

Book Review

Politicizing the Person-Centred Approach: An Agenda for Social Change

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This is a provocative, stimulating, and passionate collection of 31 theoretical essays, calls to action, testimonials, reports, and critical analyses addressing the person-centered approach (PCA) and politics and social action. Most of the essays explore ways in which PCA and “radical political theory and activity” can contribute to each other. Several essays focus on therapy in general. I recommend *Politicizing* to those who want to explore the political implications of their person-centered practices. I emphasize “explore.” The book, by design, raises questions, suggests paths, and inspires reflection.

Politicizing offers approximately 31 answers to the question of what it means to politicize PCA. A sampling: For Perret (Chapter 2), the person-centered approach, which fosters loving one’s neighbor as oneself, is inherently political. Vasconcellos (Chapter 30) outlines a program he calls the Politics of Trust, which, in simplified form, is elements of Rogers’ theory of personality change writ large. Lago and Haugh (Chapter 19) see politics entering through the racial identity of counselors, and they explore the implications of “whiteness” in counseling. Hough (Chapter 26) sees connections between emotional literacy and PCA. MacDonald (Chapter 5) examines the political implications of time limits on therapy. Sanders (Chapter 1) argues, easily, that therapy is inherently political and offers a map of the ways politics seeps into therapy—e.g., through professionalization and government regulation, theories of pathology, and training. Wood

(Chapter 27) sees living well in a place in community with others as an expression of person-centered values.

The essays that interested me took or implied positions on the relationship between PCA values and political action and the state. In regard to the latter, I found a serious omission in the volume: the failure to address how Rogers' or other person-centered views are compatible with *any* type of state. A state, whatever else it does, redistributes wealth and goods by force (think taxes, if you have doubts about this claim). Instead of a close reading of Rogers (or of anyone else in the person-centered tradition) that proposes specific implications and *justifications* for political positions and action, many of the authors simply marry PCA views with roughly left, socialist, and feminist political positions. Most of the authors accept a liberal state that redistributes wealth and "takes care" of its citizens. MacDonald (Chapter 5), for example, argues that the National Health Service should not limit the number of therapy sessions clients can receive. What is the PCA argument for requiring and paying taxes?

Cooper (Chapter 10), in what is in many ways a lovely essay, outlines "a vision of a what a person-centered informed polity might look like. . . [that] incorporates the essence of person-centered thinking into a broadly socialist framework" (p. 80). He identifies "a deep faith in humankind" and a "commitment to non-hierarchical relations and [an] emphasis on freedom and liberation" (p. 85) as part of the essence of PCA and humanism. His socialism is that of the Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, who wants to liberate all human beings from alienation into free activity. As Marx writes in the Bottomore translation, "Communism is the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation. . . the return of man. . . as a social, i.e., really human being" (Marx 1932/1976, p. 127). How does a person-centered commitment to non-hierarchical social relations mesh with an abolition of private property, which is a key notion of Cooper's Marx? How does developing emotional literacy in (compulsory?) schools and helping politicians communicate openly, both of which Cooper advocates, help us get there?

It is one thing to argue, as Cooper does, that "structural inequalities" in society create unequal opportunities for self-actualization. It's another to propose a person-centered approach to

eliminating these inequalities. Cooper's hope for a humanist-socialist movement or political party that would fight for "social justice" begs the question of the relationship between person-centered values and a parliamentary monarchy.

If PCA proponents can be divided into roughly nondirective and directive camps—those who believe the task of the therapist is to offer a relationship for persons to free themselves as they conceive of freedom and those who know what freedom is and act to bring people to it—almost all of the writers are in the directive camp (and I am not). They want to free people to a way of being that they have identified as real freedom or reorganize society to provide what they see as equal conditions for growth. Sanders (Chapter 11) offers a disturbing example of this thinking.

Sanders uses Marxist and neo-Marxist theory to develop a theory of alienation that encompasses and transcends what he sees as Rogers' limited focus on interpersonal relationships as a cause of "self-alienation." He does not know what a practice based on his theory would look like, but it would not just restore the clients' control over their lives sufficiently to return, say, to "unfulfilling work and their prescribed role as passive consumers." He asks, "Should we be satisfied with restoring to our clients the fake freedom to choose which brand of clothing to identify with?" (p. 111). Sanders' theorizing is impressive, but it lands him in a place far removed from trusting clients or respecting their right to self-determination. Actually, it lands him in the midst of questions to which he does not have answers. He does not know how to use his theory in a way that doesn't oppress clients.

I don't see how Sanders' thinking can be used in therapy in a way consistent with nondirective practice. When you have ideas about freeing clients from something (alienation, spectacle, and consumer culture, as Sanders would have it), you are up to something. You are up to the same thing as therapists who want to free people from godlessness, mental illness, effects of racism, structural inequalities, lack of awareness of historical conditions, meaninglessness, faulty schemas, failure to accept responsibility—fill in the blank with any of hundreds of goals of therapy. You've got the truth about life and you want to bring people to it. Sanders, who elsewhere has identified

himself as a classical client-centered therapist (Sanders, 2004), is, if I may interpret, stuck between a sense of horror at much of modern life and a commitment to following clients' direction. Rogers managed the unique trick of developing a theoretical justification for not pushing people around. No one in this book who extends his theory does so in a way that does not have an agenda for clients or citizens.

Remarkably little attention is paid to Rogers' own views on the relationship between his views and politics. The Rogers who wrote, "The politics of the client-centered approach is a conscious renunciation and avoidance by the therapist of all control over, or decision-making for the client" (Rogers 1977/1989, p. 38), appears in but a few pieces, and there not powerfully. The libertarian/anarchist implications of Rogers are rarely mentioned, and then usually dismissively.

Mearns (Chapter 13) takes an engaging look at the politics of helping and his own career as a person-centered therapist working "within the system." In the concluding section of his essay, he asks if his work as a person-centered therapist and his person-centered approach to relating to administrators have served or subverted the antihumanistic institutions in which he has worked. Wow—to have worked 35 years with a deeply thoughtful, value-based commitment and to wonder if one has been accomplishing the opposite of what one intended. Hopkins' essay (Chapter 28) may be a comfort to him. She asks, "Can I offer unconditional positive regard to people described as perpetrators of terror?" Her answer is that we are all part of an authoritarian, terroristic system, and the only person-centered response is to be more deeply person-centered—more accepting, more nonjudgmental.

The one form of political action that is an incontrovertible expression of person-centered values is dialogue. *Politicizing* is a venue for important voices in the conversation about how to live an integral, authentic person-centered life. You don't have to agree with any of the 31 participants to be moved and challenged by what they say.

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