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Chapter 10

SOCIALIST HUMANISM: A PROGRESSIVE POLITICS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY [1]

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Massacres … famines … global destruction … Like many people in the person-centred world today, I believe a better society for all of us must surely be possible. And when I see the impact that person-centred ideas and practices can have on improving cooperation and communication between people, I have no doubt that this approach can make a major contribution to the amelioration of some of the world's most pressing problems. In this chapter, I would like to outline a vision of what such a person-centred-informed politic might look like. More specifically, I want to outline a politic that incorporates the essence of person-centred thinking into a broadly socialist framework, forging a 'socialist-humanist' politic that, I believe, has the potential to understand, and meet, human beings' wants and needs at both the social and individual level. The chapter begins with an introduction to the socialist-humanist tradition and then goes on to outline potential limits of both humanism and socialism when advocated in isolation from the other. A socialist-humanist model of human existence is then outlined before a discussion of the ways that such a political standpoint could be carried forward.

SOCIALIST HUMANISM

'Socialist humanism' is not a new term, but one that has been used by a variety of people in a variety of contexts across the course of the twentieth century. *Pravda*, for instance, described Khrushchev's Report to the Twenty-first Congress of the Russian Communist Party as 'the magnificent and noble conception of Marxist-Leninist socialist humanism' (see Dunayevskaya, 1965: 72). More commonly, however, the term has been used to refer to a particular form of Marxist thinking that rejected both the 'state socialism' of twentieth-century Eastern Europe and a mechanistic, structural understanding of Marx's writings. Instead, it advocated a form of socialism that prioritized human agency, subjectivity and individuality.

Probably the best known proponent of this viewpoint was Erich Fromm, a twentieth-century Marxist psychoanalyst, whose edited collection of chapters—*Socialist Humanism* (Fromm, 1965)—remains the most comprehensive and lucid discussion of this perspective (see also *Marx's Concept of Man*, Fromm, 1961).

Socialist humanists like Fromm drew primarily from Marx's earliest writings, in particular his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Marx, 1988), which was written almost twenty years before *Das Capital*. Here, Marx explicitly equates communism with humanism, and outlines a model of individual and social existence that displays remarkable commonalities with a contemporary humanistic and person-centred perspective (see Fritzhand, 1965, for an excellent overview of Marx's ideal of humankind; and Nord, 1977). Central to this model is a belief, like Rogers (1951, 1959), that modern human beings are radically alienated from their own nature, needs and potential, as well as from their fellow human beings and the natural world. Here, within a capitalist, commodity-orientated society, human beings are driven into a never-ending frenzy of acquisition and consumption; whilst the workers at the base of the capitalist pyramid are reduced to little more than 'commodities', 'machines' or 'horses': 'crippled monstrosities' that are spiritually and physically dehumanized (Marx, 1988: 86). In this respect, contrary to a more structural or economic reading of Marx, socialist humanists like Fromm have argued that Marx's aim 'is not limited to the emancipation of the working class, but the emancipation of the human being through the restitution of the unalienated and hence free activity of all men [*sic*]' (Fromm, 1961: 41). Here, through liberating themselves from the dominion of money, commodification and class hierarchies, human beings can take back control of their own lives (what Marx termed 'auto-activity', cf. an 'internal locus of control' (Rogers, 1959)), actualize their genuine potential, and meet their authentic human needs, including a need for love and affiliation.

PERSONAL BEGINNINGS

A more extended discussion of the commonalities between Marx's early thinking and contemporary humanistic and person-centred ideas could make a fascinating and original paper in its own right. In this chapter, however, I want to present a more personal journey towards a socialist-humanist standpoint: how I came to see the complimentarity between these two world-views and also the psycho-political model of human being that I have developed to try and integrate them.

I was born into a family that had radical politics at its core. My dad, who was already in his fifties when I was born, had joined the Communist Party in the 1920s, and had been both at Cable Street and in Spain as a young man. He moved to the States just before the Second World War, and was relatively proud of the fact that he had been 'asked' to return to Britain during the McCarthyite

period. On his return, he set up a company distributing progressive, mainly foreign-language films to cinemas and film societies in the UK; and he, along with my mum, remained members of the Communist Party right up until its breakdown in the early 1990s. My dad was a very warm man, particularly when I was younger, and I remember visualizing him once in a therapy group as a big, brown, affectionate bear. He played games with my older sister and I, taught us political songs from places like Ireland and the Soviet Union, and cuddled and wrestled with me in equal measure. But he could also be stubborn, defensive and closed-minded. He seemed almost incapable of listening to any criticisms of the Soviet Union or China without rushing to their defence, and rarely acknowledged the possibility that communism could have its flaws.

As a young boy, I simply believed that communism was right. Consequently, throughout my school years, I engaged in numerous political arguments with my fellow pupils: from repression in the Soviet Union ('It might not be perfect, but America is a lot worse') to the viability of a communist utopia ('People can learn to live without money'). One of my strongest memories is of standing up to sing a song during a rainy 'wet break' at infant school when I was about six. After renditions of 'Jesus Loves Me' and 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' by various other pupils, I burst into 'Our Engines Roaring', a soviet military anthem, which goes:

> Our engines roaring, roaring into battle
> Up in the air, above the clouds we fly
> Our bombs are ready, our machine guns rattle
> The first, red air fleet in the world flies higher
> And higher, and higher
> Our emblem the Soviet star
> And every propeller is roaring
> Defending the USSR.

As I reached my late teens, however, I began to consider the possibility that some chinks might exist in my communist 'armour'. One of the biggest factors here was that I had started to listen to punk music, and became exposed to critiques of Soviet-style communism that were coming from the even-more-radical left, as opposed to the (easily dismissable) right. One song that particularly influenced me was by a band called *Crass*. It was entitled 'Bloody Revolutions', and was a direct challenge to the call for revolutionary action that I had so heartily assumed was the way forward:

> You talk about your revolution, well, that's fine
> But what are you going to be doing come the time?
> Are you going to be the big man with the tommy-gun?
> Will you talk of freedom when the blood begins to run?
> Well, freedom has no value if violence is the price
> Don't want your revolution, I want anarchy and peace

You talk of overthrowing power with violence as your tool
You speak of liberation and when the people rule
Well ain't it people rule right now, what difference would there be?
Just another set of bigots with their rifle-sights on me. [2]

A few other experiences were also important. I went to see a psychoanalyst at the Tavistock for a year. His transferential interpretations infuriated me (Why the hell did he think he was like my dad!), but his one (not very analytical) outburst at my tendency to dispute most of what he said did make me wonder whether I, and my family, might not be too stuck in a rigid system of beliefs. Then, when I got to University, I encountered 'hard left' activists who I experienced as dogmatic, closed-minded and simplistic, and felt that I wanted to have nothing to do with their politics. I stayed involved with politics just about (i.e. I joined the Labour Party), but became increasingly involved with personal development and therapeutic activities, much of it through the pro-feminist 'men's movement' that was burgeoning in the 1980s and 1990s.

WHY SOCIALISM NEEDS HUMANISM …

As I allowed myself to move further and further away from my communistic roots, I increasingly began to feel that there were fundamental problems with this political creed. First, whilst the socialist beliefs I had adopted as a child seemed to be about creating a society in which people were happier and more fulfilled, the socialists I encountered seemed to have little understanding of, or interest in, people's *psychological* needs or functioning. Questions like 'What makes people happy?' or 'What makes life worth living?' did not seem to be on the socialist agenda at all; and yet, to me, they seemed like the most fundamental issues of all: How could you create a society of happier people if you didn't know what happy was? Indeed, with the communists and socialists I met, the assumption seemed to be that if people had enough food, drink and shelter then that would be enough—there seemed to be little appreciation of what Maslow (1968) called human beings' 'growth motivations': their desires for creativity, change, stimulation and achievement. I remember, on a trip to the Soviet Union, being struck by the fact that there was just one type of jam in the supermarket: rows and rows of the same strawberry glop. It seemed lifeless, boring, uninspiring; and whilst I do not believe that a lack of adequate conserves led to the downfall of the Soviet empire, I remain convinced that it was the failure of the Soviet system to meet people's growth needs that led to its collapse. For all the problems of the capitalist West, its ability to provide people with challenges, variety, and the potential to achieve goals seems to me to cater more effectively for the whole spectrum of people's psychological desires.

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Then there was blame. As a young boy, playground arguments about the viability of communism would almost inevitably come down to the issue of whether people were inherently good or not. 'People can't live without money,' my fellow pupils would say. 'If you didn't have any money, someone would just walk into a shop and take everything.'

'Ah, yes,' I'd retort, 'but people are basically good, so if they knew they'd be taking something away from someone else, they wouldn't do it.' (At this point, I'd usually get back 'So why don't your parents give away their film distribution company'!)

So, for me, the whole of communist thinking was based on a faith in the inherent goodness of humankind. And yet, when I listened to socialists talk, there seemed to be a great deal of distrust towards whole swathes of humanity: 'the media', the Tories, the police, and worst of all, right-wing Americans. Everyone was 'good', but there was a sense in which these people were selfish, power-hungry and inherently 'bad'.

So, to me, there seemed to be a basic contradiction here: were people inherently good or weren't they? And if the argument was that these people *could be* good, they had just been socialized to be bad, then essentially we (the good people) could just as easily be them; in which case, why were we giving them such a hard time? Moreover, this attitude of demonization seemed to me to lack political expediency. If we wanted to change these people's attitudes, we weren't going to be able to do it by relating to them in a way that inferred they were suspect or ignorant. They did that to us ('loony lefties', 'politically correct thought police', 'hooligans') and I knew it only made me more adamant in my opinions—so why should I expect them to be any different? And finally, when I began to talk to people on the right of the political spectrum, what I realized was, phenomenologically, these characterizations of them were just plain wrong. When I spoke to right-wing Americans, or policemen, or conservative-voting fellow students, it simply was not the case that their agenda was one of self-protection or self-enhancement. These were people who genuinely believed that what they were doing was for the good of others as well as for themselves: that communism was threatening people's freedom and they wanted to protect it, or that the miners' unions needed to be broken because they were holding the country to ransom. And the more I became immersed in a person-centred, phenomenological standpoint, the more difficult I found it to brush these self-reports aside and claim that I *really* knew what they were up to. I may not have agreed with them, but if I thought they were coming from a place of selfishness or malice, where was my trust in their ability to know their own experiencing?

Another set of contradictions seemed to exist in how working-class people were viewed. On the one hand, the message from the hard left was that these were the people who would free us from our class bondages; but on the other hand, they were the McDonalds-eating, football-watching couch potatoes, too passive, gullible and compliant to question anything they read in *The Sun* (unlike

the people who read *The Guardian*!). A contradiction … and, again, ways of being that were entirely at odds with the phenomenological realities of the working-class people that I listened to.

For me, then, humanistic ideas provided an essential corrective to the radical, socialist views I had encountered in much of my youth. Here was a view of human beings which not only saw people as needing food, shelter and comfort; but also goals, challenges and new possibilities (Maslow, 1968)—a viewpoint that seemed to me to capture much more of the wholeness of human desires. And instead of seeing people as malevolent and power-hungry, it held fast to the idea that people were inherently constructive and pro-social—albeit that they might act in destructive ways (e.g. Rogers, 1959). Moreover, it was an approach that moved beyond blaming people or putting labels on them, and instead started with the concrete reality of each person's lived-experiences and the intelligibility of their behaviours. This, it seemed to me, was a much better starting point from which to try and change people's attitudes and beliefs.

… AND WHY HUMANISM NEEDS SOCIALISM

As a corrective to much socialist thinking, I found humanistic and person-centred ideas essential; and their deep faith in humankind, their commitment to non-hierarchical relations and their emphasis on freedom and liberation resonated with some of my most fundamental beliefs. In their own right, however, I was always troubled by their potential to approximate more reactionary standpoints. In particular, like many other authors from both within the person-centred field (e.g. Barrett-Lennard, 2005; Bohart, 2003; Holdstock, 1993; Mearns & Cooper, 2005; O'Hara, 1992; Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2002) and outside of it (e.g. Geller, 1982; Sinclair & Monk, 2005), I have always been concerned by the individualism that seems to lie at the heart of person-centred and humanistic thinking. In his book, *Carl Rogers' Helping System*, Godfrey Barrett-Lennard (1998) shows how client-centred therapy grew out of the grounds of Rooseveltian 'New Deal' America, and its initial emphasis on individual actualization and personal achievement would seem to mirror, in many respects, the 'American dream' (Shaw & Colimore, 1988: 60). When I watch my daughters' Barbie® DVDs, I am often struck by the similarities between the morals and message doled out by corporate America—'Be yourself', 'Be who you want to be'—and humanistic ideas and principles. Here, there is little explicit regard for the needs or the rights of the Other, nor of a responsibility towards them. Rather, development is a move towards autonomy and independence. 'The primal choice, the fork in the road,' writes Maslow, 'is between others and one's own self' (1968: 52), and the path towards individuality that humanistic psychologists would seem to favour puts them very close, at times, to the libertarian right.

What also narrows this distance is the tendency within the humanistic field

to neglect *structural inequalities* within society: the fact that different social groups and classes have very different capabilities to actualize their potential. A working-class, disabled Black woman, for instance, has very different opportunities to an able-bodied middle-class White man. When psychological difficulties are understood primarily in terms of conditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959), however, these socio-economic differences can easily be overlooked. The same can be said for the issue of *power*. Some groups in society have much more opportunity to enforce their way of doing things than others, but this is rarely talked about in the person-centred field (though see Proctor, 2002). Much is made of personal power, but power is not something that just exists at an individual or experiential level: it also exists by virtue of being part of particular groups and classes. Without an appreciation of these dynamics, then, the person-centred approach will be very limited in how much it can help *all* people to liberate themselves and overcome powerlessness.

The danger, however, is not simply that parallels exist between a person-centred and reactionary world-view, but that humanistic and person-centred ideas and practices may be used to justify, or shore up, reactionary political systems. If maturity, for instance, is defined in terms of the ability to act autonomously and independently (Rogers, 1961), then it is easy to deduce from this that dependence on others or the State—for such support as unemployment benefit or health care—is an immature, and hence undesirable, state of affairs. Certainly, Maslow was no fan of those he did not feel were achieving autonomy. He wrote in his journal: 'As far as the unemployed loafer today, in times of shortages of help, I'd simply be willing to let them starve ultimately. Short of this nothing will work. As with some nothing works but shooting' (quoted in Shaw & Colimore, 1988: 58). Along similar lines, if distress and unhappiness are attributed to intrapersonal factors such as conditions of worth, then it can be inferred from this that improvements to society need to happen at the individual level—for instance, through counselling and psychotherapy—rather than through wider political change. Here, the fact that most person-centred practitioners are engaged with change processes at the intrapersonal, rather than societal, level, suggests that our approach *has* become incorporated into a political system that views psychological distress in distinctly apolitical terms.

Of course, in defence of these criticisms, one could argue that Rogers was deeply committed to progressive political change (see Barfield, Chapter 22 and O'Hara, Chapter 12, this volume), and there is no doubt that this is true. Moreover, one could argue that at the heart of the person-centred and humanistic approaches lies a belief in 'synergy': a principle that if I do the best for myself, I will also do the best for others (Shaw & Colimore, 1988). A slight variation on this theme is to say that the actualizing tendency is inherently pro-social, such that: the more I allow myself to be guided by my inner directing force, the more I will act in ways that are helpful to others (Rogers, 1961).

But is it really true that following my own needs, drives and organismic

valuing tendency will result in pro-social behaviour?[3] Take the following example: At four o'clock in the morning, my nine-month-old daughter Shulamith wakes up and starts crying. I now have a choice: Do I go downstairs, get some milk for her, and then feed her for the next half hour or so; or do I tell my partner, Helen, that I've got a really long day at work tomorrow and that it's her turn to feed the baby. Here, it would be too simplistic to say that my needs and Helen's needs are in total opposition. For instance, it might be that once Helen dragged herself out of bed to feed Shulamith she would have some profound moments of encounter with our new baby. But it would seem to me equally simplistic to assume that our needs are entirely consonant: that if I enhance and maintain my being by going back to sleep that this will also in some way enhance and maintain Helen's, or vice versa. The reality, in this and in numerous other situations, is that some of my needs will be consonant with the needs of others, and some will be dissonant. So whilst the humanistic notion of synergy is a useful corrective to a more Hobbesian view of human beings— as inherently pitted against each other—to simply assume that if I do what is 'right' for myself it will also be 'right' for others seems equally one-sided. Relationships, like life, are enormously complex, and it seems to me that the assumption of synergy can often be a means of avoiding the discomfort and exertion of having to think that complexity through. Emmanuel Levinas (1969), a postmodern philosopher that some person-centred writers are beginning to draw on (e.g. Cooper, in press; Schmid, 2002), argues that meeting an Other in an ethical and principled way gives something of great value to the 'self', but it also requires sacrifice,[4] effort, and a willingness to move beyond our own egocentric standpoint. This, it seems to me, is a much more balanced understanding of how one person's needs relate to those of another.

Just as humanism provides an essential corrective to socialist rhetoric, then it seems to me that socialism provides an essential corrective to humanism. By going beyond an individualistic perspective and acknowledging the socially embedded nature of our existence, it can begin to address the issue of the inequalities of opportunities that exist in our society and also the complex issue of the relationship between my needs and those of others. Here, a humanistic approach becomes much more than a vehicle for individual self-assertion; it becomes a means of creating more opportunities for all in a socially just way.

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3. I am indebted to Pete Sanders here for pointing out to me the problematic nature of this assumption.
4. At a recent person-centred workshop, I was struck by how uncomfortable (even angry) many people were with the idea of 'sacrifice', on the grounds that it meant giving up some of your own needs for the needs of others. Yet, as I am suggesting here, perhaps it is important for us to reconsider the place of 'sacrifice' in person-centred theory and practice.

PSYCHOSOCIAL EXISTENCE: A SOCIALIST-HUMANIST UNDERSTANDING

Having argued that socialism needs humanism and humanism needs socialism, I want to sketch out a preliminary framework for understanding human needs and experiences that can underpin a socialist-humanist politic. It is based on a Rogerian (1951, 1959) understanding of human personality and development, but attempts to broaden it out to include social and political factors as well as intrapersonal ones.

The starting point for this model is that people have a whole range of different 'wants'. Coming from an existential background (Cooper, 2003, 2004), I prefer the term 'wants' or 'desires' to 'needs', 'motives' or 'drives', because it conveys a less mechanistic and deterministic understanding of how people come to act in the way that they do. That is, the person is not conceptualized as being 'driven' or 'needing' to behave in certain ways by some non-human force, but as having the capacity to make proactive choices against a backdrop of certain wants. To say a bit more about these wants: they can be conceptualized as existing in a hierarchy, with lower order wants being the means by which higher order wants are fulfilled. So for instance, a lower order want may be to complete this chapter, and this may be in the service of a higher order want, such as being seen as a successful academic, which might then be in the service of an even higher order want, such as 'being liked by people.'[5]

Within this model, no two highest order wants are seen as being inherently incompatible. Two of my most fundamental wants, for instance, might be for excitement and for security, and in an ideal environment there is no reason why I could not experience both of these to my satisfaction. In reality, however, our wants are often in tension with each other, because we inhabit an environment in which the achievement of one want frequently necessitates the subjugation of another. A person in a context of limited financial resources, for example, might only be able to achieve their desire for financial security by suppressing their desire for excitement and stimulation: for instance, by taking a job in a fast-food restaurant. Alternatively, in that environment, the person may be able to actualize their desire for stimulation by forming a musical group with their friends, but then they might have to compromise their desire for financial security. In other words, in an ideal world, no two wants need ever conflict. But we don't live in an ideal world, and in the real world, our wants may come into conflict because of the limited material resources of our environment.

This model of multiple wants may seem very different from Rogers' (1951, 1959) understanding of personality and human development, with its emphasis

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5. Note, whilst the notion of 'wants' tends to convey the idea of something residing *within* the individual, in fact, we can also think of wants as being embedded within a socio-cultural context: for instance, the Western world's *want* for consumerism.

on the unity of the actualizing tendency. In reality, however, the model presented here is essentially just a broadening out of Rogers' original formulation, within which the specific developmental pathway identified by Rogers can be seen as one exemplar (see Cooper, 2000). For whilst Rogers (1959) describes the actualizing tendency as a singular source of energy, what he describes in his model of development is essentially the emergence of a tension between the desire to actualize the self-concept and a desire to actualize *other* aspects of the organism, brought about because the person inhabits a world in which to obtain positive regard from self and others they must deny certain experiences and desires. In other words, to achieve the higher order want of being liked, the person strives to see themselves in a way compatible with their conditions of worth (a lower order want); but in doing so, the person undermines the achievement of other higher order wants, such as their desire to be emotionally or freely expressive.

In this model, well-being is associated with the maximal satisfaction of wants whilst distress is associated with the minimal satisfaction of wants. [6] Why does such minimal satisfaction of wants come about? A first possibility is that the person lives in such a restrictive environment that only a very few of the person's wants can be satisfied at any one time. So, for instance, a young man living on an underprivileged estate chooses to deal drugs to have some financial mobility, but at the same time has to sacrifice his desire for physical security or to live ethically or to care for his children. Here, then, distress and dissatisfaction are primarily brought about by external factors. It may also be, however, that a person in a relatively benign environment is also experiencing a high degree of dissatisfaction, and this would suggest that they are not maximizing the actualization of their wants as much as their environment would allow them to. Why might this happen? If we accept the person-centred assumption that people are at all times striving to maintain and enhance their being, it must be that the person has configured their life in such a way that attempts to achieve certain wants and desires are undermining other wants and desires more than they need to.

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 contexts can be reconfigured, such that people are more able to achieve more of their wants more of the time; and through therapeutic activities, people can find ways, within their particular environment, of getting more of their wants met at more of the same time. In particular, through counselling or psychotherapy, people can find ways of achieving certain wants without undermining others. Here, then, lower order activities and wants are reconfigured so that they allow the actualization of more higher order wants more of the time.

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6. An alternative hypothesis is that well-being is associated with a feeling that one *can* satisfy one's wants (possibility or hope), whilst distress is associated with a feeling that one *can not* (hopelessness or despair).

Central to this process of increasing self-consonance, as many self-plurality theorists have argued (see Cooper, Mearns, Stiles, Warner & Elliott, 2004; Hermans, 2003; Rowan, 1990; Rowan & Cooper, 1999), is that the different 'parts' or wants of the person begin to communicate more openly and empathically with each other. Instead of dismissing, disowning or disparaging other 'voices', they start to listen to each other and see the legitimacy of each other's underlying desires. As the person begins to give their vulnerable side a voice, for instance, the other 'parts' of the person begin to see that this side is not merely 'weak' or 'disposable' but a manifestation of their desire for security or closeness. Here, then, the 'parts' of the person can begin to find ways of working together, rather than pulling in different directions.

So far, this model of psychosocial existence has focused primarily on the individual level, but this analysis can be easily extended to the social plane. If individual well-being is associated with the maximization of personal wants, then the well-being of a society can be associated with the maximization of wants across people (the humanistic agenda), distributed as equitably as possible (the socialist agenda). Here, social improvements can be brought about in a number of ways. For instance, campaigns can be fought to ensure that power (the ability to get what you want) is more equitably distributed, or laws can be enacted that lead to a greater maximization of wants overall.

As at the personal level, however, an increased achievement of wants across society may not necessarily require changes in 'external circumstances'; and, as at the personal level, the key here may be improved communication. The more effectively people can express to each other their wants and listen to the wants of others, the more likely it is that the achievement of wants will be maximized. It may be, for instance, that my partner Helen really does enjoy getting up at four o'clock in the morning to feed our baby, and it is only through open and honest communication that I would know about that; and if she does not want to be doing that, then the more we can talk about what we want in that situation— and listen to the other person's wants—the more likely a constructive compromise will be achieved. People, I would suggest, waste enormous chunks of their lives doing what they do not want to do because they believe that someone else wants them to do it, when, in fact, the other person does not want that at all. So the more people can communicate openly and honestly about what it is they want, the more likely they are to get those wants met, and the more able people will be to figure out how to maximize the achievement of wants across society.

Here, the basic anthropological assumption, along person-centred (Rogers, 1961) lines, is that people are not inherently 'evil'. In other words, that we do not have some higher order want to stop others getting what they want; and that, in many instances, one of our highest order desires may be to help others achieve their own wants. At the same time, and less consonant with a person-centred perspective (though not with a Piagetian one (see, for instance, Shaffer, 1996)), the model is underpinned by an assumption that people do have an inherent

tendency towards egocentricity: that they tend to give greater weight and credence to their own wants, perceptions and experiences than those of others. I certainly see this clearly in my children: they do not intend to harm others, but they often struggle to fully conceptualize what others want or need. Similarly, as I have argued in a previous paper (Cooper, 2005), adults are often very poor judges of the experiences and perceptions of others, and have a tendency to assume that others see the world in the same way that they do, and therefore want what they want. Whilst human beings may have a basic desire to help others, it is only by knowing what others actually want that they can really do so. In other words, without communication, our chances of maximizing our collective wants are slight.

At the same time, this basic human egocentrism may be so strong that, at times, open and honest communication may not be enough to bring about a maximal and equitable distribution of wants. If I am an affluent person, for instance, the financial demands that a raise in taxes brings about may be so proximal (i.e. close) to me, and the opportunities it offers less affluent people so distal (i.e. far away), that no amount of communication may convince me to accept it. Moreover, I may be tempted to block out or dismiss the other person's experiences, and the more power I have, the more capacity I have to do that. The other factor is that, as at the intrapersonal level, the more limited the resources, the more genuine is the conflict between the satisfaction of my wants and those of someone else; so here, too, the impact of communication is limited. In other words, open and honest communication is not a substitute for political action, but it may be a very effective means of reducing the amount of conflict required, and of maximizing the achievement of wants that any one situation will allow.

A SOCIALIST-HUMANIST POLITICAL AGENDA

That is the theory, but what about the practice? It is my belief that we need a political force—perhaps a pressure group or even a political party—that can bring a humanistic agenda to the political table. This would be a progressive political voice that, alongside socialist and radical activists, would fight for equality and social justice—for instance, campaigning for the rights of asylum seekers—and against discrimination and abuses of power. But, unlike so many voices on the political left, it would also bring humanistic values and practices into the social arena: for instance, an emphasis on the value of good communication, a belief in the fundamental trustworthiness of human beings, and a willingness to challenge dehumanizing ideas and practices wherever they emerge. Most specifically, perhaps, it would be a radical progressive voice without the element of blame. A political force that challenges injustices and inequities at the socio-economic level whilst maintaining a phenomenological appreciation of why people act and feel in the way they do.

In terms of a political agenda, one key issue for such a force would be the

development of emotional literacy in young people (see Hough, Chapter 26, this volume). As I have argued in this chapter, and as I devoutly believe, one of the most effective means of improving our society would be by helping our children and young people to learn to express their genuine feelings and wants, and to empathically receive the genuine feelings and wants of others. If they could learn to do that, if young people could learn to tell each other what they wanted as assertively as possible rather than expressing it in violence or in passive aggression, the reduction in the amount of social conflict and destruction could be enormous. And I can actually visualize this: classes in which young people are helped to identify their feelings, in which they have opportunities to practise assertiveness and negotiation with others, in which they can learn that it is OK to tell each other about their vulnerabilities and anger. Perhaps it is too much to hope that young men, tanked up with alcohol on a Saturday night, could learn to say 'I felt really hurt when you spilt my pint', but at least if they could identify those feelings or had learnt to take a few steps back from them, social problems could be dramatically reduced. Certainly, it seems bizarre to me that whilst young people are taught about virtually every subject under the sun at school, the one thing they learn so little about is themselves and their relationships with others.

And, of course, it is not just young people who have difficulties relating effectively with others. Indeed, perhaps one of the biggest contributions that a humanistic agenda could make to the political arena would be in terms of helping the politicians, themselves, to communicate more effectively with each other. Like many people, when I watch our politicians 'debating' on programmes like *Question Time* or in the House of Commons, I am aghast at their seeming incapacity to listen to each other or to treat each other with respect. With their agenda of point-scoring, name-calling and putting the other down, it seems a way of communication more appropriate to a primary school playground than the most powerful institution in our country. Imagine, then, if our politicians and leaders could actually listen to each other, to learn from the vast intelligence that so many politicians seem to have and to cooperate on political issues rather than compete. And imagine if that was also true for world leaders across national boundaries: that they could listen to the wants of other nations and see the legitimacy of their desires, rather than seeing things only from their own perspective. We are talking here about moving beyond a 'politics of blame' to a 'politics of understanding', and in the United States, former senator John Vasconcellos has begun to make such moves with his 'Politics of Trust' network (see <www.politicsoftrust.net/home.php> and Chapter 30, this volume).

CONCLUSION

As a person-centred trainer and therapist, I see the benefits every day that this way of being can have on clients, trainees and colleagues. It is no magic solution, but in terms of helping people cooperate more closely together and get more of their wants met more of the time, I know of no better approach. At a time when we are so in need of new ways of addressing old problems, when 'old style' socialist politics appears so dramatically to have failed us, it seems to me that person-centred understandings and practices have a unique contribution to make: one which is not about psychologizing or psychotherapizing socio-political issues, but about bringing humanistic values and practices into a radical political stance. Socialist humanism offers us a way forward that is both socially and individually sensitive, that understands the wants of the individual without forgoing the wants of the collective. 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.

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