

# The Merging of Humanistic Psychology and Progressive Politics with an Application to the Leadership and Dangerous Rhetoric of President Donald Trump: Part 1<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Is it appropriate to include politics within psychology? Or more specifically, is it appropriate to include progressive politics in Humanistic Psychology? In this article I will focus on the above specific form of the psychology/politics question, but my discussion will include in particular the current state of politics in the United States, under the leadership and 'dangerous'<sup>2</sup> rhetoric of President Donald Trump. I have previously described in print my concrete progressive politics/Humanistic Psychology/group facilitation activities since the November 2016 US presidential election (Benjamin, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b), but in this present article I want to take a deeper look at a justification for the merging of Humanistic Psychology and progressive politics, and then explore this merger under the leadership and dangerous rhetoric of President Donald Trump.

To begin with, there is a good deal of current debate on what should be the present and future directions of Humanistic Psychology, and more specifically person-centered psychotherapy (Bazzano, 2018; House et al., 2018). I personally witnessed the latter debate at the July 2016 conference of the World Association for Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapy & Counseling (WAPCEPC) in New York City (Benjamin, 2018c). At this conference I learned how person-centered psychotherapy was seeking broader horizons than the initial person-centered psychotherapy model of Humanistic Psychology founder Carl Rogers (1961, 1980), and was now including some of the 'tribes' of the movement under its umbrella, such as motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) and

focusing (Gendlin, 1981). I have also made my own modest contribution to this extension of Rogers' initial conception of person-centered psychotherapy, through what I have referred to as my contemporary person-centered facilitation of a creative artists support group (Benjamin, 2018c). But I think that in the present time it is both crucial and enticing to explore the question of whether it is appropriate to extend the contours of person-centered psychotherapy, and more generally Humanistic Psychology, in the direction of progressive politics, as I believe that this question has taken on urgent meaning in the current political climate of the United States.

## The Argument for the Infusion of Progressive Politics into Humanistic Psychology

In a 2014 article in the journal of *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, Peter Schmid strongly argued for the inclusion of politics in person-centered psychotherapy, and it can be seen from the following extensive excerpts from Schmid's (2014) article that he is thinking specifically in terms of 'progressive' politics, and generally in terms of Humanistic Psychology:

If we are aware that the PCA [person-centered approach] is social psychology by its very nature and therefore convinced that life springs *not from the Self but from the primary We...* then values like tolerance, solidarity, justice, and support of and for minorities and discriminated people are not a consequence but a foundation and must be demanded. It goes without

saying that this is a political task that requires the courage of one's convictions. (p. 11, original emphases)

If we value the nature of the asymmetricity of a Thou-I relationship and thus the importance of taking the other as truly an *Other*, if we thus understand our profession as *practical social ethics*... then it is a political task to raise our voice for all who, at best, speak in our practices, if at all they find their way to the therapy room: minorities, discriminated people, ignored, laughed at, underprivileged. It is not by coincidence that feminists, and gay and lesbian people, to name only two groups in our culture, and politically suppressed people all over the world, discovered the PCA rightly as an approach that allows them to express themselves. (p. 12, original emphases)

Finally, if the human being's *actualizing tendency* is not simply an inner force of the individual, but essentially a relationship-oriented and social construct and therefore a *personalizing tendency*, characterized by freedom and creativity... and fostered by the *presence* of the Other... then we are obliged to interfere in structures and institutions that are hindering instead of creatively fostering personalization. Instead of remaining in 'noble' silence psychotherapists and counsellors must bring the program of becoming a person, of creative personalization, into the societal discourse much more forcefully. To summarize: if psychotherapy understands itself in this way, then psychotherapists and counsellors have an ethical duty to act politically. (p. 12, original emphases)

Schmid's (2014) above words reverberate in my consciousness: 'We are obliged to interfere in structures and institutions that are hindering instead of creatively fostering personalization... an ethical duty to act politically.' And he goes on to convey what, for me, is a chilling reminder of the urgent issue at stake currently in the political climate of the United States under the leadership and dangerous rhetoric of President Donald Trump:

If we take this sketch of a comprehension of psychotherapy on the basis of its image of the human being being serious, then neither more nor less than the dispute between, on the one hand, remaining dependent to authorities (and, ultimately, totalitarianism), and, on the other hand democracy is at stake; between indoctrination and emancipation, between either dominance, misuse of power and control or participation and sharing.... For a 'political way of being' we need: ...social criticism as an indispensable part of psychotherapeutic theory development, practice, and training.... This requires: us to leave the closet... and the study and to engage politically - therapists need to publicly, politically voice and fight for what they know out

of their experience with clients.... [I]f the goals are personalization and dialogue, there must be no compromise with regard to the essential issues.... We need to raise our voices when the milieu is shaped in which our clients live, which promotes and furthers their life and our own life, or damages and destroys it.... To be apolitical means to stabilize, to fortify the status quo.... Doing psychotherapy and at the same time being politically disengaged or claiming to be non-political is not only cowardice, it is also and simply irresponsible. (Schmid, 2014, 12-14)

And then to summarize his argument, Schmid (2014) powerfully related political involvement to Carl Rogers' (1961) foundational notion of unconditional positive regard:

To summarize; unconditional positive regard definitely has a political dimension. This kind of Love - in the meaning that is clearly defined in the PCA... is a political force. It challenges structures and hierarchies, and breaks up suppression, totalitarianism, self-satisfaction, contentment, narcissism, and idleness. It opens up authenticity, transparency, sincerity, unpredictability, desire to change, free discourse, and reliability. Personalization is necessarily also a political process and, therefore, a political program.... Rogers (1961) wrote that '*the most personal is the most universal*' (p. 26) - and, we need to add: *is the most political*. (p. 14, original emphases)

Schmid (2015) subsequently took his ideas further in the context of a 'person-centered sociotherapy', which he discussed as a 'practice of social ethics, as therapy in and of society and its communities' (p. 217). He unhesitatingly made a call to arms for person-centered therapists to engage themselves politically: 'We do not only need to be aware that doing therapy is always also political, we need to engage politically and promote alternative approaches to societal questions' (p. 231). Schmid ended this 2015 article by relating his advocated progressive political infusion into Humanistic Psychology to a statement made by Carl Rogers himself: 'In his Honorary Lecture to the American Psychological Association, he [Rogers] urged us not to content ourselves merely with treating people "but to change the system"' (quoted by Yalom, 1995, p. viii) (p. 233).

However, the argument to incorporate progressive politics into the person-centered approach did not begin with Schmid's 2014 article, as previous work in this regard can be seen, for example, from O'Hara (2007), Tudor (2000) and a number of articles in the book *Politicizing the Person-centred Approach: An Agenda for Social Change* (Proctor et al., 2006). For example, Seamus Nash (2006) wrote the following:

This political imperative in the very foundations and philosophy of the PCA is based on seeing the human being as a person, with inalienable rights and

choices.... In other words, espousing a person-centred way of being is by its own virtue, political.... Therefore when I, as someone who espouses a person-centred way of being, witness oppression and injustice to others, I cannot ignore this. Action is imperative.... This enables a politicized PCA: as individuals and collectively; through lobbying, writing, research, policy, individual and collective mobilization. (pp. 31–2, 36)

Maureen O'Hara (2006) reinforced Nash's (2006) above statement in her article comparing what she refers to as the 'radial humanism' of Carl Rogers (1961, 1977, 1980, 1986) and Portuguese political activist Paulo Freire (1972):

For Freire, critical consciousness is an ongoing *achievement*, developing only through action in the world. By reflection upon the action, and its consequences in the world (and in their hearts), people become aware of their aspirations to become fully human, and aware of the forces (internal and external) that conspire to enslave the human spirit. (O'Hara, 2006, 120)

And Mick Cooper (2006) discussed the person-centered approach in the context of what he terms 'socialist humanism':

By bringing together socio-political and intrapersonal 'causes' of mental distress into a single conceptual framework, the model outlined here also points to the value of both political and therapeutic activities as a means of enhancing mental well-being. Through political activities, social concerns can be reconfigured, such that people are more able to achieve more of their wants more of the time... bringing humanistic values and practices into a radical political stance.... It is an approach which, I believe, has the potential to become a major new force on the political scene: a truly progressive politics for the twenty-first century. (pp. 89, 93)

In the context of her article that emphasized how Carl Rogers, throughout his career, was deeply concerned about the damaging effect that politics could have on the psychological health of the individual person, Gay Barfield (2006) expressed what I believe has some striking applications to what is currently happening in the United States under the leadership and dangerous rhetoric of President Donald Trump, as I discuss later on in this article:

As a start for activating our hopefulness and our own courage, each one of us might begin by expecting more from our corporations, our popular media and our professional politicians and religions. We might require of them and of ourselves that we self-monitor our greed, be it material or for power, that we speak to

and write articles and editorials and laws and sermons that hold accountable individuals, businesses, governments and religious movements for our thirst for excess profits and power or a place in heaven, at the expense of others.... In altering these downward cultural directions, we might even then elect presidents and prime ministers and legislative bodies and governments that truly believe in responsible ethics and integrity, service and compassion, fair economic systems, equity and justice, a free press, religious and cultural diversity and our own personally devised constitutions. I, for one, await with great anticipation such articles and actions and idealistic leadership from among us. (pp. 241–2)

And Max Boyd (2006) conveyed a powerful and passionate personal statement about the necessity of engaging the person-centered approach with progressive political actions:

A crucial question for me is not just why social change is relevant to the person-centered approach but how we counsellors make connections with movements for global justice and social change.... Political involvement is not just an optional extra or the eccentricity of a few. We can choose to be active or passive in that involvement – we cannot help but be involved.... We counsellors need a social context that 'affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance'.... I want to be part of such a common alliance between the person-centered approach and movements for social change, other helping professionals with similar concerns, and the mental health users' movements.... We have to understand that the mental distress we seek to alleviate is over-determined by the social forces of poverty, warfare, ageism, sexism, racism, violence, trauma, and loss. (pp. 296–7)

There are current arguments for combining the person-centered approach with progressive politics in the context of the negative effects of *neoliberalism* on the human relations empathic dynamics that are at the cornerstone of person-centered psychotherapy, as described by the Argentinian person-centered psychotherapist Claudio Rud (2018):

This new form of late capitalism, inherited from savage capitalism and defined as neoliberalism, has consequences that are translated into daily life and that affect us as subjects submitted to the imperative of the system, manipulated by the mass media of the global corporate power generating what is now defined as the 'post-truth', a word that entered the Oxford dictionary in 2016. We bear this condition in our countries, in our groups, in our families, inside the therapy room, and perhaps even more importantly

inside each of us, something that manifests an effacement of the subjective dimension, as an accentuation of selfishness and competition, as loss of the capacity to empathize as well as loss of joy. As it happens, neoliberal capitalist totalitarianism has been disguised as democracy and its result is the social catastrophe that we suffer in our country. (pp. 17–18)

In regard to the wider context of progressive politics and Humanistic Psychology, in my youth I was quite stimulated by the critical analysis of what it means to be 'normal' in relation to an 'abnormal' society, as described by the humanistic writers and psychiatrists Erich Fromm (1955) and R. D. Laing (1968). In 2011, I conveyed my perspective on the concrete inclusion of progressive politics into Humanistic Psychology, as can be seen from my *AHP Perspective* article in regard to the Occupy movement (Benjamin, 2011). A similar perspective can be seen more recently from a 2016 article with regard to the Black Lives Matter movement (Hoffman et al., 2018), and from the articles by O'Hara (2018) and Duffell (2018) in the section entitled 'Socio-political Cultural Perspectives' in the edited volume *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects* (House et al., 2018). In his foreword to this edited volume, Manu Bazzano (2018) passionately described the detrimental current political climate in which Humanistic Psychology is trying to survive:

Humanistic Psychology spoke to the world congruently, empathically, and holding this frail blue planet with unconditional positive regard. Did the world listen? Did it notice? As I'm writing this, the geopolitical landscape keeps tilting towards opposite values: intolerance, divisiveness, hatred of otherness, the worship of supremacy, easy money, and war. The few public figures who at present speak out for humanness, justice and equality are increasingly ridiculed by a hostile media and ostracized by a mounting wave of reactionary populism. (p. xix)

And back in the late 1970s, Carl Rogers (1986) demonstrated his 'shift' about realising that he needed to speak out in the political arena:

I have never before spoken out on the broad spectrum of social issues which face our society. Now, however, I believe our culture is facing a life and death crisis on many fronts, and that I have an obligation as a citizen to speak out. I am frightened about our destiny as a people, as a nation. So I want to take as clear a stand as I can on a variety of issues. I recognize very well that I am no expert in most of the fields I shall mention, but I shall simply voice the attitudes and views of one deeply concerned person. (p. 24)

There were a number of humanistic psychologists in the 1970s and 1980s who shared Rogers' evolving political awareness in relation to Humanistic Psychology. For example, James Lafferty

(1986) conveyed the following in his article 'Political responsibility and the Human Potential Movement':

I appreciate the fact that the AHP [Association for Humanistic Psychology] is not a political organization. And yet, if we are an organization committed to finding solutions to the human problems of our clients or patients, then can we fail to have a political thrust to our organizational work? If we recognize that the problems our patients and clients present are often, in whole or in part, a result of the way our nation is now governed and structured, can we fail to address those broader, external, political issues?... What I am suggesting, however, is that the organization's political work be labeled as such and be made a dominant and announced part of the organizational structure and program of AHP.... Only an organized, active, and militant political movement will truly make the world a 'better place for all of us.' (p. 50)

For an earlier rather colorful language description of what Lafferty (1986) is essentially saying, Michael Glenn (1971) expressed the following in the context of the Radical Therapy movement, which was partially inspired by the work and writings of R. D. Laing (1968):

Therapy is change, not adjustment. This means change – social, personal, and political. When people are fucked over, people should help them fight it, and then deal with their feelings. A 'struggle for mental health' is bullshit unless it involves changing this society which turns us into machines, alienates us from one another and our work, and binds us into racist, sexist, and imperialist practices. (Anderson, 1986, 179)

Using more 'academic' language, Walt Anderson (1986) conveyed this same idea in his early 1970s article 'Politics and the new humanism': 'The humanistic perspective becomes not merely psychological, but political; we are not talking about principles of research or therapy, but about principles of social action and institutional change' (p. 182). And Elizabeth Campbell (1986) also used more academic language to convey this same idea:

I further believe that the next step is one of social responsibility, understanding that my needs and rights are interconnected with everyone. So personal growth and responses to change become linked with societal transition.... We always hoped and intended that a self-actualizing individual by definition would become socially responsible and transfer learnings about self and others into the world. (p. 198)

Moving forwards into our current decade, in my 2011 *AHP Perspective* article, 'Humanistic Psychology, progressive politics,

and the “peaceful” occupations: an integrated perspective’ (Benjamin, 2011), I made the case for incorporating progressive politics into Humanistic Psychology, with a focus on the Rebuilding the American Dream movement and the Occupy movement:

The basic principles of humanistic psychology can also be seen in some of the core features of progressive politics, in particular from the progressive platform of the Rebuilding the American Dream organization... painstakingly built up from the grass roots meetings of more than fifteen hundred ‘house parties’ all over the country in July, 2011. Having facilitated one of these house parties in my own rural Maine community, I was actively engaged in creating a political/humanistic group atmosphere that I believe Carl Rogers would have been pleased with.... The peaceful progressive political context of the occupations goes along with the guiding principles of humanistic psychology – involving the building of caring relationships in all segments of our society.... [T]he only viable means of effectively promoting a progressive humanistic/political agenda may very well be through a continued outpouring of demonstrations and occupations all over the country.... The enemy as I and many others see it is unrestrained self-interest, greed, and militarism, resulting in unchecked violence and a total disregard of those who are less well off. The progressive agenda prioritizes promoting jobs and fighting against cuts to human service programs, ending the war in Afghanistan, taxing the rich, and preserving the environment. Effective human service programs go hand in hand with respecting people’s feelings, enhancing people’s creativity, and promoting people’s personal growth and development, which are the essential building blocks of humanistic psychology.... These precious humanistic staples are in danger of virtually disappearing from the way our children are growing up. This is why I believe that humanistic psychology absolutely needs to meld itself into the political hotbed of what is going on in our country.... There will soon be no more opportunity to relate to people ‘humanistically’ if we do not fight the beast away from our doors. This is what Carl Rogers dedicated himself to in various parts of the world in his later years [Rogers, 1980], and this is what I believe is urgently needed in our country right here and now. (pp. 8, 10)

Moving further forward into our current 2018 world of right-wing political take-overs all over the world, the editors of *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects* (House et al., 2018) described an extremely disturbing and dangerous scenario, along with the need to revisit and re-emphasize Humanistic Psychology:

As multiple stresses associated with neoliberalism and austerity precipitate a burgeoning epidemic of mental health problems and a chronic loss of certainty, and attitudes and values which Humanistic Psychology (and other liberalizing movements) have long espoused appear to be under threat – universalism, human rights, women’s and minority rights, anti-racism and anti-fascism, care for the Earth, distributional fairness, freedom from intrusive surveillance, and so forth – the need to revisit and re-assert humanistic principles may be greater than ever. (p. 2)

In this context the above authors (House et al., 20018) made the following positive political statement about Humanistic Psychology: ‘From its very outset, Humanistic Psychology has engaged fulsomely and fearlessly with the social, cultural and political, in a way that much of mainstream “scientific” positivistic psychology has sought to avoid’ (p. 73). However, not all writers in Humanistic Psychology are in agreement with the above statement, as can be seen from the authors of the article ‘An existential humanistic perspective on Black Lives Matter and contemporary protest movements’ (Hoffman et al., 2018):

Humanistic psychology, including existential-humanistic psychology, has been disturbingly quiet on multicultural and social justice issues historically... [W]ithin existential-humanistic psychology, we should be committed to engaging these issues.... When the perpetual experiential reality is one of degradation and oppression, the natural humanistic response is one of protest.... If existential-humanistic psychology proclaims itself to be rooted in compassion and an advocate for social dignity, yet remains silent on the pressing racial issues of our times, then it deserves the fate of gradually withering into irrelevance that will likely follow.... With regard to racism and other forms of prejudice, psychology too often has encouraged people to become comfortable in their role of being oppressed and marginalized instead of empowering people to stand up to injustice.... If humanistic and existential-humanistic psychology truly values human dignity, compassion, and empathy, and practices the art of listening and valuing the experience of others, including the marginalized and oppressed, then there is no authentic option but to speak. (pp. 596, 599, 607–8)

Finally, in a striking portrayal for the formulation of a ‘humanistic politics’, former long-time California state legislature John Vasconcellos (2006) made an extremely impactful statement that, I believe, ties together many of the ideas in the preceding quoted articles for incorporating progressive politics into Humanistic Psychology. Vasconcellos made this statement specifically from a person-centered perspective, but I think it



can be viewed more generally from a Humanistic Psychology perspective:

Here and now we owe it to ourselves and to our larger society to recognize, and to commit ourselves, again individually and altogether, to undertake the next great era of discovery – how to translate the tenets of our person-centered psychology into the entirety of our social and political realms and how to transform the entirety of our social and political realms according to the faithful tenets of our person-centered psychology. It is not hyperbole to state that the very future of our human race depends upon our successfully making this revolutionary transformative journey altogether – beginning right now! This socio-political frontier is immediate and daunting, as well as essential and vital to our hopes and future – because our own individual capacity for fully realizing ourselves as persons depends upon the totality of our respective life experiences, which come at the hands of those who operate our culture and institutions and their various processes and policies and programs.... We owe it to ourselves and to each other right now to faithfully and boldly and enduringly carry our enhanced selves wholeheartedly into a comprehensive effort to create instead a new person-centered politics – serving to transform our politics and our governments at every level, as well as the entirety of our social realms. Our calling is therefore altogether radical and subversive – because it goes to the very root of our society and culture and institutions, and deeply challenges and subverts the entirety of our culture’s basic formative assumptions regarding our human nature and potential. We must enlist and mobilize ourselves right now in nothing less than ‘The new human revolution!’.... So we must now, each and all of us, enlist ourselves in an historic effort, broad and deep, smart and strategic, wise and comprehensive – to assure that every institution and practice, policy and program is entirely transformed according to our faithful person-centered vision of our selves. (pp. 304, 306)

It is my contention that at this present time, in particular regarding the political climate of the United States under the leadership and rhetoric of President Donald Trump, it is important that a heightened progressive political network be embraced by Humanistic Psychology, in the context described in all of the above-cited articles. Furthermore, I believe that this kind of progressive political activity may very well need to involve peaceful political protests, as I described above in relation to the 2011 Occupy movement (Benjamin, 2011) and Hoffman et al. (2016) described above in the context of the Black Lives movement. Hoffman et al. (2016) conveyed their rationale for advocating for political protests in the context of multiculturalism:

At the time of this writing, there has been an increased period of protests about police violence, particularly as it has disproportionately impacted people of color.... The protests are understood and experienced differently by many people of privilege and people from marginalized groups.... [T]he political and legal systems have not protected marginalized groups the way it has privileged groups. If the protests were quiet and civil, or comprised of merely writing letters to legislatures, it is unlikely that it would draw enough attention to bring about any significant change. (p. 119)

It is precisely this kind of political protest and advocacy work, in a peaceful context, that is consistent with the basic values of Humanistic Psychology, that I will discuss later in part II of this article, in relation to my political/psychology work that I have previously described (Benjamin, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b) in what has been referred to as ‘the Resisting Trump movement’. However, I would like to first take a look at the impact of politics on mental health in the current political climate in the United States, under the leadership and dangerous rhetoric of President Donald Trump. I will return to this in part II of the article, in the summer 2019 issue (magazine number 3).

#### Notes

- 1 This article is the first part of a two-part article. Part 2 will appear in the next issue of the AHP online magazine in the summer, and will include the sections ‘The Impact of Politics on Mental Health Under the Leadership and Dangerous Rhetoric of President Donald Trump’, and ‘My Work in the Resisting Trump Movement’, followed by a Conclusion to the article.
- 2 There is concerning supportive evidence for my characterization of President Trump’s rhetoric as ‘dangerous’. First of all, the Federal Bureau of Investigation November 2018 report indicated a 17 per cent increase in hate crimes in 2017 (see [goo.gl/Rds6ii](http://goo.gl/Rds6ii)); and nearly 60 per cent of these hate crimes are tied to race (see [goo.gl/torSwc](http://goo.gl/torSwc)). And in the book *The Constitution Demands It: The Case for the Impeachment of Donald Trump* (Fein et al., 2018), the following material about Trump’s rhetoric is included, which I find particularly disturbing in relation to the above FBI 2017 hate-crimes statistics:

Since entering office, Trump has urged police to be ‘rough’ with suspects, given aid and comfort to neo-Nazis and other white supremacists, and suggested that the military should commit war crimes against Muslims. On July 28, 2017, in a speech to police officers, Trump openly encouraged police to be ‘rough’ with people they arrest. (p. 97)

A survey of more than 10,000 K-12 educators by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that the 2016 presidential election led to increases in ‘verbal

harassment, the use of slurs and derogatory language, and disturbing incidents involving swastikas, Nazi salutes and Confederate flags', with 'over 2,500 educators describing specific incidents of bigotry and harassment that can be directly traced to election rhetoric'. (p. 101)

A peer-reviewed epidemiological study of the 2016 election found that cities experienced a 12 percent increase in assaults on days when Trump held a rally, as compared to days when there was no campaign rally. (p. 101)

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