

The Beach beneath the Street

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The Future of Humanistic Psychology

Edited by Richard House, David Kalisch & Jennifer Maidman

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Everything becomes reified, yet everything starts disintegrating

(Henri Lefebvre)

This book is an open house event with its editors as unconditional hosts inviting a wide group of artistes and fellow travellers to the merry proceedings. I felt gratefully entertained, inspired and at times bamboozled. Before wandering through the rooms of the Humanistic Party, the visitor is greeted by Andrew Samuels, who sombrelly reminds us that ‘aggression, lust and other difficult emotions’ are routinely overlooked by humanistic practitioners who are also ‘at sea when confronted by promiscuity and infidelity in their clinical work, and tend to be rather conventional (and hence inadvertently condemning) in response’ (p xii). These ‘shadow’ aspects find expression covertly: going from the extreme of neglecting a ‘highly professional persona or set of or personae’ to doing ‘research, work out more theory and seek professional acceptance’, and wanting ‘the prizes it sees others as having’ (pp x-xi).

To illustrate his vital point Samuels resorts to a (Jungian and Aristotelian) (mis)reading of *enantiodromía*, the Heraclitean term literally meaning ‘the running course of opposite’ aka the tendency of things to turn into their opposite, concluding, with a touch of melodrama: ‘Enantiodromías lead to totalizing outcomes’ (p xi). This conjures up the image of an over-empathic therapist turning almost overnight into the grey eminence of the therapy world. Yet in its original meaning *enantiodromía* speaks of the fundamental unity of the movement taking place out of isolated polarities. It speaks of *hidden harmony* (‘divine nourishing force’ in Heraclitus’s words). There is no *third* element here, as in the Aristotelian and Jungian versions, playing the referee, compensating and mediating between opposites and even more crucially *judging* and evaluating the shadow elements. What we find instead is a fundamental trust, or objectless faith, in the process of *becoming*.

Heraclitus (and later Nietzsche) put his faith in the *totality* of the opposites. One repercussion may be that there never was inherent purity in Humanistic Psychology to begin with. It also means that a movement towards articulation, informed expression and theorisation is possible and necessary as part of an ongoing, holistic process favouring the heart one moment, the intellect the next, fluctuating between visibility and invisibility, at

times working in the undergrowth, other times attempting fuller exposure – all of the above without any obligation whatsoever to join the conservative chorus of apparatchiks.

Yet Samuels's foreword touches a sore point and one that invites reflection, a point echoed in a different context by Dina Glouberman:

Much of what we are known for in Humanistic Psychology has now seemingly been accepted in the mainstream. This is our success as visionaries, and also our challenge. But if we look closely at some of the areas where we have been pioneers, we will see that the ideas may have been adopted, but the application has narrowed so that they no longer represent the original vision (p. 127).

Even more worryingly, Humanistic Psychology has given birth, like hippy parents to an ultra-square progeny, to a new breed of neo-conservatives – writers and practitioners who whilst formally upholding humanistic principles, show unambiguous signs of having, in a perverse Foucauldian twist, fallen prey to the entrapments of power. It's easy to spot the neo-cons: they will eulogize RCTs, revamp psychopathology, and colonize any space left for real debate at conferences and meetings with streams of data and blanket use of *PowerPoint*. The assumptions behind the words and deeds of the neo-cons appear to be that progress can be measured by how often state, government and governing bodies adopt a humanistic lingo. What is truly mind-boggling is that some of its most vociferous exponents claim to be inspired and having theoretical affinities with that true person of no status who was Carl Rogers.

'Isn't it great, I remember reading a few years back, that the European Council had the word 'person-centred' in one of his statements?' I have witnessed a parallel of this phenomenon with the mindfulness movement. I remember reading an interview in a Buddhist magazine with people in the Pentagon. Wasn't it amazing, the journalist mused, that these people practice meditation? But surely one of the positive effects of *intelligent* meditation practice (as opposed to mere solipsistic concentration and relaxation) is that the person meditating slowly begins to question the very notion of war, the *raison d'être* of the military and of a department of defence, rather than dropping bombs mindfully?

A similar point has been recorded in these very same pages by Andy Rogers (2014). He reported on Jacqui Dillon who quoted from civil rights activist Audre Lorde:

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (p 59)

A more philosophically attuned and philosophically astute humanistic practice is not aimed at recognizing the friendliness of facts but instead geared at questioning in a fundamental way the very notion of 'facts' – the very nature of data-driven, literally-minded, target-oriented, evidence-based 'facts'.

What is more inimical to Humanistic Psychology than the rather crude viewpoint, such as the one expounded by Windy Dryden in his chapter (pp 119-24) – of one-sidedly waving the finger at humanistic in the name of ‘engaging with reality’ (p 123) which the author sees as ‘play[ing] politics, carry out research that is acceptable to NICE so that it become a part of the therapeutic establishment as conceived by the government’? (ibid) Answer: a power-hungry bureaucrat who has mastered the egalitarian and compassionate idiom of Humanistic Psychology. What is worse than corporate ravenous disregard for ecology? Answer: a company that adopts environmentalism as ornamental badge for their faux green credentials.

We live in deeply conservative times where the values of Humanistic Psychology, upheld by the majority of contributors to this book, are vital. We live at the time of faux greens, humanistic neo-cons, and essentialist re-writing of gender, culture, ethnicity and class – all in the name of biology, neuroscientism and professionalization. But in order to be effective, Humanistic Psychology needs to undo itself, clarify its metaphors and ontological scope and see through them. It needs to become *groundless*. Groundlessness has a long and fierce philosophical tradition, which goes way beyond the counter-culture, back to Heraclitus, the first psychologist/philosopher: its name is the counter-tradition. Humanistic Psychology has not decided whether it belongs to the tradition or the counter-tradition. The dominant ontologies behind all three forces of psychology are firmly entrenched in the tradition and this constitutes their weakness. Humanistic Psychology is an exception because it has a history of flirting with the counter-tradition without ever making the leap into groundlessness. It still believes in the outmoded metaphysics of ‘human nature’ – something which will shine in all its beauty and glory if left untainted and unconditioned, or restored to itself by ‘growth’ and ‘development’. It believes that if we dig long enough underneath the ugliness of asphalt and concrete we’ll find a beach, a prairie, a musical Eden. It believes there is a soul (variously apprehended and longed for), a more or less pure inner core to us humans.

From these fundamental errors stem key misapprehensions such as the twist from *self-actualization* to *actualization of self*: the former standing for the autonomous ability of an *organism* to regulate and enhance itself; the latter bolstering the development and ‘growth’ of a fictional construct, the self, whose very propped-up existence constitutes the very root of the problem. If what develops and grows (becomes spiritual, actualized and transpersonal) is this very same construct, the end result will be that uniquely humanistic paradox: the actualized self, the spiritual self, the very pinnacle of narcissism (hierarchical geometries and pyramids, from Maslow to Wilber to Rowan abound in humanistic psychology, and so does the fixation with ‘peaks’, beyond and above the tremendous unacknowledged mystery of everyday existence). There is one possible label for a psychological/therapeutic practice that would positively exploit the counter-tradition: a *psychology of becoming*.

That very same name Lois Holzman (pp 29-42) gives to her own practice, one that is refreshingly informed by Marx, by activism, social engagement, and by *performance*, which she describes as a *new ontology*:

We all have the capacity to play as children do, to do what we do not yet know how to do, to be who we are and other than who we are at the same time. The babbling baby, the actor on the stage, the student in a school play, the researcher singing her data, and all of us – are capable of creating new performances of ourselves continuously, if we choose to. In this way, performance is a new ontology, a new understanding of how development happens – through the social-cultural activity of people together creating new possibilities and new options for how to be in, relate to, understand and change the world, which, of course, includes ourselves.

Mainstream psychology is designed as the study of product – the isolated individual at different points in time. It is incapable of seeing, let alone understanding, process. In this way, mainstream psychology contributes mightily to alienation, i.e. relating to the products of production severed from their producers and from the process of their production, that is, as commodities (Holzman, p 36).

Much is to be gained by re-imagining the past (which is what some of the contributors do) particularly at a time when a new generation of trainees, coming of age in our dark, evidence-based times, may be stirred by learning that once upon a time doing therapy could mean opening the doors of perception, being socially and politically engaged, even question the very nature of our bewildering human predicament.

The editors write:

In terms of age, all three of us editors are part of that idealistic generation which now finds itself taking stock and asking – despite the inequality, the wars, the fundamentalism, the rampant capitalism, the terrorism, the political corruption, and the other ills which continue to plague the human race – to what extent might those of us who have been drawn to humanistic ideas have succeeded in sowing the seeds of the humanistic dream? And is that dream still valid in current cultural historical circumstances, or do we need a new one (or, at the very least, a realistically updated one) (p 18)

A feeling of nostalgia does colour the entire book, but this is not a bad thing: *algia* is pain and *nostos* homecoming: a longing to return home can mean aspiration to revisit old haunts and redefine what was valuable and what needs to be discarded.

It may also cause us to see with our own eyes that home itself has gone, that we are left homeless under a big sky – which might be another way of saying what the editors very perceptively state in their editorial conclusion:

Many, if not most critical humanists are ... instinctively drawn to ... deconstructionist ideas, and are also open to having the 'shadow' side of our

humanist ontologies and epistemologies subjected to a critical deconstructionist 'gaze' (p. 172)

In revisiting our own root metaphors, we might discover that we did rely on half-digested ontologies, and that we failed to work through metaphysical assumptions.

Humanistic Psychology shares a fault with psychoanalysis and CBT: it too relies on a metaphysical view of the human being: softer and kinder than psychoanalytic determinism and behavioral reprogramming, but as clunky in its blind atomistic faith in the human self, in 'growth', ('growth is for vegetables, James Hillman was fond of saying, not for humans), 'self-actualization' and the idea of 'human potential'. Even when it ventures into the so-called transpersonal, this is still as an appendix of this atomistic belief as a safari of acquisition in the exotic land of all things 'spiritual'. Before one ventures into the wider sphere (in which we are embedded), the self needs to be studied and dis-assembled, awakened to existential recognition.

A cultural movement needs new metaphors/images/words. This is what Humanistic Psychology, as evidenced in this book, patently lacks. Its metaphors hark back to the 1960s counter-culture with its mix of half-cooked unreconstructed metaphysics and wisdom-while-u-wait rosy platitudes.

'Psychology (and psychologies) of becoming' might be one way of re-imagining the terrain occupied at present by humanistic psychology. The latter term has become too diffuse (at times, conversely, too dogmatically entrenched), with some of its key ideas engulfed and co-opted by the mainstream.

The hosts may have indulged in promiscuous inclusiveness – a sign of a generosity as well as disinclination to do what editors are called to do, ie unrepentantly cross out repetitions, incongruities and views that are remote if not downright hostile from the book's ethos. Yet I feel their inclusiveness paid off in the end. Andy Rogers's chapter alone is worth buying the book. I was so engrossed in reading how he articulates the living paradox that is contemporary person-centred therapy that I missed my tube station on the way to work. I didn't care, it was well worth it:

Just because we keep saying something is 'revolutionary' does not make it so. The battleground has shifted. The wars between Humanistic Psychology, behaviourism and psychoanalysis have been superseded, if not transcended. The immediate pressures facing the therapy field have opened up fault lines through the traditional schools (even the non-school of 'pluralism') to such an extent that there is increasingly as much difference within as between them.

We see these divisions in the politics of our professions, most obviously in the uniting for common purpose that, in Britain, brought together psychoanalysts and humanistic counsellors – among others – to fight state regulation of the psychological therapies by the Health Professions Council. In the midst of that fierce debate, with Rogers' incendiary lament about 'certified charlatans' hovering nearby throughout, it was hard for some to see the implications for the wider scene, that the disagreements were not

just about the proposed policy, but about the very meaning of therapy and, beyond that, human experience itself. It was startling and liberating to discover that the issue did not re-ignite feuds between the schools but revealed fundamental differences within, and commonalities between, them. When the environment becomes noxious enough, more meaningful differences emerge to transcend the competitive skirmishes of more comfortable times (Rogers, p 67).

References

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