Humanistic Psychology in Cultural and Historical Context[1]

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In order to start to consider what Humanistic Psychology might contribute to the new, disquieting and rapidly emerging socio-economic-cultural terrain facing us, it is useful to take a step back and consider the cultural conditions in which Humanistic Psychology emerged in the first place. Humanistic Psychology, like any cultural phenomenon, developed in a particular socio-historic context. It has been some fifty years since the humanistic 'brand' first began to enter the cultural mainstream in North America, where it was widely hailed as a 'Third Force' to counterbalance the perceived reductionist excesses of behaviourism and the pessimistic outlook of psychoanalysis. Its optimistic ethos and emphasis on human potential, rather than on deficiency and a dehumanizing 'psychopathology' discourse, perfectly suited the 1960s *Zeitgeist* of expansiveness, creativity and abundance and, for a while at least, it went from strength to strength. Yet here we are in 2016 when, despite considerable propagation of humanistic *ideas* into the wider society, the humanistic approach, within both Psychology and within the psychological therapies, seems to have a definite visibility (if not credibility) problem – as some of our contributors argue in this book. Has something gone wrong, or have we missed a trick and been outwitted by more ruthlessly power-aware approaches? Or was this always the inevitable outcome for an approach whose common ground rested largely upon shared values and progressive but, crucially, *diverse* attitudes, rather than on a single, sharply defined (tribalist?) theoretical doctrine?

After the carnage and atrocities of the Second World War, which followed hard upon the Great War and subsequent Great Depression, there had been not only a widespread desire for a more equal society (witness the surprise landslide election of Atlee's progressive Labour government in Britain in 1945), but also a thirst for a deeper understanding of human nature and the existential human condition. Pioneering (and sometimes maverick) humanistic psychologists like Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Eric Berne and

Fritz Perls were soon making an impact on conventional psychological thinking and practices, and rapidly became virtual celebrities in their time, with the 'movement' they collectively founded beginning to recast psychology and therapy in less professionalized and more democratic terms, as something which could be 'all things to all people', and which no longer necessarily needed to be considered as lying purely and exclusively within the realm of experts (e.g. Mair, 1997). To 'know oneself' was no longer to be the preserve of a privileged and fortunate few – anyone could have a go.

Though it can sound quite passé and unexceptional today, in its time this was indeed revolutionary stuff. You didn't have to be 'neurotic' or 'broken' to seek therapy, which came increasingly to be seen as being about self-discovery, personal growth and the healing of society's problems from the inside out, rather than simply 'curing' an individual's psychological disease or psychopathology. The emphasis was on individual *autonomy*, taking personal responsibility for oneself, and being fully alive in the moment. Carl Rogers went on to question whether 'professionals' were even needed any more in his seminal lecture on the helping professions, in which he had a telling section entitled, 'Dare we do away with professionalism?' (Rogers, 1973; see also *Self and Society*, 2013a). Tellingly, today Rogers' profound question still remains largely unanswered (though it has been exhaustively explored within the humanistic literature); and sadly, in our view – and notwithstanding many notable and admirable exceptions keeping the humanistic flame alive – since the 1990s the pendulum seems to have swung back towards both the 'professionalization of helping', and a psychiatrically oriented, pathology-based model of human functioning (Parker et al., 1995). Therapy these days, at least in the mainstream, is once again for those who are defined as sick or deficient in some way – and at worst, may be deployed as a means for getting the disadvantaged (back) into a low-paid and demeaningly alienating jobs market (e.g. Thomas, 2016). As we put it in the title of a theme issue of the *Self and Society* journal which we co-edited, 'Welcome to the paradigm war' (*Self and Society*, 2013b).

Still, back in its halcyon days, Humanistic Psychology seemed, for a while at least, to be an unstoppable force which found common cause with other left/green cultural

movements of the time. Well-known therapists appeared on television, and popular therapy books such as Eric Berne's *Games People Play* (1964 – over 5 million copies sold to date), Carl Rogers' *On Becoming a Person*, and Arthur Janov's *The Primal Scream* (1970) became best-sellers, with the latter being read by tens of thousands of Americans, in the process bringing Janov considerable popular success and acclaim. The sheer scale of the movement around that time, both in North America and beyond, is staggering by today's standards, with Rowan (2004) reporting that the fifth European Association for Humanistic Psychology (EAHP) Congress in Rome in 1981 attracted some 500 participants, and with the sixth Congress, held in Paris, attracting 800 participants – only to be aced by the March 1985 quarter-century celebration in San Francisco, which attracted a mega-gathering over one thousand strong (Rowan, 2004: 231–3).

John Rowan also describes several other extraordinary events in the history of Humanistic Psychology. For example, there was the conference held in Easton, Maryland State in 1979, at which some 120 leading government officials from virtually every government department assembled for three days to explore the implications of humanistic values and practices for social change. Perhaps it's no coincidence that this occurred during the presidency of arguably one of the most progressive and unjustly unrecognized US presidents of recent decades, Jimmy Carter. According to then AHP President, Jean Houston (quoted in Rowan, 2004: 229), 'We in the AHP were asked by a number of key officials to continue to assist and consult with their departments… The *Washington Post* featured a long editorial applauding the conference'. Notwithstanding the pioneering work of figures like Susie Orbach and Andrew Samuels in bringing emotional awareness into the British political world via their Antidote work, remembering such extraordinary initiatives can only evoke a mixture of awe and desperate yearning for such progressive thinking helping to heal our broken political system today (cf. Palmer, 2011). Across its mixed history, Humanistic Psychology has repeatedly (though perhaps not always) been 'ahead of its time' and ahead of the game, in all manner of rich and creative ways.

During the heady late 1960s then, therapists and 'alternative' psychiatrists, like R.D. (Ronnie) Laing, Thomas Szasz and Arthur Janov, became as much the spokes-people of the 'counter-culture' as were the hippy poets, rock stars and novelists, and the new 'celebrity' political philosophers such as Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Goodman (Self and Society, 2016) and Noam Chomsky. These were the days when Ronnie Laing questioned the very foundations of mainstream psychiatric thinking (routinely attracting hissing whenever his name was mentioned at orthodox psychiatry conferences), took LSD, went to India, and wrote poetry. Laing's *Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (1967) became a cult classic; and Arthur Janov helped John Lennon exorcise his inner demons, leading to a best-selling album about the experience – the 1970 release, 'Plastic Ono Band'.

Many of us post-war 'baby boomers' were instinctively drawn to the values of the humanistic approaches (we use the plural advisedly), and perhaps above all by the belief that they offered a route to greater *authenticity* (cf. Jackson, 2013). The desire to be *real* and *authentic – keywords in the new humanistic lexicon –* resonated deeply with the rock and roll generation, tired of what many saw, like James Dean's Rebel without a Cause, as their parents' generation's 'uptight' artifice and sexual repression. Humanistic Psychology seemed like a major step in the right direction, towards the kind of egalitarian, person-centred, forward-looking world which many longed for – but conveniently, without any of the totalitarian conformity of state communism – still a force to be reckoned with back then – or having to engage too much with the frustrations, compromises and general 'square-ness' of increasingly satirized mainstream politics. Rather like Dylan and the Rolling Stones, then, for a while at least Humanistic Psychology was *cool*, *far out*, and above all counter-cultural and exciting.

It's been said by some that the 1960s really ended, not on the 1 January 1970, but on the 8th December 1980 when John Lennon was shot in New York. One of the editors of this book (JM) was in a large Primal group at Art Janov's Institute in Los Angeles, California that very night. Many in the group spent the evening screaming and crying out in inconsolable shock, horror and disbelief. How could this have happened? Lennon's

hugely influential art, irreverence for authority and persona had brought many to this 'therapeutic Mecca' in the first place. How could the figurehead of the 'revolution' who had imagined 'all the people living life in peace' be shot in cold blood? Our optimistic *humanistic* philosophy maintained that people were basically good – that the human organism could be trusted, if we allowed its inherent wisdom to prevail all would be well.. To many it seemed as if the egalitarian dream of the sixties was really over, and as political progressives struggled with the ascendancy of the neoliberal right's champions, Reagan and Thatcher, many baby-boomers arguably sought refuge from what they saw as a dehumanizing, free-market ideology by immersing themselves in an increasingly individualistic and introspective therapy culture.

We could draw parallels with recent political developments. Another dream at least appears to be coming to an end. The day after Donald Trump was elected, many young progressives were seen crying inconsolably in the streets. Similarly, with Brexit, there was an outpouring of grief and disbelief. These events seem to represent the 'how-could-this-happen' moments of a whole new generation. This time around though, with a global swing towards right wing populism, authoritarianism and intolerance, perhaps the fear runs deeper and the stakes seem higher, particularly for those who grew up in, and perhaps took for granted, the sense of 'progress-toward-a-more-tolerant-future' ethos of the nineties and noughties. The great financial crisis of 2008 seems to have changed everything, and even eight years later, it's unclear which way the world is heading. Are we really going backwards? As we write this, nobody really knows.

The 'Woodstock generation' was to encounter bewilderment and the shattering of their hopes and dreams again and again as the 1980s unfolded, and ruthless Darwinian market forces, given free rein by Friedman- and Hayek-inspired Reaganomics and Thatcherism, raged across the Western world. 'Self-actualization', the Holy Grail of the early humanistic movement, also began to manifest a darker, shadow side: self-obsession and an insatiable appetite for 'stuff' (see, for example, Lasch, 1979; Wallach and Wallach, 1983; Furedi, 2004; Gerhardt, 2010). The advertising industry, never slow to jump on a trend, also co-opted the humanistic message of authenticity and freedom. Authenticity

now became something that could be attributed to a product, and with psychology manipulatively exploited to increase sales (Roberts, 2015) – 'It's the *real* thing'; and as the Coke Generation 'taught the world to sing in perfect harmony', the message was clear: self-liberation could now be achieved through conspicuous consumption.
The nineties and the noughties continued in much the same individualistic and materialistic vein, and, notwithstanding the occasional recession, a whole new generation was invited to join in the party.

In the UK, the Tony Blair's Centrist New Labour was elected in a landslide to the optimistic strains of 'Things Can Only Get Better'. With hindsight, that seems rather naïve, not unlike, some might argue, the 'All You Need is Love' ethos of the late 1960s. And meanwhile, as the neo-liberal world view became increasingly mainstream, normalized and taken-for-granted, and as the 'haves' pulled up the economic ladder and left the 'have nots' behind, much mainstream 'therapy', humanistic or otherwise, seemed to be moving away from (perhaps it had little choice?) a 'human potential' model, and increasingly towards ministering to the emotional and spiritual wounds of those who had fallen by the wayside in what had become, despite the smokescreen of 'touchy-feely' messages, a fiercely competitive and sometimes soul-destroying culture.

In his 2008 invocation of 'Yes we can' discourse, US President Barack Obama sought to re-awaken and re-connect with an optimistic humanistic ethos. As Obama realized, a *humanistic* generation of baby-boomers does still exist, who still, despite everything, want to believe that a just, progressive society is a real possibility. We are still here, and it appears a majority of young people also share similar values and aspirations for a more tolerant and inclusive society. Yet the democratic left has self-evidently failed to connect with many of those who feel they have been left behind by globalism, or that their anxieties about a rapidly changing world have been dismissed or even ridiculed. Enter the New Populism of Nigel Farage, Donald Trump et al.

In terms of age, the three authors are part of that idealistic generation which now finds itself taking stock and asking – despite the inequality, the wars, the fundamentalism, the

rampant capitalism, the terrorism, the political corruption, 'post-truth' anti-ethics and hate-speech, and the other ills which continue to plague the human race – to what extent might those of us who have been drawn to and aligned ourselves with humanistic ideas have succeeded in realizing at least some of the humanistic dream? And is that dream still valid in current cultural-historical circumstances, or do we need a new one? (or, at the very least, and given recent events, a realistically updated one). There are perhaps tentative signs of a renewed interest in the history of our field, from those who weren't there first time around. For instance, David Tennant (the renowned actor best known for playing Doctor Who) is soon to star in a major film about R.D Laing and Kingsley House. Still, no matter how much we may revisit and even revere the past, we are where we are now.

Where are we now? Has Humanistic Psychology fulfilled some, or any, of its early promise and potential? Has it floundered along the way, and turned into something that its founders, amongst others, might fail to recognize, were they alive today? Further, has Humanistic Psychology actually contributed negatively to some of the mess we currently find ourselves in? And might it be so that, notwithstanding the somewhat tainted humanistic dream, Humanistic Psychology's comparative failure to make significant inroads into modern academic and cultural discourses and practices is an argument for *redoubling* our efforts to assert the human against the inhuman, both within mainstream positivistic Psychology and in present-day culture more generally, rather than to give up in despair?

Perhaps it is also time to fearlessly consider Humanistic Psychology's current condition, the pathway of its development over the past half century, and what this suggests about its future. What are its distinctive achievements, and what might it have surrendered or compromised in the process of becoming more respectable, 'professional' and mainstream? Are what seem to some to be unacceptable compromises actually signs of adaptation and a coming of age, and therefore to be welcomed, or at the least accepted?

In the trajectory of Humanistic Psychology, especially but not exclusively in the UK, whilst counselling and psychotherapy have without question enjoyed a boom period of increased social acceptance (so much so that it is indeed as if Philip Rieff's 'Triumph of the Therapeutic' had finally come to pass – Rieff, 1966), within that trend many if not most counsellors and psychotherapists espouse at least *some* humanistic values and practices. And yet affiliation to overtly 'humanistic' professional organizations is everywhere either at a standstill, or on the wane. Why might this be? Is there perhaps a failure of 'branding'? For whatever reason, many long standing humanistic organizations continue to experience alarming declines in membership.

There are clearly issues of professional identity and affiliation here in the UK, with the centre of gravity of humanistic work having shifted through the 1980s and 1990s from the 'Growth Centres' to the terrritory of the practitioner, training and accreditation lobbies. In this changed context, the question of affiliation – and the simple economic calculus that militate against belonging to more than one or two professional organizations – has become a more pragmatic one, rather than necessarily a statement of core values, possibly thereby eroding the rather loose and ill-defined sense of affiliation and kinship that somehow held the 'humanistic movement' together so well in previous decades.

Does this even matter though, when many adherents of both the Psychodynamic and Cognitive Behavioural approaches embrace many core Humanistic Psychology values, such as the centrality of the therapeutic relationship and Carl Rogers' 'core conditions' of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard? Perhaps we should all be happy, given that 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery'! With the importance of the late Dan Stern's 'present moment in psychotherapy' recognized (*aka* 'the here and now'; Stern, 2004; Owens, 2013), notions of 'embodied presence' and the 'embodied mind' fast becoming ubiquitous (e.g. Corrigall et al., 2006), and *awareness* – another of the 1960s humanistic buzzwords – now commercially repackaged as 'mindfulness' (e.g. Bazzano, 2013), is it perhaps time to at least celebrate these successes of influence, and to reframe Humanistic Psychology as a once revolutionary movement that is now being so

comprehensively absorbed into the mainstream that it will soon no longer have anything distinctive to offer in terms of its own differentiated 'brand'?

Putting this in another way, was the term 'humanistic' *always* going to be too broad an umbrella-term for its constituent parts? And perhaps, thinking more widely, what are the characteristics of, and is there still a place for, humanistic values in a psychology field becoming dominated by 'audit mindedness' (e.g. Power, 1997; King and Moutsou, 2010) and 'bang for buck' thinking in the delivery of services increasingly standardized into protocol-driven and (supposedly) 'evidence-based' 'treatments'? (e.g. Marzillier, 2004; Holmes et al., 2006; Elkins, 2007; House and Bohart, 2008)

Some argue that humanistic values are essentially little more than a relic of the hedonistic and overly optimistic 1960s mind-set. However, there is a strong counter-argument, that on the contrary, humanistic values may represent the clearest expression thus far, within the field of Psychology at least, of that great, liberalizing swathe of ideas and sensibility called 'humanism' (broadly defined), and that those values remain the strongest bulwark that we have against the triumph of technocratic scientism, soulless materialism, and the march of the inhuman (Sim, 2001), and are therefore now needed more than ever. But if the latter is true, then is humanism itself still sufficiently relevant in the world of post-modernity? – and if not, what adaptations must it make to be so? And is there a potential third, more middle-ground position emerging, which honours both sides of the argument whilst transcending their apparently binary, either/or form?

However, it would be short sighted and naïve in the extreme to pursue these questions at the philosophical level alone, and not to question also the influence of far broader and deeper underlying tectonic shifts that all societies, and the global system itself, are undergoing, at breathtaking and increasingly accelerating speed (see, for example, Gliding (2012), Mason, (2016), Bauman (2007), Wallerstein et al (2013), Zizek (2014). Although inevitably the jury is out on what exactly is driving this end-of cycle trend – take your pick from end of the world/end of capitalism/new phase of neoliberalism/rise of authoritarian capitalism/ terminal decline of the West, and more – it seems already safe to

suggest that business-as-usual assumptions are not going to work in the emerging situation.

Thus, in order to succeed, attempts at understanding the present (and the future) may need to transcend the simplistic – and moralistic – binaries of progressives' versus' regressives', 'left' versus 'right', 'goodies' versus 'baddies', head versus heart, so beloved of ideologues of both left and right. On this basis, Humanistic Psychology, founded on values of mutual respect, integrity, honouring of difference and diversity and the willingness and ability to embrace uncertainty, may have a vital role to play by *not* coming down on one side or another in the aforementioned binaries, and by *not* becoming polarized itself into its own version of the above binaries (to use a useful concept developed by Kirk Schneider – see Schneider, 2013); but by finding the middle ground where both sides in these (apparent?) conflicts can meet as openly and non-defensively as possible in their full humanness.

Taking a broader overview of what the humanistic movement is, how it emerged, its many contributions to the psychology and therapy fields and to the wider culture, its current foci of interest as well as some thoughts about its future trajectory, we wish to strongly assert and fulsomely celebrate the influence of Humanistic Psychology as a substantial, enduring and broadly liberating one – and one with, as we have argued, quite possibly increased relevance and vitality in these difficult times.

There will always be tensions within any field. Currently in the UK, and at the risk of over-simplification, there is considerable debate taking place between, on the one hand, those who feel that humanistic approaches need to be more pragmatic and do whatever is expedient to further their penetration into the mainstream; and on the other, those who feel that humanistic values, if authentically expressed, must always and *necessarily* embody a strong counter-cultural, even revolutionary quality. There is also a potential middle-ground position which consciously strives to honour both sides of the polarities, and searches for the common ground between them – a common ground that we who still

proudly identify ourselves as 'humanistic' can still find, connecting us far more than dividing us.

So, might the dream really be over? – or at least, might it have changed beyond all historical recognition? Or might Humanistic Psychology have a continuing and indeed increasingly important role to play in these difficult times? And is it still conceivable that a fundamental paradigm shift might lead to academic Psychology degree courses openly embracing the kind of avowedly critical (Parker, 2007), human-centred theories and ethos that Humanistic Psychology at its best represents and champions? – or the kind of consciousness perspectives proposed by the likes of Stan Grof (2000) and Jill Hall (1993); or even the kind of transpersonal *heart-centred psychology* championed by thinkers like Sardello (2015), Duffell (2018) and House (2018)?

We'll leave the readers to formulate their own answers to these and earlier self-searching questions.

Note

1 Excerpts from a paper originally written in 2016.

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