texts. Specifically I argue that narrative, repetition and assertion all have a role in persuading readers to adopt an entirely new world view and a related view of the self. This worldview has ontological and epistemological consequences. That is, the laws of cause and effect found in these texts locate responsibility for financial success entirely at the (often subconscious) level of the individual. I further suggest that these texts advocate and encourage a form of extremism: extremist capitalism. While capitalism is not normally thought capable of being extremist, I argue that the extremism of these books is a consequence of the way the texts extend the values of dominant neo-liberal ideology to their logical and individualistic conclusion. The violence of this extremism is not directly physical; however through its endorsement and erasure of structural inequalities and its construction of a particular subject position and identity that supports and enforces capitalism, it is violent nevertheless.

Key words: *get rich books, discourse, capitalism, extremism*

1. Introduction

Being wealthy is perhaps the most common and commonly desired marker of success and individual talent. Money is thought to represent human value(s) in a straightforward and quantifiable way. Certainly, there are other measures of success. But while other forms of social capital may be both more durable and rewarding, the equation of wealth and goodness is hegemonic. It is not surprising, then, that a market exists for books, workshops and events that promise to assist individuals in becoming wealthy. With titles like *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind* (Eker 2005) and *I Can Make You Rich* (McKenna 2007) the clear message is that becoming wealthy is simply a matter of having the right knowledge and behaviour.

In this paper, I detail the worldview and identities that four get rich books construct. By showing the logic of these texts and describing the worldview they promote, I want to suggest that they advocate and encourage a form of extremism: extremist capitalism. While the violence of this extremism is not

directly physical, it is, through its endorsement and erasure of structural inequalities, violent nonetheless. This extremist ideology depends on a particular construction of the individual as an entrepreneur. The entrepreneurs encountered in extremist capitalist texts are not in tension with broader society (as extremists often are), rather, this subject position takes the ideological underpinnings of the texts and of neo-liberal capitalism to their logical, fascistic conclusion. In order to show this, it is necessary to outline in detail the worldview promoted by these texts and examine the persuasive strategies used in them to secure the trust of readers.

2. The Texts

I draw on material from four books that claim to make the reader rich. They were identified after consulting online sources that recommend get rich books (Ellis 2015; Elkins and Kane 2015) and bestseller lists. All books have been commercially successful and either through their title or their back cover description claim to be able to make a person rich.¹

The books range in publication date from 1937 to 2007. The Hill text, the temporal outlier, was included as new editions continue to be printed and it is often recommended in online sources.

Napoleon Hill: *Think and Grow Rich*, (2004, originally published in 1937).
Robert T. Kiyosaki: *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* (2011, originally published in 1997).
T. Harv Eker: *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind* (2005).
Paul McKenna: *I Can Make You Rich* (2007).

All the texts advocate a system and/or set of rules that individuals are encouraged to follow in order to become rich. They may provide information about how to budget and manage money (e.g. Eker 2005: 147 ff.; Kiyosaki 2011: 75, 89; McKenna 2007: 89 ff.) but their key message is that becoming rich is simply the product of thinking and behaving in a particular way. Their arguments, however, are similar in at least two respects. First, they all argue that the rich think and behave differently to other people. Second, they all claim that through the power of positive thinking everyone can become rich. Therefore, the process of becoming wealthy is not only about accumulation of money. This is an effect. The process of becoming wealthy involves readers changing how they understand the world and its laws, thinking about their relationship to this world differently and adopting a different identity.

In order to understand how these texts work and how they encourage readers to shift their identity, it is important to understand what kind of books they are. I therefore first provide an outline of existing research on the New Age and self-help books. I then set out my approach to discourse and analysis. Following that, I discuss the persuasive strategies of narrative, repetition and assertion before outlining the laws and rules the texts propose. The laws and rules structure the worldview that readers are encouraged to adopt and the subject positions they are invited to occupy. I then identify some tensions in the worldview that these laws and rules suggest. At this point, I offer a definition of extremism in order to argue that in presenting the world of

money as a game, these books promote an individualistic set of rules that depends on and maintains damaging structural and symbolic violence.

3. New Age, Prosperity Theology and Self Help

There is not a great deal of work on the four books examined here (with no critical work dealing with any of them at length), or the genre of get-rich-books more generally. There is, however, research that assists in understanding both the persuasive strategies and the world views found in get rich texts. Specifically, looking at work on New Age philosophy (various spiritual movements of the 1970s), prosperity theology (the idea that God wants us to be rich), and self-help books helps to understand both the history and content of get rich books. New Age merges the values of religious faith with elements of contemporary capitalist culture (Hunt 2000: 333). However, as the New Age genre is so diverse and difficult to define, I do not engage with it extensively here (see Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). Nevertheless, get rich books are clearly related to this genre. Indeed, Aldred describes the New Age as ‘primarily a consumerist movement’ (2002: 62). While some aspects of New Age ideology are found in get rich books (e.g. the connection between mind and body, the importance of positive thinking) others are not (e.g. reincarnation, see Askhave 2004: 10-12). In get rich books, there is also less concern for society and the environment than is sometimes found in New Age work (though see McKenna 2007: 298). Generally, the get rich genre is firmly focussed on the individual, her/his power, thoughts and success.

What get rich books clearly share with New Age ideas is ‘positive thinking’. This has a much longer history than might immediately be apparent. Discussion in recent years of the ‘cosmic ordering service’ (see Mohr 2001 and <http://thecosmicorderingsite.com> [last accessed 15 January 2016]) might suggest that positive thinking is very recent. However, as Whitney Griswold makes clear in his discussion of New Thought, it dates back until at least the late 19th century (1934). ‘The law of prosperity was a cardinal statute upon the books of New Thought as it had been in the teachings of Puritans’ (Whitney Griswold 1934: 312). While New Thought was a more secular system than its Puritan forerunners, the idea that prosperity is a blessing has also been swept up into more clearly religious movements. This is clear in the case of prosperity theology, also known as the ‘health and wealth gospel’ (Bielo 2007; Coleman 2011; Hunt 2000; Lin 2013).

It is work on self-help books more generally that provides the most detailed account of language and persuasive techniques (Gauntlett 2008; Jackson 1999; Lauricella 2011; Rimke 2000; Woodstock 2006, 2007). Work on the linguistic features of this genre is not extensive, however. This is surprising, as Woodstock defines the genre as follows: ‘Self-help literature constructs persuasive, moral ideas about the self and one’s internal landscape, as well as one’s communication with others’ (2006: 322). Indeed, Woodstock’s work on self-help texts is the most expansive, examining self-help books from 1880 through to 2000 (2007). In her thorough historical analysis of the genre, she points out that the challenge for writers of these books is to be persuasive by being both like and unlike the reader (in that they should have some relevant expertise) (Woodstock 2006: 322-4). If the author can construct such a voice

in the texts, it becomes possible for the reader to project their own future narrative and identity onto the model provided by the (successful) advice giver (Woodstock 2006: 324).

4. Discourse

My approach to discourse is broadly in line with critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1995; Kress 1990; van Leeuwen 2008; Wodak and Meyer 2001). Specifically, I agree that textual structure, social context and practice and the broader ideological structures that these rely on and index are all necessary to critically appraise language. As such, 'discourse' captures both the choices made at the linguistic level as well as how these choices communicate an interested view of the world. As Fairclough writes, '[t]exts are social spaces in which two fundamental social processes simultaneously occur: cognition and representation of the world, and social interaction' (1995: 6). As a linguist interested in representation and who understands language as a social practice, paying attention to linguistic choices made in texts while also considering the communicative context in a broad way is instructive in at least three ways. First, the CDA approach provides a way of clearly identifying the representational choices that have been made. Second, because of the space given to ideology and discourse as genre, it is not necessary to fully attribute individual authorial intention to these choices. In any discourse type (e.g. medical, educational, or business discourse) some 'choices' will be conditioned by (and meaningful in the context of) the genre, audience and purpose of the text. Third, the attention paid to the ideational functions of language makes it possible to situate texts in a broader social context and to understand them as linked to particular practices, ideologies (views of the world), motivations and effects.

As 'discourses are social cognitions, socially specific ways of knowing social practices, they can be, and are, used as resources for representing social practices in text. This means that it is possible to reconstruct discourses from the texts that draw on them' (van Leeuwen 2008: 6). It is also possible to reconstruct the beliefs and ideologies that structure a text. I take Althusser's definition of ideology as representing 'the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (1971: 162). It is in this imaginary relationship that we find identity. That is, the individuals' interpretation of the 'real world' is indexical of the identity they perform. And as 'ideology has a material existence' (Althusser 1971: 165), these identities can be reconstructed from linguistic and social practice. The identities that readers of texts are encouraged to adopt can be reconstructed from the linguistic (materiality) of those texts.

While the Discourse Historical Approach (Wodak 2001) enables us to understand a text by documenting the historical trajectories that led to its construction and interpretation, my approach here asks where the text, as ideological product, is going. Specifically, I want to consider the material effects of the ideologies. As ideology has material effects and as it interpellates readers, paying attention to the ideology that underpins these texts makes it possible to reconstruct the identities that these texts promote. Ideologies can of course be resisted. But the specific way that these texts interpellate the

reader encourages consumers to become neo-liberal subjects of a particular kind. I first explain how narrative, repetition and assertion are used as persuasive features and then outline the ideology that structures these texts by documenting their view of the world and the 'laws' that operate in it.

5. Persuasive Features

As the account of discourse makes clear, analysis of these texts needs to take into account the context in which they are consumed. Specifically, it is important to remember that readers of these books are self-selecting. Thus, they need to already desire riches or suspect their financial behaviour is somehow wanting. A person happy with their wealth would not buy a book that promises to teach them how to be rich. In that sense, part of the persuasion has already taken place before the point of purchase. This persuasive work can be understood as being done by a person's position in society as it is largely through comparison with others that we perceive ourselves to be poor (or rich) (Lansley and Mack 2015). That these books sell thus suggests two things. First, while there is no information about the socioeconomic status of readers, it seems reasonable to suppose that they are unhappy with their relative financial position (which is hardly surprising given current levels of financial inequality, Lansley and Mack 2015), and, second, that they care enough about this to purchase and (at least intend to) read a book. It also means that readers may be more likely to be open to the information they are about to consume. However, to convert readers to the specific worldview being outlined in the books, some textual features may assist in this persuasion. As Aristotle writes,

Of those proofs that are furnished through the speech there are three kinds. Some reside in the *character* [ethos] of the speaker, some in a certain *disposition* [pathos] of the audience and some in the *speech* [logos] itself, through its demonstrating or seeming to demonstrate ((1356a) 1991: 74).

In the following, I consider the functions of narrative, repetition and assertion. These were not only the most dominant features of the texts (considered at a meso-level) as I explain below, they also capture the three Aristotelean modes of persuasion ethos (narrative), pathos (repetition) and logos (assertion).

5.1 Narrative

Narrative was identified following Labov and Waletzky (1967) as the inclusion of temporally ordered clauses containing past tense verbs. Following Woodstock's (2006) focus on narrative as being key to both the identity construction of the author (ethos) and the persuasion of the reader, I focus on first person narratives in the get-rich books. In line with the meso-level approach taken in this paper, I do not consider the narratives in detail. Rather, I pay attention to the persuasive effects of the different kinds of narrative included.

The get rich books texts contain at least three kinds of narratives. First, and most commonly, writers explain through narrative why they have written their

book. The authors claim that they have special insight acquired either through knowing and studying rich people (Eker, Hill, Kiyosaki) or through becoming rich themselves (Eker, McKenna, Kiyosaki). Hill focuses on the former. In his Preface to *Think and Grow Rich*, Hill recounts his relationship with the industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie:

This book contains the secret, which has been put to a practical test by thousands of people from almost every walk of life. It was Mr Carnegie's idea that this magic formula, which gave him a stupendous fortune, ought to be placed within the reach of people who do not have time to investigate how people make money. He hoped that I might test and demonstrate the soundness of the formula through the experience of men and women in every calling (Hill 2004: vii).²

Kiyosaki's book is structured around a narrative comparison of his rich dad and poor dad. The lessons he provides derive from what his rich dad taught him. Other authors make clear that they have used their own system and that this required both work and effort to develop (Eker, Kiyosaki, McKenna). The journey is foregrounded here sometimes in great detail. In the following, Kiyosaki explains the value of knowing a little bit about a range of things.

That is why for years I worked in different areas of his [rich dad's] companies. For a while, I worked in his accounting department. Although I would probably never have been an accountant, he wanted me to learn via osmosis. Rich dad knew I would pick up jargon and a sense of what is important and what is not. I also worked as a bus boy and construction worker as well as in sales, reservations, and marketing. He was grooming Mike³ and me. That is why he insisted we sit in on the meetings with his bankers, lawyers, accountants, and brokers. He wanted us to know a little about every aspect of his empire (1997: 118-9).

The second kind of narrative helps the author to communicate a lesson they want the reader to learn (Eker, Hill, Kiyosaki, McKenna). This may be related to the narratives already discussed in that they involve either authorial experience or details about successful people. While Kiyosaki and Eker draw on their own experience, in a section called 'Grow rich while you sleep', McKenna provides three short narratives about his friends' success. The second reads:

Another friend, who loved to cook, saved and saved until she had enough of a down payment to start a restaurant. For the first few years she worked there every day and loved it. Now, she's opened two more restaurants and only works a couple of days a week. Meanwhile, the restaurants have made her financially independent (2007: 158).

The point of the three mini narratives McKenna offers is:

Don't put yourself to work for money when you can put money to work for you (McKenna 2007: 159)

Third, in addition to narratives *about* other people, narratives produced *by* other people are embedded in the text. While McKenna's book includes a foreword from Richard Branson, the embedding of narratives apparently

written by others is mostly found in Eker. He includes many of these presented in text boxes. The start of one, from Jim Rosemary, reads:

If someone had said to me I would have doubled my income and simultaneously doubled my time off, I would have said that was not possible. But that is exactly what happened.

The third and final paragraph reads:

As a result of knowing Harv Eker and being involved with Peak Potentials,⁴ I have a deeper understanding of myself and a greater appreciation for the abundance in my life. My relationship with my wife and children has been immeasurably enhanced. I now see more opportunities than I ever thought possible. I feel that I truly am on the right path to success in all its facets (Eker 2005: 77).

While narratives like this take the form of endorsements, they can also be understood as witnessing texts in that they attest to the success of the programme being offered (Mooney 2004; for examples, see Eker 2005: 37, 48, 77, 133, 154, 178). For such witnessing to be effective, however, it needs to come from trusted individuals (Iannaccone and Berman 2006: 115). Here, ironically, the trust may inhere in the fact that the endorsements come from ordinary people (rather than celebrities). That is, the claim is that even a completely ordinary person (someone just like the reader) can transform their life with the system contained in the book.

The persuasive power of narrative more generally is a direct consequence of the point of view and representational choices that narrators make (Simpson 1993). First, narratives about the author's experiences of success (and failure) help the reader to identify with the author and see him as an expert (Woodstock 2006, 2007). In this way, these narratives contribute to persuasion through ethos, that is, persuasion that relies on the character of the speaker (Aristotle (1356a) 1991: 74). Second, narratives can be an effective way of encouraging behaviour and identity change. Askhave, for example, argues that the use of parables in New Age self-help texts helps to change the readers' interpretation of themselves and their lives as parables are not face threatening (2004: 25). That is, because the parable is telling a story rather than telling a reader what to do, the lesson can be easier to accept (Askhave 2004: 25). Nevertheless, these stories, like the other narratives used in these texts are being 'used as vehicles for ideological 'truth' (Askhave 2004: 26). Further, the narratives are crucial because of the absence of any proof that the rules and laws proposed actually work (see section 5.3). While the narratives are often provided as though they are proof, as though they are illustrations of a general rule, they are in fact examples that establish very little (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 357).

5.2 Repetition

The second most striking feature in the texts is repetition. This was evident not only within texts, but also across the books.⁵ Repetition certainly works as a cohesive device in texts, but it is also used to teach, socialize and create categories (Johnstone 1987). In these texts, repetition appears to be used to

teach readers the ‘real’ laws of money and to socialize them not only into this worldview but also into the new identities they are encouraged to adopt.

Repetition also has persuasive power as it ‘convey[s] persistence and obduracy that sounds right because it is based on conviction’ (Charteris-Black 2011: 56). This links it directly to pathos, as certainty conveys the emotional state of the author and seeks to create an emotional state in the reader. Repetition also increases a sense of presence of the author to the reader (Johnstone 1987: 208; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 174). In turn, this can make an idea ‘persuasive even without logical support’ (Johnstone 1987: 208) thus working at the level of logos.

Repetition takes place in two ways in the four books examined here. First, readers are encouraged to read the texts repeatedly (Eker, Hill and Kiyosaki) or undertake the exercises outlined over and over (Eker, Hill and McKenna). McKenna, in *I Can Make you Rich*, provides an exercise for readers early in the book, which he advises readers to do

every single day for the next three weeks. This will reprogram your unconscious mind for wealth in ways that you can only begin to imagine... (2007: 29).

Hill likewise advises repeated study in clear, precise and emphatic terms.

READ THE ENTIRE CHAPTER ALOUD ONCE EVERY NIGHT, UNTIL YOU BECOME THOROUGHLY CONVINCED THAT THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTO-SUGGESTION IS SOUND, THAT IT WILL ACCOMPLISH FOR YOU ALL THAT HAS BEEN CLAIMED FOR IT. AS YOU READ, UNDERSCORE WITH A PENCIL EVERY SENTENCE THAT IMPRESSES YOU FAVOURABLY.

Follow this instruction to the letter and it will open the way for a complete understanding and mastery of the principles of success (Hill 2004: 77; emphasis in original).

The reader is told that study, repetition and an open mind are essential for understanding the laws and rules presented in these texts. While the results of this are, in the world of these texts, positive, it is also possible to argue that these imperatives to read the text several times and perform the required tasks repeatedly constitute a kind of auto-reprogramming. The repetition both creates and inculcates new categories and ways of thinking. Indeed, this is the explicit intention of the authors. In *Secrets of the Millionaire Mind*, Eker writes:

Recall how at the beginning of this book I suggested you don’t believe a word I say? Well, if you really want to take off in your life, don’t believe a word *you* say. And if you want instant enlightenment, *don’t believe a thought you think* (Eker 2005: 47).

In these lines, Eker encourages readers to doubt everything. As well as being instructed to question what Eker says, readers are advised to question their own thoughts. This creates a space for new beliefs, views and identities to be formed. Crucially, the reader is encouraged to enter into this process actively and voluntarily. The second kind of repetition is connected to content. That is, the message communicated in the texts is repeated both within and across the

books. As I will show below in relation to the laws and rules that structure these texts, both individually and collectively, the texts rehearse the same arguments and facts about the world.

5.3 Assertion and Trust

In terms of argument strategy, there is one feature that stands out above all others: assertion. The reader is told that there is proof, but no real proof is actually given. Facts are asserted with no real evidence provided. This strategy can be linked to logos as assertions have a strong epistemic modality and thus constitute ‘proof’ of a kind. Further, because of this certainty, assertion can also be connected to pathos and ethos as, like repetition, it constructs and conveys both persistence and conviction. While there were many instances of assertion, those discussed in this section all relate to the natural laws discussed in section 6 below.

The closing lines in the following from Hill are illustrative of both the conviction of the author and the lack of actual proof provided:

If you fill your mind with *fear*, doubt and disbelief in your ability to connect with and use the forces of Infinite Intelligence, the law of autosuggestion will take this spirit of unbelief and use it as a pattern which your subconscious mind will translate into its physical equivalent.
THIS STATEMENT IS AS TRUE AS THE STATEMENT THAT TWO AND TWO ARE FOUR (Hill 2004: 54, emphasis in original).

In a similar vein, at the start of his book, Eker writes:

It’s simple, it’s law, and you’re not going to circumvent it. It all comes down to this: if your subconscious ‘financial blueprint’ is not ‘set’ for success, nothing you learn, nothing you know, and nothing you do will make much of a difference (2005: 2).

The assertion of facts works in parallel with an appeal to intuition. Both Hill and Eker claim that the truth is self-evident, that when we read something that is true, we immediately know that this is the case. Hill writes:

Somewhere in the book you will find an idea that will quicken your receptive powers and place at your command, for your own benefit, this same irresistible power. The awareness of this power may come to you in the first chapter, or it may flash into your mind in some subsequent chapter. It may come in the form of a single idea. Or it may come in the nature of a plan, or a purpose. Again, it may cause you to go back into past experiences of failure or defeat, and bring to the surface some lesson by which you can regain all that you lost through defeat (Hill 2004: 9).

Eker makes the same point, but rather more pithily.

For most of us, when we hear the truth, we know it (Eker 2005: 29).

Whether or not one actually has this experience, the claim primes the reader to accept as true an idea or law they want to be true, whether or not it is well defended or evidenced.

This of course, requires trust. Some writers establish this by setting out their own experience in narratives throughout the text (Kiyosaki and Eker), through already established reputation (McKenna), or by reference to study and association with famous people (Hill). The claim from all is that they know something other people do not or may not be willing to tell you: the secret laws. At the same time, the authors are able to present a ‘take it or leave it’ position. This is an effective persuasive strategy as it suggests that the author is doing the reader a favour and will himself lose nothing if the reader walks away (Eker 2005: 1). As shown below, the reader is told that the laws that structure the world of money are clear, stable and set. The authors make clear that they have already profited from understanding these laws and applying the associated rules. As such, whether the reader chooses to profit from this knowledge or not makes no difference to the author.

6. The Laws of the World of Money

Get rich books aim to be both persuasive and instructive. In order to explain why these are extremist texts and to understand the subject position they offer the reader, in this section I document the rules and laws that the texts articulate. It is possible to make an analytical distinction between laws that the authors tell us are natural and universal and the rules that one needs to follow to profit from these laws. In their presentation in the get rich books, however, the two are often merged. It is worth noting that all the texts assert the existence of laws and describe the rules one needs to follow to profit from these laws. Moreover, the texts rely all on the power of positive thinking. As such, all the texts invite the reader to reconsider how the world works and to re-assess how the reader behaves in this world.

6.1 Laws and Rules

The key to getting rich according to these books is to understand that there are laws. We are told that these laws are natural and unchangeable. The laws relate to the economic, physical and (for want of a better word) spiritual world. Hill, for example, explains in his preface that he is revealing a ‘secret’, a ‘great universal truth’ (2004: xiii), specifically, that there are natural laws controlling financial success. The laws are generally formatted by authors in some way to foreground their importance. For example, McKenna’s ‘natural laws’ are found throughout his book and are presented as follows (centred and in bold typeface):

All wealth is created by the human mind (McKenna 2007: 16)

The difference between the rich and the poor is that the rich have learned to recognize the value of their thoughts (McKenna 2007: 17)

You get more of what you focus on (McKenna 2007: 26)

Whatever meaning you are attaching to money is either drawing it closer or pushing it away (McKenna 2007: 36)

Eker also expounds laws, even though he calls them ‘wealth principles’. He also refers to the ‘wealth files’ readers need to absorb, as these are central to reprogramming thinking (2005: 2). Kiyosaki refers not so much to rules as to

lessons. He argues that positive thinking alone is not enough. We need to understand how money works (Kiyosaki 2011: 7).

A common law that the reader needs to understand is that there is no such thing as scarcity (McKenna 2007: 40).

The amount of money in the world is not limited –it’s infinite
(McKenna 2007: 57)

Eker also argues that one should see the world as a place of abundance, and that only ‘Poor people live in a world of limitations’ (2005: 131). Hill asserts that nothing is impossible (2004: 11) while Kiyosaki reassures the reader that anyone can become rich (1997: 106). These laws, including the law of abundance, have logical entailments which constitute rules to be followed. As is suggested by some of the laws already quoted, the most important action that readers can perform is to practice positive thinking.

6.2 Positive Thinking

At the heart of the get-rich books examined here is the ‘fact’ that positive thinking works. Positive thinking is not just a practice; it entails an entire worldview and taking on a new identity. Woodstock defines it as:

the inviting, yet deceptively simple idea that our thoughts become reality, and given this, we should only think positive thoughts, those thoughts we want to morph into material form (2006: 325)

Hill explains it as follows:

The subconscious mind proceeds to translate that impulse into its physical equivalent by the most practical procedure available. In connection with this, consider again the statement, ALL THOUGHTS WHICH HAVE BEEN EMOTIONALISED (given feeling) AND MIXED WITH FAITH begin immediately to translate themselves into their physical equivalent or counterpart (Hill 2004: 47)

As the texts make clear, it is also necessary to remove the negative thinking patterns of which one may not even be aware.⁶ Eker calls our preconceived (and largely unconscious) ideas about our wealth a ‘financial blueprint’ (Eker 2005: 2, 28) and a ‘wealth thermostat’ (2005: 11). McKenna also uses the term ‘wealth thermostat’ and asserts:

The only way to permanently change the temperature in the room is to reprogram the thermostat (McKenna 2007:61)

McKenna goes on to explain that one’s wealth thermostat is set by the wealth of one’s friends (2007: 62) and that its initial level was set by family and childhood experiences (2007: 73). Eker vividly explains the wealth thermostat when he describes how Donald Trump always recovers financially:

That’s because Donald Trump’s financial ‘thermostat’ is set for billions, not millions. Most people’s financial thermostats are set for generating thousands, not millions of dollars: some people’s financial thermostats are set for generating hundreds, not even thousands: and some people’s

financial thermostats are set for below zero. They're frickin' freezing and they don't have a clue as to why (Eker 2005: 11)

Hill uses the same idea, but labels it more broadly. He contrasts 'success consciousness' with 'failure consciousness'.

Success comes to those who become *success conscious* (Hill 2004: 11).
Failure comes to those who indifferently allow themselves to become *failure conscious* (Hill 2004: 12).

The use of metaphor is common in these texts and they refer to both the natural world and technology, serving to illustrate the 'natural' and 'logical' laws that structure the world (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In relation to the former, thoughts are said to be seeds or plants that grow and bear fruit (Eker 2005: 12; Hill 2004: 50), while money is also a seed that can be planted (Eker 2005: 165). In relation to technology and human made objects, the mind is said to be a computer (Eker 2005: 20; McKenna 2007: 22), a radio (Hill 2004: 237) a battery (Hill 2004: 196-7) and a filing cabinet (Eker 2005: 49-50; Hill 2004: 229). Conceiving of the mind as computer may be a common metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 260), but it resonates with the overall aim of these texts, that is, for people to change the way they view money, the world and themselves (see section 5.2). More specifically, the computer metaphor aligns with the argument that readers need to 'reprogram' their minds and ways of thinking.

The connection of the mind with batteries, radios, computers and indeed thermostats is not obviously metaphorical in that the claim is made that the mind really does hold and transmit energy (Hill 2003: 196-7). Because the mind works with such energy, readers are also told there is no limit to the power of the mind (Hill 2004: 68). Indeed, the low wealth thermostat can be reset. One only needs to pay attention to the subconscious mind. Hill makes clear that this can be done through 'autosuggestion'

NO THOUGHT, whether it is negative or positive, CAN ENTER THE SUBCONSCIOUS MIND WITHOUT THE AID OF THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTOSUGGESTION, with the exception of thoughts picked up from the ether (Hill 2004: 69-70).

The books suggest different methods for activating the laws of attraction, with many involving thought, speech and physical actions. Eker, for example, recommends the following:

...I invite you to place your hand on your heart and repeat the following...
DECLARATION:
'My inner world creates my outer world'.
Now touch your head and say...
'I have a millionaire mind' (Eker 2005: 17).

All of this has to be done with a sincere belief and desire. Wishing alone will not make anything happen. Indeed, it is common for authors to make a distinction between degrees of desire. Hill makes this clear in the following:

Every human who understands the purpose of money wishes for it. Wishing will not bring riches. But desiring riches with a state of mind that becomes

an obsession, then planning definite ways and means to acquire riches, and backing these plans with persistence which does not recognise failure, will bring riches (Hill 2004:22).

Eker also outlines the importance of an extremely strong desire. Appealing to the 'Laws of Attraction' he tells us that it is important to send a clear, strong message to the universe, otherwise it will receive confusing, mixed messages and not be able to deliver (Eker 2005: 67). Moreover, the presence of any fear or doubt will get in the way of this message and defeat the goal (Hill 2004: 54). The proposition that is put to the reader is that positive thinking works exactly because this (allegedly natural) law of attraction exists. Simply put, thought is a kind of energy that has a real effect on the real world.

6.3 Cause and Effect

The claims for positive thinking and the law of attraction thus work to reverse our normal understanding of cause and effect. McKenna provides the following illustration of how these laws work.

If you believe you have to work hard to make money, you will only sort for jobs that involve a lot of effort. If you believe that everyone is out to rip you off, you will unconsciously find people who will do that. If you believe that you deserve great wealth, then your mind will sort for opportunities that create that (2007: 43-44).

Eker makes the same claims about cause and effect.

WEALTH PRINCIPLE:

Money is a result, wealth is a result, health is a result, illness is a result, your weight is a result. We live in a world of cause and effect
(Eker 2005:14)

We do indeed live in a world of cause and effect. But because of the involvement of the subconscious mind, in these texts, cause and effect are reversed. People are poor not because they were born in an unfavourable context and are being exploited by a profit-seeking system, rather, they are choosing poverty and hence exploiting themselves because of their own subconscious beliefs (Kiyosaki 2011: 23). This means that rich people are rich because they think and desire in the right way. They construct and perform the 'right' identity. Readers are told that the rich really are different; they think differently, their wealth thermostats are set for boiling and they are not handicapped by negative thoughts in their unconscious mind (Eker 2005: 4, 51). The assertion that the rich are different in some way underpins the whole genre of these self-help texts. This difference is captured in Eker's Wealth File #1:

Rich people believe 'I create my life'.

Poor people believe 'Life happens to me' (Eker 2005: 54).

It is important therefore important to think like rich people. It is also important to like and admire them (McKenna 2007: 50-1, 53, 54):

The more comfortable you become with the wealth of others, the faster your own wealth will grow (McKenna 2007: 54)

According to the laws of positive thinking and the influence of the unconscious mind, it would be impossible to become rich if one had disdain for the wealthy. Thus, the identities readers are encouraged to adopt are outlined in very detailed ways. In service of changing our thinking, Eker spends a deal of time convincing us that rich people are nice and generous (2005: 41, 91-4) while Kiyosaki's entire book is predicated on the wisdom of his 'rich dad'.

As the foregoing examples should make clear, one has not only to know the laws and associated rules, one also has to follow them (Hill 2004: 97). Thus, knowledge and learning are valued but there are three important qualifications. First, the knowledge has to be the right kind of knowledge. Second, it has to be acted on in the right way. Finally, it has to be real knowledge rather than something else. Kiyosaki, for example, contrasts his rich dad who 'knew' why Kiyosaki wanted to do something and his poor dad who 'thought' he understood his son's motivations (2011: 119). It is important to note that these laws and rules have consequences for identity and construction of the self. If the rich really are different, and if these laws really do hold, then to become rich the reader also has to change. We are informed that people are rich fundamentally because of who they are. If we too want to become wealthy we have to change how we think, how we interact with others and how we see the world.

7. Problems with the 'System'

As should be clear from the discussion above, there are also many reasons given for why one may fail to become wealthy. Not having the right desire, not having the right kind of knowledge and not following the rules exactly are all reasons one might not succeed. But because of the fundamental importance of the unconscious mind, it is very difficult to identify or remedy these shortcomings. This problem is made even clearer when the texts outline the reasons for failure.

Hill spends a great deal of time setting out the causes of individual failure (2004: 137 ff.). Listed are only the 30 'major' causes of failure the first ten of which are:

UNFAVOURABLE HEREDITARY BACKGROUND
 LACK OF A WELL-DEFINED PURPOSE IN LIFE
 LACK OF AMBITION TO AIM ABOVE MEDIOCRITY
 INSUFFICIENT EDUCATION
 LACK OF SELF-DISCIPLINE
 ILL HEALTH
 UNFAVOURABLE ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES DURING
 CHILDHOOD
 PROCRASTINATION
 LACK OF PERSISTENCE
 NEGATIVE PERSONALITY (Hill 2004: 137-9)

Many of these are completely beyond the control of the individual and also impossible for the individual to disclaim in any evidenced way (see also Hill 2004: 267-8; Kiyosaki 2011: 129).

Thus, the biggest problem with these texts is that they are self-reinforcing systems immune to disproof. This is clear in the discussion of failure. If the system does not work for you, the texts make clear that this is because of you rather than any problem with the system. This is reinforced by the discussion of the difference between the rich and the poor, the role of the subconscious mind, and the importance of following all the rules completely with a deep desire. Anyone who complains about their impoverished lot is a 'victim'.

Eker spends some time explaining the profile and mentality of the 'victim' including in this category anyone who claims that money isn't important (Eker 2005: 55-56). In the following lines, Eker makes clear that readers should not be 'victims'.

Victims blame the economy, they blame the government, they blame the stock market, they blame their broker, they blame their type of business, they blame their employer, they blame their employees, they blame their manager, they blame the head office, they blame their up-line or their down-line, they blame customer service, they blame the shipping department, they blame their partner, they blame their spouse, they blame God, and of course they always blame their parents. It's always someone else or something else that is to blame. The problem is anything or anyone but them (Eker 2005: 55)

The two subject positions that the texts offer are clear: a positive thinking wealthy person or a victim. As Nadesan observes when analysing spiritualism used in a corporate context as a motivational tool 'Individuals who attempt to bring alternative interpretations to bear are represented as taking a victim mindset' (1999: 19). She continues, 'Those who reject the discourse [of New Age corporate spiritualism] or those who fail to achieve success get labeled as unwilling to take care of themselves or, worse, as reaping their karmic rewards' (1999: 19). The same indifference to structural inequalities is rehearsed by Kiyosaki's rich dad, who is reported as saying:

The main cause of poverty or financial struggle is fear and ignorance, not the economy or the government or the rich. It's the self-inflicted fear and ignorance that keep people trapped (Kiyosaki 2011:33).

This is a significant issue and it connects precisely to the underpinning belief in positive thinking as this focuses entirely on the individual's power to transform their own life and reality. There is simply no room for any other cause (Woodstock 2006: 325). Because of the role of the unconscious mind, it is always possible to blame failure on the individuals who are failing. What is particularly problematic here is that this includes a complete disregard for anything in the structure of society that may be disadvantageous for individuals. The identity offered by these texts is thoroughly entrepreneurial. Individuals must be 'autonomous agents responsible for mastering and/or creating their environments' (Nadeson 1999: 4). As I will go on to argue, by endorsing this singular identity and subject position, these books articulate a form of extremist capitalism.

8. 'Extremism'

It is in the relationship of the individual to society and the identities that the worldviews allow that one finds the extremism of these texts. But before this can be fully explained, it is necessary to define what I mean by extremism. As mainstream self-help books, they may seem benign. But if one takes their account of the world, the laws of nature and human agency, and the subject positions they construct seriously, they are rather more dangerous than they first appear.

Exactly what is extreme about extremism seems to be reasonably clear, however. Extremists are generally violent (Chertoff 2008: 8, 11; Iannaccone and Berman 2006: 107; Prentice, Rayson and Taylor 2012: 264). Extremism seems also to require that one 'maintain rigorous systems of shared beliefs and morality' (Iannaccone and Berman 2006: 115). In addition to violence, the distance between what is considered extreme and what is not seems to be related to whether the goals of the movement align with those of mainstream society. More often than not, the extremist will be in direct opposition to society in terms of values, norms and goals. Prentice, Rayson and Taylor's (2012) corpus analysis of extremist Islamic texts produces a number of semantic opposites, including 'success and failure', 'contentedness and sadness', 'those who are trying hard and those who are inattentive', 'what is true and what is false', 'those who are affluent and those with no money', and 'those who are intelligent and those with inability/unintelligence' (2012: 273). In extremist texts, this polarisation is part of a broader 'rhetoric of antithesis' (Prentice, Rayson and Taylor 2012: 273; see also Simon-Vandenberg 2008; Salazar 2016).

Such oppositions are commonly exploited in religious contexts. As Iannaccone and Berman (2006: 110) point out, the 'suicidal zealot' and 'self-sacrificing saint' are comparable – not on the basis of a 'moral equivalence' 'but rather because the internal *logic* and social *foundations* of religious extremism are much the same, whether the extremists' goals are good, bad, or deadly'. Having charted the difference between the various kinds of religious groups, they argue that it is instructive and productive to treat 'militant religious extremists as social and political entrepreneurs' (Iannaccone and Berman 2006: 123). That is, they argue that we can understand religion (both extremist and moderate) if it is viewed as a market in which customers (believers) need to balance risk and reward, faith and knowledge. Religion and the supernatural more generally are better understood not in terms of rationality and irrationality but in terms of economics and the market. In this market, 'Supernatural investments make sense' (Iannaccone and Berman 2006: 113) and there is 'no logical limit to the size and scope of rewards that humans will seek through supernatural means' (Iannaccone and Berman 2006: 114). And while extremist beliefs are often 'in tension with broader society' (Iannaccone and Berman 2006: 125), the entrepreneurs encountered in extremist capitalist texts are not so much in tension with broader society as taking its ideological underpinnings to their logical conclusion.

8.1 Extremist Capitalism and Games

The fact that these texts articulate self-reinforcing systems that isolate the individual, invite them to adopt an entrepreneurial identity, valorise capitalism and erase any and all kinds of structural inequality results in extremism. I want to explain this in terms of games.

The trope of the game is found in these books. Eker makes clear that the acquisition of money is a game that rich people play differently to poor people:

Wealth file # 2

Rich people play the money game to win.

Poor people play the money game to *not* lose (2005: 62)

Kiyosaki also explains that getting rich is all a game,⁷ though it a rather serious one. He describes it as both ‘war’ and a ‘game’ in the same passage (2011: 84). Describing this war as a ‘game’ is appealing. But the real appeal is not made clear as this might highlight the problem with the account. David Graeber’s distinction (2015b: 191) between play and games is helpful in this context. Play, he argues, is about imagination. It is not completely structured and it is pleasurable in a way that seems to me to speak to an essential part of human experience (see Huizinga 1949). According to Graeber, games, by contrast, have rules. They are pleasurable in that during the game, all the uncertainty that we experience in negotiating everyday life and interaction with others is suspended.

Games allow us our only real experience of a situation where all this ambiguity is swept away. Everyone knows exactly what the rules are. And not only that, people actually *do* follow them. And by following them, it is even possible to win! This – along with the fact that unlike in real life, one has submitted oneself to the rules completely voluntarily – is the source of the pleasure.

Games, then, are a kind of utopia of rules (Graeber 2015b: 191).

Knowing the rules, following the rules and winning - this is an excellent summary of the advice provided in get rich books. It is simple, straightforward and rewarding in a material sense. But as Graeber makes clear, there is a darker side to such rules.

Rules are the mainstay of bureaucracy. And it is here that we find the link to violence and therefore also to extremism. Indeed, the laws, and the rules that are entailed by them, emanate from a world that is already violent in that it is characterised by structural violence. Graeber defines structural violence as ‘forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm’ (Graeber 2015b: 57). The physical harm is connected to losing the game, to the failure that is poverty for which it is impossible to blame anyone or anything else. These get rich books implicitly endorse structural violence; moreover, they disclaim its existence. By endorsing an entrepreneurial identity, the texts insist on the isolation of the individual from the broader social context. They maintain structural violence not only by ignoring the relevance of social, political and economic inequality, but also by making those subject to the violence of this system responsible for their own

exploitation and failure. This responsibility is part of the singular identity offered to the reader.

Graeber further argues that structural violence also imposes on the 'imaginative energy' of people 'on the bottom of the heap' (2015b: 81). They 'have to spend a great deal of imaginative energy trying to understand the social dynamics that surround them' (2015b: 81). In addition to the powerless 'doing most of the actual, physical labor required to keep society running, they also do most of the interpretative labor as well' (Graeber 2015b: 81). This connects precisely to the advice to understand rich people and admire them as well as to the effort required to learn and follow the rules and laws. All the while, the individual is completely cut off from society and history, at the mercy of laws and rules, with only themselves to blame for their failure. Nevertheless, the isolation of the individual, making the individual responsible for their own success and failure is consonant with the neoliberal construction of the subject. While Graeber does not deal with self-help or get rich books in any detail, he does remark on their influence in the discourses of the public, corporate and bureaucratic world.

The 'self-actualization' philosophy from which most of this new bureaucratic language emerged insists that we live in a timeless present, that history means nothing, and that we simply create the world around us through the power of the will. This is a kind of individualistic fascism (Graeber 2015b: 36)

The 'individualistic fascism' that Graeber describes, however, is not the same as traditional fascism. In interview with Chuck Mertz, Graeber explains that 'individualistic fascism' is 'where everyone is like a little fascist corporation' (2015a). The message is that 'Everything is caused by you; you're responsible for everything that happens to you'. It's a triumph of the will on the individual level' (2015a). As we have seen, the idea that individuals are responsible for every success (and failure) in their lives is central to the get-rich books examined here. This view is simply the consequence of a world where the laws of attraction and positive thinking work.

It should be noted that these texts do encourage some kinds of community and many encourage practices like charitable giving. Eker's financial management system involves putting 10% of income into a 'give' account (Eker 2005: 151), while Hill makes clear that something must be given in return for money (2004: 23). Kiyosaki explains his rich dad's philosophy:

He firmly believed in tithing. 'If you want someone, you first need to give', he would always say. When he was short of money, he gave money to his church or to his favourite charity.

If I could leave one single idea with you, it is that idea. Whenever you feel short or in need of something, give what you want first and it will come back in buckets. That is true for money, a smile, love, or friendship (2011: 165)

For McKenna charitable giving is also a way of creating 'a genuine and tangible difference in the world', an action readers may associate with being rich (2007: 14) while Hill's text includes positive judgements about Bill Gates philanthropic work (2007: 14).⁸

But the influence of broader social inequalities and the unequal structure of society is not interrogated. The valorisation of capitalism means that this individualistic fascism is entirely entrepreneurial (Nadesan 1999: 4; Rimke 2000: 73). This ‘discourse strips individuals of gender, class, and race’ thus ‘erasing how gender, race, and class affect individuals’ opportunities’ (Nadesan 1999: 17). The focus is on the individual who is constructed as a blank yet responsible canvas. The individual is responsible for every aspect of their reality. This not only ignores inequality due to social structure, it makes it entirely irrelevant and invisible. The overall effect is to convince individuals that this game, in which they are entirely responsible for their own life, is not just inevitable but desirable. This serves the interests of neo-liberal policies and inserts these ideologies at the core of the (isolated) individual (Nadesan 1999: 18).

The laws and rules articulated and endorsed in get rich books entail an extremist view of society and a particular view of individual identity and action. Every person is completely responsible for their wealth or poverty. By ignoring and erasing existing inequalities, the symbolic violence of this inequality is perpetuated and endorsed. The violence that makes this extreme is not directly a corporeal violence, but a symbolic violence that demands a particular identity, view of the world, events and other people in it. This may well translate into physical effects as structural inequalities do indeed result in real suffering for individual people. But these texts do not even acknowledge the existence of such structures. This is structural violence involving not only oppression but also the erasure of it. This is violent and oppositional – setting the self against the self. It is extremist capitalism sold as a dream of freedom.

Notes

- 1 I did not consider specialist books about particular kinds of investing, as I do not have the expert technical knowledge required for such critique.
- 2 Updates to the original edition of Hill’s book (2004), by Arthur Pell, include accounts of wealthy individuals likely to be familiar to the reader (e.g. Steven Spielberg, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Lee).
- 3 Mike is rich dad’s biological son and Kiyosaki’s childhood friend.
- 4 Peak Potentials is Eker’s training company.
- 5 While reading the books, it often seemed as though I had read passages before (either within the same book, or across the selection).
- 6 While Kiyosaki emphasises this less than the other authors, he does offer the following:

The single most powerful asset we all have is our mind. If it is trained well, it can create enormous wealth seemingly instantaneously. An untrained mind can also create poverty that can crush a family for generations (2011: 98).
- 7 Kiyosaki is keen on the educational potential of games (2011: 95), and has created one it is possible to buy. His game, Cashflow, is sold in the form of a boardgame, an app and has a version designed for children (<http://www.richdad.com/apps-games/apps-games-landing/>).
- 8 Arthur R Pell (Hill 2004) provides the updated examples in the Hill text. The section on Bill Gates is one such section.

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