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## The conservative turn in person-centered therapy

Manu Bazzano

Department of Psychology, University of Roehampton, London, UK

### ABSTRACT

The significant battle being waged in contemporary psychotherapy is not between theoretical orientations but between different worldviews. One perspective assumes that therapy can measure, apprehend and even control human experience; the other recognizes that therapy is insufficient in explaining it and that it is ethically unsound to attempt to control it. The first is often complicit with the current master narrative of neoliberalism. By affirming the essential unknowability of being-in-the-world, the second is open to the possibility of the new and the creation of a life-affirming counter-narrative. Recent developments in person-centered therapy (PCT) have seemingly aligned it with the first rather than the second worldview. This article is divided into four parts. After an introduction on psychotherapy and neoliberalism, three developments are discussed, relating to philosophy of science, positive psychology, and politics – which justify, in the author's opinion, the claim that PCT has undergone a conservative turn. Drawing on a variety of sources linked to PCT, this article sketches a way out of our current impasse and suggests ways to reinstate PCT as a radical practice and philosophy at the forefront of contemporary psychotherapy and cultural discourse.

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### Die konservative Wende in der Personzentrierten Therapie

Die entscheidende Schlacht in der zeitgenössischen Psychotherapie findet nicht zwischen theoretischen Orientierungen, sondern zwischen unterschiedlichen Weltanschauungen statt. Eine Sichtweise geht davon aus, dass Therapie messen kann sowie dass sie menschliche Erfahrung verstehen und kontrollieren kann; die andere anerkennt, dass Therapie dies nicht ausreichend erklären kann und dass es ethisch nicht vertretbar ist zu versuchen, menschliche Erfahrung zu kontrollieren. Die erste ist mitschuldig am derzeitigen Hauptnarrativ des Neoliberalismus. Die zweite Sichtweise hingegen ist offen für das Neue und für die Schaffung eines lebensbejahenden Gegen-Narrativs, da sie unterstreicht, dass man das Sein-in-der-Welt nicht im Voraus kennen kann. Neuere Entwicklungen in der Personzentrierten Therapie scheinen sich eher der ersten Weltsicht anzuschließen als der zweiten. Dieser Artikel gliedert sich in vier Teile. Nach einer Einführung zu Psychotherapie und Neoliberalismus werden drei Entwicklungen diskutiert – im Zusammenhang mit Wissenschaftsphilosophie, positiver Psychologie und Politik – die nach Ansicht des Autors die

Behauptung rechtfertigen, dass die PZT eine konservative Wende vollzogen hat. Anhand einer Vielzahl von Quellen skizziert dieser Artikel einen Weg aus der gegenwärtigen Sackgasse und schlägt Wege vor, wie man die PZT wieder als radikale Praxis und Philosophie bahnbrechend für die zeitgenössische Psychotherapie und den kulturellen Diskurs einsetzen kann.

## **El giro conservador en la terapia centrada en la persona**

La batalla importante en la psicoterapia contemporánea no es entre orientaciones teóricas, sino entre las visiones del mundo. Una perspectiva asume que la terapia puede medir, aprehender y controlar la experiencia humana; la otra reconoce que la terapia es insuficiente para explicarla y que es éticamente poco sólida para intentar controlarla. La primera es cómplice de la narrativa maestra actual del neoliberalismo. Al afirmar la imposibilidad de conocer el ser-en-el-mundo, el segundo está abierto a lo nuevo y la creación de una contra narrativa de afirmación de la vida. Recientes desarrollos en la terapia centrada en la persona, aparentemente se han alineado con la primera, en lugar de con la segunda visión del mundo. Este artículo se divide en cuatro partes. Después de una introducción sobre la psicoterapia y el neoliberalismo, se discuten tres desarrollos, relativos a la filosofía de la ciencia, la psicología positiva y la política – que justifica, en opinión del autor, la afirmación de que la TCP ha sufrido un giro conservador. Basándose en una variedad de fuentes, en este artículo esbozo una forma de salir de nuestro actual impasse y sugiero maneras de restablecer a la TCP como una práctica radical y a la filosofía en la vanguardia de la psicología contemporánea.

## **Le basculement conservateur de la thérapie centrée sur la personne**

L'enjeu capital du conflit de valeurs de la psychothérapie contemporaine ne porte pas sur des orientations théoriques mais sur l'expression de différentes visions du monde. Une des perspectives affirme que la thérapie est capable de mesurer, d'appréhender et de contrôler l'expérience humaine, tandis qu'une autre reconnaît que la thérapie est incapable de l'expliquer et qu'il est éthiquement dangereux de tenter de la contrôler. La première est en phase avec l'histoire néolibérale actuellement dominante. En affirmant qu'il est impossible de connaître ce que signifie le fait d'être au monde, la seconde est ouverte à la nouveauté et à la création d'une toute autre histoire puisant dans l'expérience de la vie. Les développements récents de la thérapie centrée sur la personne s'inscrivent de toute évidence dans la ligne de la première vision du monde plutôt que dans la seconde. Cet article est divisé en quatre parties. Après une introduction à propos de la psychothérapie et du néolibéralisme, trois développements seront discutés en lien avec la philosophie des sciences, la psychologie positive et les politiques – ce qui justifie, d'après l'auteur, l'affirmation du fait que la thérapie centrée sur la personne a subi un virage conservateur. S'appuyant sur une variété de sources, cet article esquisse une voie de sortie des impasses actuelles et suggère des pistes pour réinstaller l'approche centrée sur la personne comme étant une philosophie et une pratique

radicales à l'avant-garde des débats de la psychothérapie et de la culture contemporaines.

### **Uma viragem conservadora na Terapia Centrada na Pessoa**

A batalha mais significativa na psicoterapia contemporânea não é entre orientações teóricas, mas sim entre diferentes perspectivas do mundo. Uma perspectiva assume que a terapia pode medir, apreender e controlar a experiência humana; outra reconhece que a terapia é insuficiente para explicar essa mesma experiência e que é eticamente incorreto tentar controlá-la. A primeira é consentânea com a narrativa dominante do neoliberalismo, ao afirmar a impossibilidade de se conhecer o ser-no-mundo. A segunda é aberta ao que é novo e à criação de uma contra-narrativa assertiva em relação à vida. Os mais recentes desenvolvimentos na Terapia Centrada na Pessoa parecem ter-se alinhado com a primeira perspectiva do mundo, e não com a segunda. Este artigo divide-se em quatro partes. Depois de uma introdução acerca da psicoterapia e do neoliberalismo, são debatidas três linhas de desenvolvimento, relacionadas com a filosofia da ciência, a psicologia positiva e a política – e que justificam, na opinião do autor, o argumento de que a Terapia Centrada no Cliente sofreu uma viragem numa direção conservadora. Tendo por base uma variedade de fontes, este artigo esboça uma saída em relação ao nosso atual impasse e propõe formas de reinstaurar a Terapia Centrada na Pessoa enquanto filosofia e prática radical, na vanguarda do discurso da psicoterapia e da cultura contemporâneas.

#### **Brief outline**

This article is divided into four sections:

(1) A brief discussion of the influence of neoliberalism on person-centered therapy (PCT), which provides the backdrop for three selected trends within the approach useful in illustrating PCT's 'conservative turn'. These are discussed in the remaining three sections, respectively: (2) PCT and philosophy of science; (3) PCT and positive psychology; (4) PCT and politics.

#### ***Psychotherapy and neoliberalism***

##### ***Societies of control***

This article is moved by a haunting question: has the radical ethos of person-centered practice been diluted and diverted in a cultural landscape affected by neoliberalism?

Clearly this question does not relate solely to PCT but applies to other therapeutic orientations as well (Barzelay, 2001; Bazzano, 2014a; Ferlie, Ashburner, Fitzgerald, & Pettigrew, 1996; House, 2016; Lees, 2016; Lister, 2013; Parker, 2002). I understand neoliberalism, which emerged in the Reagan and Thatcher years, as blind obedience to the market. Its correlate in psychotherapy may be described as an attempt to *commodify* human experience by a host of strategies including New Public Management, evidence-based practice, managed care, randomized control trials, as

well as 'managerialism', all of these trying to turn therapy – a living practice dealing with living subjects – into a commodity, trying to destroy its *raison d'être* and limit its creativity. As Richard House explains,

The therapeutic space cast in the image of neoliberal late modernity is ... moving away from its formerly more open counter-cultural nature where the previously 'unthought' has space in which to emerge, with even more infiltration of 'neo-liberal' driven, control-oriented State influence, and a stultifying ... culture of surveillance, audit and bureaucratic control. What we are witnessing, in short, is an economy-driven neo-liberal, even quasi-authoritarian colonisation of the therapy experience. (House, 2016, p. 151)

Describing the neoliberal project as 'quasi-authoritarian' is apt: neoliberalism does not *need* to implement an explicitly authoritarian model because of the advent (from the 1990s onwards) of a new type of society, a *society of control* where imprisonment is virtually unnecessary. We know, Gilles Deleuze quipped, that 'everybody will be on the highway at a given time [and that] probability calculations are much better than prisons' (Dosse, 2010, p 330). A society able to manipulate its citizens into ready submission does not need to exercise overt coercion.

A lengthy discussion on the origins and wider implications of neoliberalism is not possible, hence my description of it focuses on particular aspects relevant to the present discussion. Neoliberalism has effectively changed the way we think about mental health, by turning it into a product. It has almost entirely discarded the social element, for it regards individuals as isolated units whose feelings, thoughts, and ways of being in the world are invariably pathologized if deemed unproductive, undesirable, or of no use to the needs of the market. According to this ideology, competition is the main feature of relating and human beings are consumers. To exercise a democratic choice means to be allowed to buy and sell; this process is dominated by a new god, the market, who alone decides who is praiseworthy and who is not. For neoliberalism, hierarchy is perfectly natural: you are either a winner or a loser. What makes it an ideology is the fact that its set of beliefs is interiorized, i.e. they become our very thoughts. Forgive the simplification, but I think this may be useful to illustrate my point: if, for instance, I happen to be well-off, I may start believing that my riches are the result of my undeniable merit. If I am poor, I may start thinking that I am a failure at heart and that if for instance I am made redundant, I will bizarrely attribute it to my shortcomings as a human being rather than austerity measures and the loss of jobs.

What is more, our very humanity is denied by neoliberal ideology. Low moods, fragility, sadness and vulnerability are disdained because they slow a person down and make her shop less. To pause and reflect on one's experience is seen as idleness. To lament the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune is to fall by the side of the merry-go-round. To quietly rejoice in the bare pleasure of living without thoughts of how much one is worth in terms of assets is to be unpractical. We become secondary, replaceable appendages of the market that only seems to care for its own sustenance and thriving. In order to make humans more pliable to the needs of the market, psychology and psychotherapy in the neoliberal world have to be stripped of their transformative faculties. Consequently, the 'truth' or 'truth-value' of a psychology and psychotherapy who is obedient to neoliberal ideology is no longer *organismic*. It is no longer interested in describing the fluctuations of an organism in search of actualization,

meaning, and freedom. Instead, it is *factual*, relying on the quasi-scientific collection of quantifiable data.

### *The uniqueness of PCT*

Our inheritance was left to us but no testament. (René Char, in Hansen, 1993, p. 194).

From its inception (as client-centered therapy), and at variance with both the social engineering of behaviorism and the doctrinaire, bourgeois Freudianism dominant at the time, person-centered therapy (PCT) was wedded to an ethos of equality and solidarity, to an elemental faith in the ability of the human organism for self-direction, autonomy, and cooperation. Despite the metaphysical overtones of notions such as the formative tendency, there is in my view a lack of a consistent ‘program’ in Rogers which has left us with the happy burden of having to articulate an ethical and political praxis in therapy. This lack of testament I personally regard as a plus, for it has fostered innovation and it continues to encourage originality among those inspired by Rogers’s example. We might not have a manifesto, but PCT has a clear ethos. Despite the lack of a clear ontological stance, there is a coherent ethical position in Rogers’s legacy. Despite the interesting diversity within our approach, there are ways to know when I veer away from a broadly conceived person-centered stance – for example, when the need to mollify policy-makers overrides my aspiration to respond to the real need of my clients.

Not only did Rogers have an ethical position; he and his colleagues, alert to the seismic cultural and political shifts of the second half of the twentieth century, significantly contributed to the creation of a new ethos. The latter is very much alive in the tangible presence of a resilient grassroots person-centered (counter)-tradition of encounter, societal and political engagement, commitment to human flourishing and equality, and shrewd critique of power. Despite this, several consistent factors justify the claim that in its more visible articulations, PCT has in the last two decades undergone a veritable *conservative turn*. I have (very broadly) identified *three* essential themes/areas of endeavor where this has taken place: philosophy of science, positive psychology, and politics. There are undoubtedly more; and even the three mentioned before can only be discussed briefly. Yet, these may together constitute a threefold matrix useful at least in identifying an area of discussion.

### *Using the Master’s tools*

As with other progressive narratives, neoliberalism has been effective in mimicking the vocabulary of humanistic and person-centered psychology, producing a brand-new, consumer-friendly lingo of empathy and congruence, all the while obliterating the original meaning – twisting a language of liberation for the purpose of subjugation. But surely this could not have happened without some of the zeal shown by some humanistic and person-centered practitioners in embracing neoliberal ideas (Bazzano, 2014b, 2015a). These examples *may* speak of abdication of basic person-centered values in the name of personal gain. At best, and in most cases, I believe they illustrate a sincere attempt to use the Master’s tools in order to dismantle the Master’s house (Lorde, 1984) – only to become so spellbound by the tools’ clever design as to remain ensnared in the Master’s lavish, labyrinthine edifice. A remarkable writer – the black, gay, radical feminist Audre Lorde (1984) warned us of the dangers

inbuilt within this attempt. In the following quote, she is referring to a specific brand of white, middle-class feminist acquiescence with power, but I believe useful lessons can be drawn for us here too:

What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable. (p 110)

What does it mean when the tools of neoliberalism, coated by a veneer of person-centered lingo, are used to examine that same neoliberalism? It means that only the narrowest parameters of change are possible. Some readers may be familiar with teaching/learning PCT in a university setting. My experience of it resembles being allowed to peek from time to time (and under strict surveillance) at a beautiful animal in a zoo – a zebra, a panther, or a bald eagle. Power, grace, danger, and beauty are filtered through a safe screen of data and box-ticking, with little or no time allocated for group process, encounter, and the very backbone of what therapy, let alone PCT, is about. But PCT needs to fight for its survival, some will object. We need funding; we need to work within neoliberal institutions and get them to see that the facts are friendly, that measurement and empirical evidence can work in our favor, and so forth. Yes, and

Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

And to quote one Simone de Beauvoir:

It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting. (cited in Lorde, 1984, p. 114)

In other words, we need to speak from the crucible of our experience, and decline from using the parameters of a dominant ideology. But matters are a little more complicated because the psychic and psychotherapeutic scenario has shifted dramatically. The battle may be lost, unless we become aware of the change that has taken place, as person-centered practitioner Andy Rogers (2014) reminds us:

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. (p. 67)

We will deal with the more specific question of PCT and politics in the fourth section of this article, but a conundrum begins to emerge: in the laudable effort of becoming more influential, does PCT run the risk of merely becoming the candidate for a compassionate version of neoliberalism? Or is it going to articulate instead a critical and informed alternative to the widespread commodification of therapy?

## **PCT and philosophy of science**

### **Eureka moment**

A client comes in on a spring morning, the sky of an impossible blue, clear and new after a hailstorm. She is in a buoyant mood. She speaks of something she read on the Internet, whose absurdity, she says, makes her rage and laugh: the neurosurgical treatment of anxiety disorders. How utterly ridiculous, she says. The session goes on, words and feelings drift and turn. Toward the end, the client has a small eureka moment. She had just been talking of how she wants to be aware of things, of how unbearable it is for her to realize only later that she failed to notice something. Noticing, but also knowing, understanding seems to be crucial to her. Now she asks whether this desire to know is also a form of *control*, especially considering there is so much I cannot ever know – so much that is unknowable, ambivalent, and mysterious. Isn't this about control?' She asks to no one in particular. 'And what is this need to be in control all the time about, if not appeasing my anxiety? And is it not related, even though maybe distantly related, she goes on, to that very same desire that makes us want to find surgical ways to meddle with the brain in order to remove anxiety once and for all?'

Reflecting on the above, I later wondered whether this need to anesthetize experience is related to how neoliberal ideology conceives the human organism: unpredictable and not pliable to the demands of a cybernetic techno-sentience (Land, 2011) in relation to which we are merely secondary, replaceable appendages, reduced to *things* that serves the smooth-running of the machine.

### **Objective data and definitive knowledge**

Person-centered therapists became engaged with research in the 1990s in the attempt to redress what they saw as the exclusion of the approach from health-care settings and education. They understood Rogers' rejection, in the 1960s, of academia and 'the practice of scientific research [in favor of] action oriented pursuits [as] a mistake of historical proportions' (Elliott, 2007, p. 327). Since then, 'a veritable profusion of research on person-centered and closely related therapies has occurred over the past 15 years' (Elliott, 2007, p. 327), some of it qualitative and some of it *quantitative* and *positivistic*. These last two are defined by person-centered writer/practitioner Robert Elliott as 'based on *objective* data and seeking *definitive* knowledge' (Elliott, 2007, p. 327, my emphasis). This definition, presented as a given, is questionable: it sidesteps basic tenets within both science and philosophy of science at least since 1962, the year Thomas Kuhn's pivotal book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1996), was published. Incidentally, Elliott's analysis is critiqued here not as *ad hominem* disapproval of a notable writer and practitioner but as, in my view, the best representation of a particular stance within PCT. This stance overlooks the societal and political context in which the aggressive promotion of research came about – namely 10 years into neoliberalism – and is deeply ambivalent, oscillating as it does between tired, avowed defense of qualitative research and a fundamental ambiguity toward positivistic research, poised between abdication to a necessary evil and rapt embrace of its glistening tentacles. At the heart of positivism (and of the neo-positivism in vogue today), there is in my view a desire to *control* the inherent unruliness and unpredictability of human experience: a political act of subjugation, whether externalized in the 'enemy' or in the otherness at

the core of our being. If so, it would appear that this core aim of positivism was captured with some accuracy in my client's exploration.

Some of my person-centered colleagues suggest that a more friendly stance toward neoliberal positivism may be either *strategic* ('we play the positivistic game as Trojan horse, thus making PCT available to the wider public') or *opportunistic*, i.e. motivated by personal gain ('person-centered professors and academics gain lucrative endorsement and prestige from the institutions they serve'). My instinct is that it stems, more fundamentally, from a conspicuous lack within person-centered training of the elementary tenets of critical theory and philosophy of science. This may explain our perceived political naivety as an approach as well as our readiness to embrace whichever view is dominant in science at any given time, which often means that PCT's compassionate engagement in practice fails to translate adequately (with remarkable exceptions) in the field of theory. Dazzled by the perceived unassailability of the theories on display, the general tendency is to borrow from them without checking their validity and/or congruent application with the double effect of (a) undermining the invaluable work we do in clinical practice and (b) producing an incoherent philosophy. A characteristic example of this would be the obvious contradiction between the compassionate understanding and openness to other ways of processing experience found in person-centered therapists working with non-neurotypical people and the embracing of theoretical formulations from writers who effectively stigmatize neurodiversity, for instance, Baron-Cohen, an autism researcher whose position has been 'mercilessly and brilliantly disputed by writers of the neurodiversity movement' (Bazzano, 2015b, p. 175).

A parallel occurrence, which can only be mentioned here in passing, can be witnessed in contemporary person-centered forays into the areas of attachment theory, neuroscience, and affect-regulation – mostly reliant on sturdily psychoanalytic and neuro-psychoanalytic literature – with little or no critique of descriptions that overplay 'mommy-daddy' scenarios and underplay the pivotal role of history (Deleuze, 2004, p. 235).

These contradictions need to be addressed if PCT is to make a significant contribution to the current debate. One essential step would be acknowledging a 'multimodal approach to biology and science' (Bazzano, 2012b, p. 143), their crucial link to the humanities, as it was the case with the scientists/humanists who inspired Rogers – among them K. Goldstein and Szent-Gyorgyi (Rogers, 1980, p. 119) rather than (one example among many) univocally embracing Darwinism (Frankel, Sommerbeck, & Rachlin, 2010). Another step is more overtly political: the opening of person-centered education and training to elements of current *organizational theory* and *social theory* without which we are reduced to studying 'the person' and her immediate 'context' without the deeper connections the two aforementioned disciplines afford us.

### ***Persons or tendencies? The role of intuition***

Philosophy of science is the area that properly deals with the ways in which scientific findings are understood and assimilated in the culture. There are two distinct responses to science within philosophy of science. One asserts that science gives a direct knowledge of things and that our task is to merely reflect and communicate that knowledge. This appears to be the (deeply conservative) stance of the majority of person-centered writers, one that subdues PCT to dominant scientific perspectives.

The other view states that science has to be challenged – not because its contributions are not significant, but because the task of philosophy (and psychology) is that of re-establishing a *different* relationship with things and a *different* knowledge, ‘a knowledge and a relationship that ... science hides from us, of which it deprives us’ (Deleuze, 2004, p. 23). Understanding what this different relationship means has momentous significance for PCT and philosophy. One of its tenets is *intuition*, central to this different relation to things and to ‘nature’ and presenting *three* important characteristics:

The first characteristic of intuition is that in it and through it something is presented, is given in person, instead of being inferred from something else and concluded.

[...]

[The] second characteristic: ... it presents itself as a return, because the philosophical relationship, which put us in things instead of leaving us outside, is restored rather than established by philosophy, rediscovered rather than invented. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 23)

Before listing the third characteristic, let us pause for a moment. In line with classic phenomenology, the idea is not to reject science altogether but to bracket it, an operation that may turn out to be beneficial to science itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Scientific knowledge is not to be *discarded* but one has to recognize that ‘it grasps at least one of the two halves of being, one of the two sides of the absolute, one of the two movements of nature, the one in which nature relaxes and places itself outside of itself’ (Deleuze, 2004, p. 23). To accept scientific knowledge as an absolute is, however, a fundamental error. The other half which is not covered by it is the locus of *intuition* and interiority – the realm of philosophical enquiry, of psychology and the humanities – the realm of psychotherapy, and of person-centered psychotherapy in particular, an approach whose tenets rest on intuition. Rather than the old metaphysical split between the sensible and the intelligible, this division emphasizes two different directions of the *same* movement:

The two directions are natural ... each in its own way: the former occurs according to nature, though nature risks losing itself in it at each pause, at each breath; the latter occurs contrary to nature, but nature rediscovers itself in it, starts over again in the tension. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 24)

Even more pertinent to our discussion is the *third* characteristic of intuition, the one that concerns its method, for intuition is ‘a method that seeks *difference*’ (Deleuze, 2004, p. 26, my emphasis). While (positivist) science gives us similarities, generalities, and (reams of) data, practice-based (person-centered) philosophy can give us useful articulations and inspiring diversities. While the former gives us *things*, the latter can give us *tendencies*. Deleuze again:

What differs in nature is never a thing, but a tendency. A difference of nature is never between two products or between two things, but *in one and the same thing* between the two tendencies that traverse it, in one and the same product between two tendencies that encounter one another in it. Indeed, what is pure is never the thing; the thing is always a composite that must be dissociated; only the tendency is pure, which is to say that the true thing or the substance is the tendency itself. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 26, emphasis in the original)

If the 'person' is the thing, the sole object and focus of therapy and, in true positivist fashion, a *measurable* thing whose empathy (in the person of the therapist) or whose ability to receive the conditions (in the person of the client) can also be measured, then what one risks neglecting is the 'emergent phenomenon' (Moreira, 2012, p. 52) as well the 'true thing' or substance of person-centered philosophy: the *tendency* of the organism to actualize. In this sense then, the focus of person-centered psychotherapy would be the fostering of intuition allowing a clearer perception and understanding of *tendencies*:

Indeed, what is pure is never the thing; the thing is always a composite that must be dissociated; *only the tendency is pure*, which is to say that the true thing or the substance in the tendency itself. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 26, my emphasis)

Thus understood, the value of person-centered psychotherapy in current scientific debate consists in inviting the scientific community to consider 'things' and the world from *within* rather than *without*. Finding an internal locus of evaluation in the organismic valuing process is a little more than a move away from external, introjected value patterns. It points toward *intuition*. It also coincides with an initial subjective emphasis that is afforded space and attention to develop away from the layers of received knowledge and perceptions inherited in our education and conditioning.

This initial movement is unavoidably removed from science and more akin to art. Rather than a white blank canvas, the painter is confronted by a black canvas – black with the infinite layers of color accumulated in centuries of paintings. The first thing she needs to do is scrape the layers and – often with great difficulty – begin anew. The therapist's assistance is crucial here, at first in helping the client articulating her new idiom and later, by opening therapy to the risk of communication, to a relative truth born out of genuine encounter.

### **Positive psychology and PCT**

Positive psychology was founded in 1998 by Martin Seligman who was at the time chair of the American Psychological Association (APA). It exerted some influence on sections of the person-centered world (Joseph, 2015; Joseph & Murphy, 2013a, 2013b; Joseph & Worsley, 2005). I understand the aim of these person-centered authors as being twofold: (a) reminding mainstream psychology of the significant if unacknowledged role played by Rogers and other humanistic pioneers in the formulation of its key tenets and (b) crossing interdisciplinary bridges through the appreciation of what positive psychology has to offer. If only the appreciation was mutual. In his speech at the Lincoln Summit, Seligman repeatedly ridiculed Rogers for being '[an]anti-empirical scientist', for instigating 'the sanctification of the individual, narcissism and individual gratification' before going on to describe in vague and sentimental tones the values of 'altruism ... positive community and families' (Seligman, 1999, Internet file) allegedly at the heart of positive psychology. As we shall see, many of the applications of this 'altruistic' ethos went in aid of the US army, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the practice of torture, all in the name of 'service to the community'. In comparison, the 'narcissism' Rogers was supposedly promoting sounds a lot more constructive.

The person-centered writers who warmed to positive psychology appear to see the latter's avowed optimism as useful in offsetting an allegedly dogged tendency in

contemporary psychotherapy to focus on the ‘negative’ aspects of human experience. In a similar vein, Linley and Joseph (2004), in a book prefaced by Seligman and hailed by the latter as ‘the cutting edge of positive psychology and the emblem of its future’ (Linley and Joseph, 2004, p. xv), have imaginatively assembled a ‘lineage of positive psychology’ that enlists illustrious predecessors and even more illustrious ethical notions: Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*, Thomas Aquinas’s *virtue*, William James’ take on religious experiences, Jung’s individuation, Bugenthal’s view of human inherent potential, and Maslow and Rogers’s notion of actualization. In a more pragmatic vein, Seligman sees in positive psychology a fundamental aspiration ‘to end victimology’, which he sees as a ‘passive view of the human being’ which, has in his view, contaminated the social sciences (Seligman, 1999). This is echoed by those American psychologists (Haidt, 2007) who champion positive psychology and hazy notions of ‘happiness’ as harbingers of a conservative moral regeneration for western societies still healing from the chaos and political disobedience of the 1960s. The ‘moral’ pragmatism on display here is sharply at variance with the distinguished philosophical lineage ascribed by Linley and Joseph to positive psychology. What one finds instead is the ‘bare Hobbesian’ (Shaw, 2016, p. 39) principle of avoiding conflict, an ethos sketched on a pessimistic, bleak canvas, where ‘man is not a fellow but a wolf to man’ (*homo homini lupus*) – a rather *negative* worldview for an avowedly ‘positive’ psychology.

### *The rhetoric of resilience*

The antidote is to help a person and a community build *resilience* – for instance by helping discouraged women on welfare and trying to beat ‘defeatism’ among black Americans (Shaw, 2016) with a breezy disregard of the sociopolitical context that discouraged those women and those black Americans in the first place – a variation on the ‘smile or die’ corporate pop wisdom so brilliantly lampooned by American sociologist Barbara Ehrenreich (2010).

The rhetoric of resilience is echoed by Linley, founding director of the Centre of Applied Positive Psychology in the UK, who spoke enthusiastically of Martin Seligman’s Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program in the United States ‘[as a] superb example of how you can take some of the principles of positive psychology and apply those in a way that makes a real and lasting difference to people’s lives’ (Jarden, 2012, p. 83).

The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, established in 2009, was aimed at ‘creating more resilient soldiers by helping them with the necessary psychological adjustments’ (Shaw, 2016, p. 40). To this purpose, Seligman devised a method for measuring resilience, the Global Assessment Tool. One of the results of his efforts was that ‘in 2010, the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center (founded by Seligman) was awarded a \$31 million contract by the Department Of Defense’ (Shaw, 2016). The notion of resilience was met with great enthusiasm by other psychologists who came up with creative variations on the theme. Professor Michael Matthews promptly supplied the notion of ‘adaptive killing’: a set of cognitive and behavioral techniques ‘focus[ed] on eliminating irrational thoughts and beliefs ... on changing a soldier’s belief structure regarding killing’. As he sees it, ‘these interventions could be integrated into immersive simulations to promote the conviction that adaptive killing is permissible’ (Matthews, 2014, p. 187).

Resilience has effectively become a new fetish in contemporary psychology useful in fostering the neoliberal agenda at a time of heightened security and financial austerity.

Unsurprisingly, it has found applications in several areas. The International Monetary Fund's website has over 2000 documents discussing the topic and similar emphasis is found within the World Bank (which has created a 'Social Resilience' group) and the World Economic Forum with its focus on 'systemic financial resilience'. A newly founded academic journal, *Resilience*, is entirely dedicated to the topic (Neocleous, 2013).

### *Positive psychology and 'enhanced' interrogation*

There is, in other words, a murky side to positive psychology's alleged 'positivity' – one that is thoroughly incompatible with PCT's ethos. Positive psychology has come under fire from APA for its connivance (in terms of huge monetary gains) with the US military, for its misuse of psychological expertise in the service of the CIA torture program, and for bringing the profession of psychology into disrepute.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the APA had started to assemble a coordinated response to the horror and devastation of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. Its indisputably honorable aim was to put psychology at the service of a deeply traumatized community and in the hope to gain an understanding that would help prevent the occurrence of similar atrocities. This compassionate objective was severely thwarted by the collusion of some APA officials with the DOD (Department of Defense) and the CIA to support torture, as the 2015 Hoffman report (an independent investigation commissioned by the APA in 2014) was to discover:

We have heard from psychologists who treat patients for a living that they feel physically sick when they think about the involvement of psychologists intentionally using harsh interrogation techniques. This is the perspective of psychologists who use their training and skill to peer into the damaged and fragile psyches of their patients, to understand and empathize with the intensity of psychological pain in an effort to heal it. The prospect of a member of their profession using that same training and skill to intentionally cause psychological or physical harm to a detainee sickens them. We find that perspective understandable. (American Psychological Association, 2015; Internet file, and cited in Shaw, 2016, p. 39)

A meeting of 16 professors and secret service staff had taken place in December 2001 in Seligman's house. Among them were Kirk Hubbard, head of research and analysis at the CIA, and James Mitchell, a psychologist who was to devise with colleague Bruce Jessen the CIA's torture program, inspired by Seligman's notion of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1972), one that alongside 'resilience' is positive psychology's key 'clinical contribution' to the military. What is 'learned helplessness'? Moral philosopher Tamsin Shaw (2016) explains,

[Seligman] found that a state of passivity could be induced in dogs by giving them repeated and inescapable shocks. This provided the basis for the theory that human beings, in the face of events that seem uncontrollable, experience disruptions in motivation, emotion, and learning that amount to a sense of helplessness. Seligman and other researchers applied the theory to depression, but also to social problems such as 'demoralized women on welfare', 'helpless cognitions' on the part of Asian-Americans, and 'defeatism' among black Americans. (p. 38)

### *Awareness of vulnerability*

The notion of resilience promoted by positive psychology is problematic for at least two reasons: one more broadly political, the other psychological. Politically speaking, resilience can be understood as compliant alternative to proactive and engaged *resistance* (to economic austerity policies, to political strictures that maintain deep inequality and

the privilege welfare of the 1%). Psychologically, it supersedes with deleterious results the more congruent notion of *awareness of vulnerability* (from the Latin *vulnus*, wound), in turn linked to the extraordinary vision of the *wounded physician*, Chiron (Jung, 1993), useful in fostering acceptance of one's own and others' vulnerability and imperfection as well as being the key for healing and change. In Greek mythology, Chiron, the centaur wounded by an arrow from Heracles' bow, does not die but undergoes agonizing pain. The wound is never entirely healed: he continues to suffer from it for the rest of his life. *Because of this*, he becomes a great healer. I suspect Chiron would have been dubbed a 'victimologist' by Seligman & Co., for he draws inspiration from his wound, even *treasures* it in order to foster greater compassion toward others. The fully functioning (Rogers, 1961) or fully living person (Bazzano, 2013) is one who is able to be with and cherish her wound as a translucent stain, a mark of her humanity. Awareness of the personal wound opens us to the suffering that is endemic to every living thing in the great 'Earth household' we temporarily inhabit. It potentially opens us to wisdom and compassion. More to the point, it opens us to genuine communication, essential in psychotherapy. The wound is an opening, a *caesura*, a crack from which the light filters and the longing for the presence and words of another human being arises, if one believes with Bataille (2004) that 'communication cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another' (p. 19).

It is not coincidental perhaps that person-centered writers who warmed to positive psychology also explored in some detail psychopathology (i.e. Joseph & Worsley, 2005). I found their writings useful in studying, understanding, and even *reclaiming* diagnosis (Bazzano, 2011) from the clutches of the biomedical model, yet the absence of a radical critique of the monstrosity known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) strikes me as problematic.

### **PCT and politics**

Appeals to political commitment and formulations of PCT as an advanced, progressive cultural force engaged with, or at least aware of the wider societal and political dimension were synthesized with great clarity in a paper originally presented by Schmid at the 2007 British Association for the Person-Centered Approach Conference in the UK (Schmid, 2014a, pp. 4–17). I understand Schmid's stance to be the best formulation of a position emblematic of sectors of contemporary PCT and I discuss it here for that reason. My initial eagerness – aroused at first by the seeming rallying-cry of its title and subtitle ('Psychotherapy is Political or it is not Psychotherapy: The Person-Centred Approach as an Essentially Political Venture'), by the encouraging affirmation about the 'democratic and emancipatory stance of PCT' (Schmid, 2014a, p. 4), and by what the author sees as the 'revolutionary' nature of an approach that is 'a threat to professionals, administrators and others' (p. 6) – soon slackened into bewildered disappointment. The reading of politics presented by Schmid appears to be literal, pertaining to the *polis*, the city-state. But a city-state has walls, which inevitably segregate the non-citizens outside of the more or less democratic goings-on of the celebrated Athenian *agora* (as recent developments in the ongoing migration crisis in Europe tragically testify). Moreover, as Jocelyn Chaplin made clear in her own response to Schmid, the latter's stance lacks specificity:

When Schmid relates politics to our image of the human being ... he needs to be more explicit. He refers to the ancient Greek ideal of the common good as the goal, but in Ancient Greece women and slaves certainly weren't included in that goal. On this Schmid's article seems to lack a clear progressive/equalising perspective. (Chaplin, 2014, p. 50)

A vaguely 'politicized' psychotherapy centered on 'persons' leaves out the *non-persons*, a 'category' present at every time in history and currently represented by the thousands of refugees at the borders of European nation-states courtesy of decades of our leaders' disastrous foreign policies and penchant for warmongering. This weakness may or may not belong to the origins of the approach, with Rogers' emphasis on the person. Personally, I understand this as a polemic stance that stresses the real presence of the human other, the client, and that sabotages the assumed 'objectivity' and depersonalization of cognitivism and/or psychoanalytic interpretations.

The individual, the person, the person-in-relation: neither of these notions is sufficiently radical. Moreover, their translation in the political sphere brings deleterious alliances with notions of nation-state, class and overall dominant narratives that substantiate ephemera and subscribe to a bourgeois notion of democracy. A more useful idea may be that of the self as *construct* within the Earth household – a view that is *organismic* as well as *naturalistic* and more aligned with the organismic psychology we have inherited.

Decentering of the individual, the person – including the 'interdependent' person – aligns the human subject to the continuum of the human with the *animal* which is one of the radical and as yet unexplored implications of an organismic psychology such as PCT (Tudor, 2010; Tudor & Worrall, 2006) and one that is aligned with exciting developments in contemporary thought (Bennett, 2010; Massumi, 2014).

In a subsequent article in response to his critics, Schmid (2014b) defends the notion of person attempting to unyoke it from that of the individual:

The person-centered understanding of 'person' is rooted in 'dialogical anthropology' and views the person as a substantial and a relational being, autonomous and interdependent. (p. 68)

What is assumed in this vision is that a genuine encounter between self and other *is* possible in our societies, and that such meeting may be exempted from the pervasively alienating influence of neoliberalism.

### ***Ethics without politics is empty, and politics without ethics is blind***

My own understanding is that in the *asymmetric* interaction between any two people, real meeting happens solely by *accident*, and *despite* the pervading commodification of human interaction. In other writings, Schmid's version of dialogical therapy is multifaceted, allowing for the presence of the 'opposite' (Schmid, 2002, p. 60) and not prone to the rhapsodic pull of orthodox relational PCT. The person-centered therapist's aspiration to meet the other in *solidarity* and *compassion* is important. But it inscribes therapy within the realm of ethics rather than 'scientific psychology' (Hayes, 2014, p. 31). A corrective to an anodyne political stance is inevitably wedded to radical ethics (Bazzano, 2012a): *ethics without politics is empty, and politics without ethics is blind* (Critchley, 2007). The radical stance present in the formulation of PCT needs to be taken to a different level. An ethical approach to therapy needs to be aligned to a stance that is committed to justice and equality: essentially socialist, feminist, and anarchist in outlook and articulation. The contemporary notion of anarchism has two implications: (a) refusal of *arché*, the guiding prototype of the therapist

as expert (Bazzano, 2012b, p. 238) and (b) it is *in the service of the other* rather than in the name of individualism as it was the case with historical anarchism.

A few remarkable exceptions notwithstanding, the great majority of recent theoretical formulations in person-centered writings shy away from the above task, preferring instead to dance to the neo-positivist neoliberal tune. Even theoretical innovations within contemporary PCT, now the staple of person-centered trainings, do not question dominant narratives but are obliging in their effort to meet the Master's dictates and criteria.

## Conclusion

I have discussed three scenarios where in my view PCT has given in to neoliberal ideology. In the first instance, our excessive reliance on dominant views in science has incapacitated our own articulations, some of which have been sketched earlier: an emphasis on tendency rather than person, on multimodality rather than acceptance of scientific dogma.

Second, positive psychology's discredit can be read as a useful cautionary example of how our profession can easily be led astray by its own hubris and by collusion with power. Third, a political stance that shies away from clear, committed formulation of solidarity, justice, and compassion plays into the hand of the dominant ideologies.

Implicit in each description is the possible way out of the current impasse. Articulating this further and more explicitly is the task for future discussion. Meanwhile, the mighty task ahead can be perhaps summarized as follows.

We need a therapeutic philosophy that proudly refuses to mimic dominant narratives. We need the unambiguous enunciation of counter-traditional values in person-centered psychotherapy and counseling. We need nothing less than a rewriting of human experience in the stultified world created by neoliberalism.

## Notes on contributor

**Manu Bazzano** is a writer, psychotherapist, and supervisor in private practice, and primary tutor at Metanoia Institute, London. He is a visiting lecturer at the University of Roehampton, London, and various other schools and colleges. He facilitates workshops and seminars internationally on Zen and Phenomenology. Among his books: *Buddha is Dead* (2006); *Spectre of the Stranger* (2012); *After Mindfulness: New Perspectives on Psychology and Meditation* (2013), *Therapy and the Counter-tradition: The Edge of Philosophy*, and *Zen and Therapy: A Contemporary Perspective*. He is a regular contributor and guest editor to several international Psychology Journals and book review editor for *Self & Society – Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. He studied Eastern contemplative practices since 1980 and in 2004 was ordained a Zen monk in the Soto and Rinzi traditions ([www.manubazzano.com](http://www.manubazzano.com)).

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