Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi

Humanistic Psychology: Progressive or Reactionary?

Analysing and clarifying the ideology and political implications of humanistic psychology seems warranted by the importance and impact it has had and is going to have. Over the past 15 years humanistic psychology has taken on the image of a social-intellectual movement, and not just another theoretical approach. Humanistic psychology today may be identified with two parallel trends. One is the more respectable academic trend fashioned as the 'third force' in psychology. The other is the more popular, applied, non-academic trend, often known as the 'human potential movement'. Both sides of humanistic psychology need to be examined in this discussion. Humanistic psychology as a movement and humanistic psychologists as individuals have an anti-establishment, counter- dependent image, first because humanistic psychology is seen as an anti-establishment current within psychology itself. There are three prevalent views of the social impact of humanistic psychology, and we may want to ask which one is closest to reality. Is humanistic psychology an underground movement, keeping the flame of hope for better relations among people burning in the darkness of the world around us? Is it the vanguard of a new cultural revolution, the age of Aquarius and human fulfillment? Or is it a reactionary trend, pacifying the alienated and neutralizing the angry?

ACADEMIC HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

The individualistic orientation of humanistic psychology was expressed in the title of an Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) convention a few years back, which proclaimed 'power to the Person!'. Power to the person as opposed to the more dangerous slogan of 'Power to the People!', is what humanistic psychologists are after, and they seem to regard the two powers as separate. The 'People' slogan may drag the psychologist into the murky waters of societal power relations, and humanistic psychologists want to be given more apolitical than other psychologists (Beit-Hallahmi, 1974). Maslow's motivational theory (Maslow, 1970) almost ignores society in discussing individual problems. Despite the fact that Maslow was ready to state that society is imperfect, and perfecting it would be difficult, and despite his statement that individual problems are related to the nature of society, his analysis on this point is typically vague. What is in the nature of society that affects individual problems? Maslow leaves this question unanswered. Smith, (1973) characterized Maslow's ideas as 'essentially unpolitical'. One may wonder whether being unpolitical is at all possible in the case of a major theory of personality and human development.

Maslow's theory of self actualization and fulfillment can be viewed just like other aspects of the humanistic trend, as a genuine reaction to the reality of alienation in modern society. Fulfillment in the most private sphere is an expression of the trend to

privatize all public concerns. At the same time, humanistic psychology is keenly aware of the psychological realities of alienated social relations. Maslow's recognition of alienation in American society is penetrating and moving: '. . .the truth is the average American does not have a real friend in the world. Very few people have what a psychiatrist would call real friendships (1967, p.30)'.

The optimistic nature of humanistic psychology, as a movement with a vision of world getting better all the time, is certainly in the American tradition of 'positive thinking' (Meyer. 1965). This tradition has based itself on a specific psychological-individual assumption, which is firmly linked with general social conservatism. Optimism and hope for the improvement of society are part of the ethos of academic psychology in general (Tyler, 1973). Its official spokesmen have described psychology as the science of hopeful progress and continuous improvements, and humanistic psychologists share the same kind of optimistic spirit.

Peterman (1972) outlined a plan for social reform, based on Maslow's (1970) formulation of need hierarchy. The essence of the plan is cultural change through training in interpersonal skills and changes in norms of adult interpersonal intimacy. Peterman presents a model of an 'optimal interpersonal environment' which is the ideal for future social change. What is unique about the suggested utopia is that it involves no changes in power relations or economic arrangements in society. It is significant that Peterman recommends a human relations training program marketed by a large, diversified, corporation which has realized the business potiential involved in selling utopia in packages. His sensitivity and sincerity, together with the good sense that many of his proposals make, must be acknowledged, but it is significant that Peterman completely ignores important segments of social reality. Such an ignorance can be understood, given the emphasis of humanistic theory on intimate relationships, to the exclusion of wider ecomomic and political forces, in shaping the potential for human happiness. Schurian (1972) has pointed to an interesting analogy between ethologists and humanists in psychology. Both ethologists and humanists, despite the obvious differences between them, perceive human beings as isolated individuals, totally detached from the historical and social context.

Nord (1973) has analyzed the extreme individualistic basis of academic humanistic psychology and its limitations, He finds in Maslow (1965, 1970) some recognition of needed structural changes to make individual self-actualization possible, but these structural changes are never specified. According to Nord, humanistic psychology has presented a deficient model of human self-actualization because it has not specified the social changes necessary for its achievement. The Marxian model of self-actualization, which is surprisingly similar to Maslow's, but does not neglect the influence of social forces, is offered as an alternative. One of the strongest criticisms of humanistic psychology in its political implications has been made by Lambly (1973). In this critique humanistic psychology and Maslovian metapsychology are described as elitist and authoritarian, potentially being used to support South-African apartheid policies.

Buhler & Allen (1972) analyze the zeitgeist that led to the formation of humanistic psychology as the 'third force'. They duly survey the social and historical context and duly emphasize the social and philosophical meaning of every scientific approach. After mentioning wars, racism and poverty as being part of the background of humanistic psychology, they go on to a discussion of individual dynamics and individual meaning. The connection between social realities and individual meanings is never made, and structural problems in modern society are acknowledged in the most abstract way. We can understand the individualistic bias in humanistic psychology if we adopt the sociology of knowledge stand, suggested by Buhler & Allen (1972), and examine the relationship between the humanistic trend and the society that produced it. Buhler & Allen provide us with a thorough description of the American 'cultural complex' that led to the creation of the 'third force'. The question is whether the 'third force' can transcend this cultural complex, or whether it will remain merely its reflection. Rosenthal is extremely pessimist on this point, and his suggestion is that a theory created in contemporary America cannot transcend the dominant dehumanized concept of man in that society. Another important factor in the zeitgeist of humanistic psychology is the social origins of the people who have created it. The background of the people involved in humanistic psychology is not too different from that of others in psychology and social sciences white, middle class comfortable liberals. It is little wonder that this background leads to a world view which emphasizes liberalism, together with individualism and privatism.

Glass (1971) draws a clear distinction between radicalism and humanism, and shows how the two can be separated. Using his criterion (objection to positivist methodology) for humanism, and for radicalism (opposition to current power structures) it is quite clear that most of humanistic psychology is humanistic but not radical, and often even conservative. An example of conservative humanism is given by Harman (1974). His suggestions for improving capitalism are just that- suggestions for improving capitalism, written from the perspective of the Rockefeller brothers, well known humanists and 'business liberals' (Domhoff, 1967; Lundberg, 1968).

Mills (1959) offered another criterion for radicalism, when he dealt with the question of defining personal problems or structural-societal ones. How far do humanistic psychologists go in examining the social structure as a source of problems for individuals? Not so far, judging by Rogers, (1972). Just defining an issue as 'social', without looking for its structural courses, leads to technical suggestions for improvement, but not radical change. What Rogers (1972) is offering, in order to solve 'social issues' is merely technical help from behavioral scientists. Thus, black-white encounters are offered as an aid in fighting racism. While such encounters may contribute to changing attitudes among their participants, they have no bearings on the real issues, and may actually foster a false feeling of success in over-coming problems. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Beit-Hallahmi, 1972), there is always a danger in overemphasizing psychological factors in the causation and resolution of group conflicts in the political world. Conflicts are not caused by attitudes and images, but by real opposition of interests, and attitudes may very likely be the result of observed status differences in society (Ehrlich, 1973). It echoes concern and care, but

does not deal with changing basic power relations in society.

NON-ACADEMIC HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

It is the non-academic, applied aspect of humanistic psychology which has had considerable impact on psychology as a profession and a discipline. The growth of the 'encounter' or 'Human potential movement' has been striking. Many have regarded it as a real revolution in theory and practice. Sensitivity training, encounter groups, group marathons, and all other varieties of temporary and intense interpersonal contact in groups can be regarded as a reaction to the alienation and shallowness in normal human relations in society (cf. Foa & Donnerwerth, 1971). Viewing such group situations as oppoturnities for the exchange of love and intimacy makes clear why they have become so popular.

Humanistic psychologists have come to believe that group encounters create not only a new therapeutic tool but also a new 'social force' (Rogers, 1967). Many of them express a sincere belief in the possibility that the 'human potential movement' is actually going to change society, by improving interpersonal relations and without touching social institutions or power structures in society (e.g. Greening, 1971). This is an echo of the old liberal dream of changing society without touching institutions. It is also a reflection of humanistic optimism, which tends to minimize the reality of conflicts and emphasize their emotional side.

Many of the advocates of the 'encounter culture' express an almost religious fervor in their hopes for changes in the world around them as a result of spreading encounter gospel. Their belief is that by teaching people new interpersonal skills we are changing the world a little bit, and that every little bit helps towards the ultimate goal. One encounter weekend, one encounter session, contribute to making the world a better place. In terms of ideology and political implications, encounter groups cannot be regarded as radical, since they still concentrate on individual changes and immediate relationships. Despite some emphasis on group processes in encounter group work, the purpose of this work is changing individual members. Humanistic psychotherapy is no different from traditional psychoanalytic approaches in emphasizing individual dynamics and offering the message of adjustment to the world around the individual as the mature, wise way. Humanistic psychology is still the tradition of 'something is wrong with the individual'. Even when it emphasizes that something is right with him, it still focuses on individual dynamics.

Concentrating on internal dynamics and ignoring social problems as determinants of personal suffering has clear political implications (Halleck, 1971). The exclusively privatized view of personal problems, i.e. as stemming from internal roadblocks on the road to self-actualization and not from social problems, tends to neutralize people who may otherwise be politically active. Included in the non-academic strand of humanistic psychology were several manifestations of extreme mystical and escapist ideas, such as the use of astrology, I Ching, etc. The mixers of Eastern wisdom and Western problems offered their followers an escape from private frustrations into satoris or minisatoris achieved through various novel techniques.

THE EFFECTS OF HUMANISTIC THERAPY

The encounter movement has been viewed as the vanguard of a new liberated consciousness, a technique which will provide a ready made way to self-fulfillement in a dehumanizing society. Encounter groups can be criticized as being symptoms of alienation but not its cure, and are not dealing with the causes of dehumanization in society. Since encounter groups are not part of any active solution to the ailments of society they may be regarded as perpetuating the problem.

Humanistic psychotherapy offers the individual a way of becoming free without changing the world around him. The new individualism reflected in this approach advocates changing the internal environment and one's immediate relationship as a way of gaining more freedom. Humanistic psychotherapists participate in the general withdrawal from the evils of the political world which is typical of Western intellectuals (Halmos, 1970). Politics is dirty business, and changing individuals is much neater than changing societies. Humanistic psychologists may be contributing to the illusion of change in society, by viewing themselves as the harbingers of a new age. They are among the prophets who offer a change in 'life style' without looking at basic problems and inequalities in society.

The conflict between humanistic psychotherapy and the society in which it takes place has been recognised by Bugental (1971). After describing the emerging ethic of humanistic therapy, Bugental goes on to say that '. . .we who share this emerging ethic area are a threat to the establishment. It is only that the size and pervasiveness of that threat is as yet unrecognized. (p.24). He describes the gap between the humanistic ethic and the ethic of contemporary society, but is hopeful about closing it, According to Bugental, those who have undergone '. . .a growthful therapeutic emerge . . . as societal change agents themselves.'(p.11). Thus, society can be changed by changing individuals, who in turn are going to affect the world around them. Whether therapy actually has such an effect is doubtful. Halleck (1971) takes a strong exception to this view and suggests that successful individual therapy will minimize motivation for becoming a 'social change agent'.

The underground view of humanistic psychology reflects what can be described as the subculture of feeling, where people are encouraged to behave much differently than the way the majority culture tells them to. The safety valve function of feeling subculture vis-a-vis society as a whole was aptly expressed by a client in a group session: 'Society teaches you to hide and suppress feelings, but then you have all these nice shrinks who tell you what feelings are all right.' Humanistic psychotherapy as an island of feelings and warmth has become a marginal institution in one dimensional society (Marcuse, 1964). It has become a functional equivalent of religion in secularized society. One kind of consolation psychologists have been offering themselves rewarding the effect of their work on society has been the 'Shelter Theory'. It goes like this: 'True, we don't really have any impact on social evils, but at least we can offer people some shelter from these evils.' The 'Shelter' aspect of therapeutic work is especially prominent in encounter groups, which create a temporary hothouse

environment, so different from what society has to offer when the marathon weekend is over. Both religion and humanistic psychotherapy offer a refuge from the ravages of the real world, but do not attempt to change them at the source.

CONCLUSION

Humanistic psychologists are sensitive to social inequality and so called 'social issues'. There is no question about it. The question is rather what is the net effect of humanistic psychology as an intellectual and social movement. Is the net effect one of reinforcing the trend toward real social and political change or is it one of supporting the status quo and neutralizing political energies? One is struck by the sensitivity and good intentions shown by Rogers (1972) and other humanistic psychologists when they write about social problems. Nevertheless, this sensitivity is usually accompanied by a reluctance to look at structural problems, stemming from the extreme individualist and non-ideological basic stance. One obstacle to taking political stands is the non-judgemental spirit of humanistic psychology. If we have to accept people as they are, without rushing to judge them, then we will be very slow to develop motivation for political change. Movements for radical social change are motivated by a strong moral vision, moral condemnations and plenty of value judgements. Humanism emphasizes what human beings have in common. Radicalism emphasizes what seperates them and starts with negation as prerequisite for struggle.

Our criticism of humanistic psychology parallells Marcuse's (1966) critique of neo-Freudian theories. The neo-Freudian school has proclaimed 'optimal development of a person's potentialities and the realization of his individuality', (Marcuse, 1966, p.258) as the goal of therapy. This goal, according to Marcuse is unattainable within present-day civilization, and thus therapy in most cases means adjustment to the social order. If society is dominated by total alienation, how can a productive realization of personality be possible? Marcuse portrays Fromm as a representative of the Power of Positive Thinking, which supports the alienated social order by fostering the 'normal' productivity of good business executive. Since human aspirations for fulfillment are sublimated and spiritualized, neo-Freudian revisionism turns social issues into spiritual ones and ignores the realities of social repression. While Marcuse berates the neo-Freudian for ignoring the concreteness of Eros and Thantos, humanistic psychology should be blamed for ignoring the less controvertible concreteness of power relations in society. Whether self actualization and human fulfillment are possible without real changes in society around the individual, that is our question. Today it seems quite clear that any theory which ignores the necessity of social change actually contributes to its prevention. Looking at the development of humanistic psychology can be compared with various religious revival movements, especially of the Eastern kind. Both academic and non-academic humanistic psychology can be seen as reactions to alienated academic psychology and alienated forms of therapy. In both, we see a genuine search for authenticity. The question remains whether the gap between our humanistic ethic and the existing social ethic can be bridged without a radical social change.

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