The American Soul Rush: Esalen and the Rise of Spiritual Privilege, by Marion Goldman. New York University Press, 2012. xii + 207pp., 13 b&w illustrations. \$30.00, ISBN-113: 9780814732878.

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Marion Goldman's socio-historical study of the Esalen Institute weaves together volumes of material drawn from interviews, ethnographic field work, archival work, legal records, and various primary source publications to construct a vision of the organization as a locus of development for the late twentieth-century social phenomenon of "spiritual privilege." Goldman defines spiritual privilege as "an individual's ability to devote time and resources to select, combine, and revise his or her personal religious beliefs and practices over the course of a lifetime" (2). The present work broadly argues that Esalen "transformed spiritual privilege into a human right that could be available to any American dedicated to maximizing her or his potential in mind, body, spirit, and emotion" (2–3). This, at least, was the Institute's official platform—a universalization of access to spiritual exploration that rested on the metaphysical assumption that every individual was endowed with a "spark of divinity." Goldman also explores Esalen's contributions to the human potential movement in humanistic psychology, progressive political groups that connected social and personal issues, and the men's movement as ways that the organization broadened the effects of spiritual privilege on popular audiences. Goldman's research, though it acknowledges other facets of the Esalen community focuses on the men who founded and continue to govern the organization through the Center for Theory and Research (CTR), which exemplifies Esalen's involvement in the phenomenon of spiritual privilege and its enduring effect of American spirituality.

Goldman provides an extensive account of Esalen's foundations, both ideological and historical (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) as well as its pervasive and lasting impact on American culture and alternative spirituality (6 and 7). In the former portion, she offers useful insights and context concerning the Institute's origins that might be succinctly summarized by her statement that,

Esalen was by no means the sudden coincidence described by [its] creation narrative. It developed because two young men with extraordinary spiritual priv-

ilege brought together a growing supply of alternative spiritualities and personal growth psychologies, legitimated them with a doctrine about unlimited human potential that was connected to cosmic forces and reached out to millions of men and women who also enjoyed some degree of spiritual privilege (59).

Goldman paints Esalen's evolution as a historically grounded phenomenon that owes its form the social forces and possibilities of its time. All the meanwhile, she foregrounds the role of spiritual privilege as a governing force that dictated the development and organization of the Institute through subtle hierarchization, inclusion, and exclusion that belied Esalen's own message of the democracy and egalitarianism of spiritual potential. Here spiritual privilege is articulated through four primary elements: spiritual affinities, religious and general cultural knowledge, connections with elite networks, and economic resources (61). Goldman views the phenomenon as a type of social capital (following Bourdieu) that is theoretically available to all social agents but may be acquired and possessed in greatly varying amounts.

The chapters that occupy the intermediate section of Goldman's work are arguably both the most interesting and the most problematic. In this section, the author examines one particular factor governing the dynamics of spiritual privilege at Esalen: gender. Though the base of participants at Esalen—as is common in alternative spiritualities and indeed in traditional religious communities—is largely dominated by women, its leadership consists virtually exclusively of men. This puts Esalen somewhat at odds with the majority of alternative spiritual and metaphysical movements, which have traditionally been far more open to female leadership than mainstream traditions, a detail that is never truly addressed by the author's analysis. Goldman largely attributes this gender dynamic to the fact that the Institute's founders—Michael Murphy and Richard Price—were men and thus women's particular interests, though never explicitly marginalized, were also never formally taken into account, a reality that Goldman describes as “both inevitable and almost accidental” (120). In addition to Murphy, Goldman focuses on three other men—Gordon Wheeler, David Price, and Albert Wong—as figures who were fundamental to the development and direction of Esalen. As a result of this “gender advantage,” Esalen became a locus for the exploration of new definitions of masculinity and masculine spirituality. To this end, Goldman introduces us to a series of “stories about men” that “cement men's primacy in Esalen's past, present, and future” (122) by drawing boundaries between the men in question and women as well as gay men.

Though Goldman's assessment of the prioritization of masculinity at Esalen is compelling, it is too easily dismissed by her assertion that the Institute

mirrored its host society, which at the time boasted no major female leaders among the mainstream liberal and conservative faiths and few female academics and public intellectuals. Although Goldman convincingly identifies Esalen as a popularizing force for alternative spirituality, it is by no means a representative of the mainstream. One wishes for a more incisive analysis of the reasons for Esalen's failure to conform to the emerging trend of female leadership in alternative religious movements such as Christian Science and New Thought. Esalen's emphasis on masculine self-actualization that resembled more conservative movements like earlier muscular Christianity and other revivalists of aggressive, assertive religiosity despite its generally progressive ethos remains a fascinating but opaque phenomenon.

In this way, gender advantage becomes the chief lens for Goldman's elaboration of spiritual privilege, almost to the exclusion of other factors. Goldman does explicitly state that spiritual privilege, especially as propagated by Esalen, has largely been a white middle and upper class phenomenon and the beginning chapters of the work address the ways in which economic status has played a role in the culture of the Institute. Nevertheless, far more emphasis would have been placed on the ways in which the Esalen's leadership has worked to cultivate elite networks to secure funding and prestige among other reasons. Likewise, race is almost entirely ignored.

Overall, however, Goldman's concept of spiritual privilege offers a useful theoretical perspective on the study of Esalen and its role in American culture. This book is one of the few non-insider accounts of the Esalen Institute, along with the volume edited by Jeffrey Kripal and Glenn Shuck, *On The Edge of the Future* (2005) and Kripal's *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007), which Goldman rightly cites as pseudo insider's perspective. Goldman's own account is undeniably impartial and her prose is clear and compelling. The work is a valuable addition to the field and a solid example of socio-historical research integrated with critical theory. The range and scope of Goldman's sources is especially impressive. While, as I have argued, Goldman's analysis could use a bit of nuance, she has mounted an illuminating argument for the role of social privilege in Esalen's history in general and gender privilege in particular.