Each day, millions of people across the globe, participate in the Oprah Winfrey cultural industry by watching either of her two television shows, reading her magazine, or logging on to her website. Illouz analyzes the myriad texts created by Winfrey in order to examine the messages viewers might acquire. The “text” they see, regardless of delivery system (e.g., the Internet, printed word, or television) appears to be stories about the ordinariness of life—pain and suffering, personal failures and successes, and intimate relationships straining under work and kinship obligations. Oprah offers these narratives, Illouz claims, as cultural models through which viewers can comprehend suffering in their own lives. Thus the author’s analysis of Oprah’s cultural products is grounded in “’moral sociology,’ which has traditionally explored the role that culture plays in making sense of our lives and in binding us to a realm of values” (p. 1).

But these narratives are not just tales of everyday life, Illouz argues; they also point to the double-edged sword of modernity: it wounds the self while simultaneously providing it with the right to claim an existence without pain and suffering. Oprah declares that social institutions, grounded in modernity, provide little or no comfort from this suffering, nor few if any solutions to it. People must look elsewhere for moral guidance. Guests come on the show, sharing narratives full of incredible pain, only to have them be reconstructed, with Winfrey’s guidance, as steps toward creating “a biography of change” (p. 124). Oprah’s own biographical narrative, Illouz argues, has become the charismatic touchstone for viewers, demonstrating how pain can become the stuff of personal (and financial) transformation.

Talk shows have been much analyzed of late. Many authors have accused them of being overly grounded in the therapeutic narrative, offering viewers identity work without providing them the concomitant capacity to create social change. Illouz denies this, arguing that Oprah Winfrey’s cultural products have provided a vehicle by which significant social change has occurred in America. The last two chapters contend that Oprah has problematized the American family, highlighting its tensions and contradictions, especially for women, and, therefore, single-handedly helped to expand the marketplace for social problems claims. But where is her evidence of such macrolevel change? Illouz seems to believe that Winfrey’s longevity in the pop-culture industry’s stratosphere is evidence enough to demonstrate that she truly has produced social change. This, however, begs the question about whether viewers, while
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using the biographical narrative approach modeled on the show, have been able to create meaningful individual, let alone, social change.

Throughout the book Illouz criticizes other writers who have analyzed talk shows, especially those who focus, solely or predominantly, on the freak-show nature of the industry. But a careful reading of the transcript titles that she uses for her data makes one wonder whether she does exactly what she criticizes others of doing. Take for example, the year 1996. She examined only 11 shows, covering the following topics: interpersonal/domestic violence (three shows), homelessness, pedophilia, disease, “runaway parents going to jail,” males with eating disorders, brides with amnesia, having quintuplets in the family, and “are you who you think you are?” (p. 289). Are most of these topics truly the stuff of “ordinary” Americans’ suffering? It would be nice to see more proof than just Illouz’s opinions here.

The book is a quintessential cultural studies project, in both its strengths and weaknesses. I was bothered by unaddressed methodological issues. How were transcripts chosen? Examining the list in the bibliography was puzzling; it did not seem to be a random sample of shows, nor did it focus on “sweep” months, as some other authors have done. Without an explanation, the reader is left wondering if they were simply the shows that allowed the author to advance her argument. But what about shows that did not? How would Illouz account for them? And how were the transcripts coded and analyzed? These are issues about which Illouz is silent.

Perhaps the issue that concerned me the most was how the book gives the impression that there is no “private Oprah,” that her public words and statuses reflect her private intentions. But how does the author know this? She offers little proof other than Oprah’s public texts. But does that make sociological sense? One of our discipline’s gifts to the academy, I believe, is its understanding of the multiplicity of the self. We all occupy different statuses, playing different variations of a self. Oprah Winfrey can be no different than any of us. The reader of Illouz’s book will need to be prepared to wrestle with these issues alone, for they are not addressed in a meaningful way in this book.

Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and a Culture of Precaution. By Adam Burgess. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. x+301. $65.00 (cloth); $24.00 (paper).

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In Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and a Culture of Precaution, British sociologist Adam Burgess pursues an intriguing sociological puzzle. In the late 1990s, cell phone anxieties were widely disseminated across a handful of European nations (Ireland, Italy, Switzerland, Britain), Australia, and