

Barry Richards

Against Humanistic Psychology

The assortment of writings and 'therapeutic' techniques which can be assembled under the heading of 'humanistic psychology' currently enjoy a considerable degree of influence amongst students and intellectuals, the existence of this journal being a case in point. Many progressive people have begun to see through the deceptions of Rogers, Maslow and company, but their 'human potential' movement still has widespread ideological currency due to the extent to which it is being promoted in the educational and cultural system of capitalist Britain.

A full exposure of the doctrines of these charlatans might involve a systematic analysis of their roots in existentialism and related trends in reactionary philosophy and psychology. This would be beyond the scope of this article; however a few relevant points can be made here, to encourage the reader to judge this 'humanism' in the full light of the role it plays in class society. For a clear statement of the need for ideological polemic from a class standpoint, one can read Mao Tse-tung's 'Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art'. Essentially the point is this, that

'In the world today, all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines'.

Firstly Carl Rogers, high priest of 'client-centred therapy'. In the preface to his 'On Becoming a Person' he makes an interesting comment on the intended function of his work:

'I hope it may be clear from this volume that we already possess learnings which, put to use, would help to decrease the inter-racial, industrial and international tensions which exist'.

In other words, Rogers offers to help solve the problems of the ruling class with a new brand of piecemeal social engineering. Like most would-be social engineers and propagandists for capitalism, he is well paid for his work, as he tells us:

'My wife and I have found isolated hideaways in Mexico and the Caribbean where no-one knows I am a psychologist; where painting, swimming, snorkeling and capturing some of the scenery in colour photography are my major activities. Yet in these spots, where no more than two to four hours a day goes for professional work, I have made most of whatever advances I have made in the last few years'.

Basking in the Caribbean sun, Rogers solves the problems of living under capitalism. What other delights does life hold for him?

'I have found it highly rewarding when I can accept another person'.

This pious generality, expressing a complete lack of principle in personal relation is glorified as 'unconditional positive regard'. After this, the second characteristic of a good therapist is, we learn, empathic understanding.

'Our first reaction to most of the statements which we hear from other people is an immediate evaluation, or judgement, rather than understanding of it . . . our tendency is, almost immediately, to feel 'That's right'; or 'That's stupid' . . . Very rarely do we permit ourselves to understand precisely what the meaning of this statement is to him. I believe this is because understanding is risky. If I let myself really understand another person, I might be changed by that understanding. And we all fear change'.

The notion that 'man' fears 'change' is one of the oldest chestnuts of reactionary psychology. It is a mainstay of the propaganda which tries to make out that exploited people actually derive some advantage, some 'security' from the institutions, laws and so on of their exploiters. We should not be surprised to hear Rogers churn it out; his more explicitly political views are of the same colour:

'We (the United States - B.R.) are moving, somewhat ignorantly and clumsily, toward accepting a position of responsible world leadership . . . we have no desire to hold dominion over peoples'.

'We desire the independence and self-determination of individuals and countries and are proud of the past support we have given to such tendencies'.

He would surely be a very competent writer of Presidential speeches. And now to the third 'therapist variable'; here the Professor would have us think that everyday honesty and straightforwardness had just been discovered by him.

'In my relationships with persons I have found that it does not help in the long run, to act as though I were something that I am not'.

This is the technique of genuineness; the Rogerian therapist is obliged to listen to his own feelings and to be 'himself', while at the same time providing warm unconditional acceptance of the 'client'. He has to be the sort of person who can 'genuinely' respond with 'warmth' to whatever the client presents. Once this benign facade is acquired, then clients (and not uncommonly, one imagines, fees) 'grow' before the eyes. Just what 'growth' is, one is not told except in some pseudo-scientific twaddle about movement along a fixity-fluidity dimension.

Rogers cannot always pretend to live in a value-free paradise; at an American Psychological Association mock debate with Skinner in 1956 it suited his purpose to argue that any scientific endeavour involves a prior subjective choice of values about the purpose of that work. Carried one step further that argument easily undermines the myth of 'non-directive therapy'.

Maslow couches his standpoint in a somewhat different tone, but he differs in no

fundamental way from Rogers, nor either of them from the behaviourists/reductionists against whom they are championed. Rogers and Skinner are close Harvard cronies, and both do very well by the same paymaster. Maslow cries for 'hard, firm research' and is very ready to compare people with ants or trees. He does not, however, want to live in Rogers' value-vacuum, and pronounces that

'Only if we let it (the environment) be, can we perceive fully'.

He is another Zen hack, advocating the values of passivity, detachment and withdrawal. He distinguishes between 'coping behaviour' and 'expressive behaviour'. Expressive behaviour is necessary for health, but is nothing to do with environment, with concrete material reality.

'A reality-centred theory of full human nature cannot manage or incorporate expression, unless with great difficulty'.

This is because part of the 'psyche' has 'nothing to do with the environment', with social reality.

'The culture is sun and food and water; it is not the seed'.

The 'seed', therefore, is something we are born with. Nativist theories are the bulwark of reaction in psychology; Maslow is no doubt aware of this and it would tarnish his progressive image for him to spell out too clearly the biologism on which his theory rests. He is, however, explicit about the need for a 'naturalistic system of values' based on the 'spontaneous expression' of man's 'instinctoid' nature.

It is interesting to see how Maslow extends his concoction of mysticism and nativism into the field of social prescription. His value system or 'scientific ethic' is based on blatant elitism, on the behaviour of a few prize specimens, his sample of 'self-actualising', 'authentic' persons who 'resist enculturation'.

'Good choosers can choose better than bad choosers what is better for the bad choosers themselves'.

'Only the choices and tastes and judgements of healthy human beings will tell us much about what is good for the human species in the long run'.

This arrogant nonsense is quite compatible with fascist ideology and social engineering; most ordinary working people are by definition (since they are preoccupied with satisfying their 'Deficiency-needs' and do not have the time or money for peak experiences' and B-cognitions') excluded from self-actualisation and therefore from healthy choice - the choices must be made for them.

Let us turn briefly to some aspects of humanistic psychology in practice. According to Rogers, coiner of the term 'encounter', two strands came together in the first

encounter groups - sensitivity training (T) groups (the first of these being at Bethel in 1947; the National Training Laboratory was founded there shortly afterwards), and client-centred therapy groups at the University of Chicago Counselling Centre. The latter were intended to train counsellors who were dealing with the problems of returning G.I.'s, while the NTL has continued to fulfil its function of providing holidays, playgrounds and a sense of technological supremacy to the harrassed lackeys of American big business.

It has been argued that humanistic psychology is somehow a good theory which has been abused at places like NTL. To separate theory from practice in this way is at best naive; moreover the 'abuse' of humanistic psychology has been perpetrated by its very inventors. Rogers has done a great deal of work a company called TRW Systems, organising groups of executives to help them overcome the problems of jealousy and suspicion arising between executives in the many mergers and takeovers which TRW was involved in during the 1950's (one kind of 'growth' with a rather more concrete meaning).

Encounter groups are of course also practiced by academics, social workers, clerics and so on. They are not known to be popular amongst working people, which Rogers explains thus:

'As long as I am concerned over next month's rent, I am not very sharply aware of my loneliness'.

Emotional suffering (like self-actualisation) is therefore the prerogative of the well-to-do. Thus although Rogers has grandiose schemes of using encounters with black militants and police, he must be content largely with work in the higher levels of business organisations and forays into, for example, educational institutions. On any such occasion 'administrative support is most necessary', i.e. the 'facilitators' move in only when asked to do so by the powers-that-be. This gives the lie to claims that encounter groups are a grass-roots movement. There is no doubt who calls the tune in applied humanistic psychology.

Parallels can be drawn the content of encounters and that of the group phenomena of other religious movements, with the Methodist Jumpers and the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example; or with the medicine show and its combination of entertainment, audience participation, and panacea offered by the charismatic quack.

To make an objective appraisal of the function of encounter groups is not to be cynical about the motives of all those who attend them, nor even of those who run them (though the flow of money to the organisers seems to be an invariable characteristic of the 'public' encounters). Such an appraisal would however point out that in many cases feelings of isolation and frustration are exploited and channelled into self-indulgence, self-cultivation and the generation of illusions about 'real' communication. This communication is illusory because the realities of conflict and struggle on which social life is based are either denied or dismissed, in a manner well expressed in this banality by Fritz Perls, late guru of Esalen:

*I do my thing and you do your thing
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
and you are not in this world to live up to mine
You are you and I am I
and if by chance we happen to find each other, it's beautiful
If not, it can't be helped'.*

The extent to which the irrational 'spontaneity' of the encounter differs from everyday experience may enable the participants to derive some titillation from the proceedings, justified by drawing on the sense of awesome mystical significance with which events may be invested, and by fabricating complacent theories about the 'revolution' (an 'inner' one, of course) having already started.

Encounter groups in Britain may not yet have matched the decadence of those in the U.S., where self-absorbed intelligentsia with time and money on their hands may lounge around for days or weeks on end in sumptuous country retreats; but their ideological and diversionary function is the same. They are a means of drawing large numbers of intellectuals into active promotion of extreme individualism, hedonism, and the psychotherapeutic ideology - the ideology of personal adjustment as opposed to political commitment and organisation, of self-fulfilment as opposed to social change, and of serving self and not serving others.

Gaie Houston

The Creative use of Hostility

I flipped through Barry Richards' article in a meeting, and warmed to some of his complaints, so I volunteered to write a response to it. But on a second reading, some of his complaints seem based on an extremely partial interpretation. Carl Rogers can answer for himself; he speaks of the 'desire to understand' being highly communicable and helpful. Helpful in allowing the speaker to experience and express his meaning, and helpful in allowing the listener - or reader - the possibility of expanded awareness. So I want to ask Barry Richards to use a Rogerian technique before dismissing Rogers. The technique is that of expressing your opponent's case in a way which is full enough to satisfy both you and the opponent himself, before expressing your objections. If he did this, Mr Richards would find himself stating much that he has omitted. For example, he ridicules the incompatibility of 'genuineness' and 'unconditional positive regard'. Rogers knows about this too. He confesses to having tried to maintain a front of UPR at times, and having been sussed out by his clients. Page 51 of 'On Becoming a Person' is one of many places in which he emphasises this contradiction and his praxis.

So I accuse Mr Richards of the sort of partiality which is producing defensiveness and cavilling in me. And what else is he evoking? An impatience, that he seems at times to be saying 'These men and these ideas are not in all respects perfect; therefore they are totally contemptible'. So what contradiction could underlie that? Maybe: 'I believe