

# 17.1

## SOCIALIST HUMANISM

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Supplementary material for Integrating counselling and psychotherapy: Directionality, synergy, and social change (Sage, 2019).

*Socialist humanism* is an example of one particular attempt to synthesise personal and political change perspectives (Cooper, 2006; Fromm, 1965). This is a form of Marxist thinking which rejected both the 'state socialism' of twentieth century Eastern Europe; and a mechanistic understanding of Marx's writings. Instead, it advocated a form of socialism that prioritised human agency, subjectivity, and individuality. Probably the best known proponent of this viewpoint was Erich Fromm, a 20th century Marxist psychoanalyst, whose edited collection of chapters, *Socialist Humanism*, remains the most comprehensive and lucid discussion of this perspective (see also 'Marx's Conception of Man', Fromm, 1961).

Socialist humanists, like Fromm, drew primarily from Marx's earliest writings, in particular his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Marx, 1988). Here, Marx explicitly equates communism with humanism, and outlines a model of individual and social existence that displays remarkable commonalities with a contemporary humanistic perspective (Fritzhand, 1965; Nord, 1977). Central to this approach is the assertion – as with Rogers (1951, 1959) and Laing (1967) – that human beings have become radically alienated from their own needs (i.e., their intrinsic, highest-order desires); from their fellow human beings; and from the natural world. Here, within a neoliberal, commodity-orientated society, human beings are driven into a never-ending frenzy of acquisition and consumption (i.e., extrinsically-oriented goals); 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 dehumanised (Marx, 1988). Contrary to a more structural or economic reading of Marx, then, socialist humanists like Fromm (1961) have argued that Marx's aim was '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' (p. 41). But, through liberating themselves from the dominion of money, commodification, and class hierarchies, human beings can take back control of their own lives, and actualise their intrinsic highest-order human desires. This is the kind of socialist society which, as Oscar Wilde (2001) described in 1891, would 'relieve us from the sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody' (p. 127).

By integrating socialist thinking into a humanistic perspective, socialist humanism compensates for the individualism that is implicit in much humanistic psychology (see, Buss, 1979; Shaw & Colimore, 1988). To a great extent, for instance, Rogers's person-centred therapy grew out of the grounds of Roosevelt-ian 'new deal' America (Barrett-Lennard, 1998), and its initial emphasis on individual actualisation and personal achievement would seem to mirror, in many respects, the 'American dream' (Shaw & Colimore, 1988). Here, socialist thinking introduces the idea that we do not all start on a level playing field: that there are structural inequalities that need to be addressed if we are all to have the opportunity to actualise our potentials.

At the same time, however, the humanistic aspect of socialist humanism compensates for the lack of psychological depth which is evident in much socialist thinking. As Corning (2011) writes, 'The basic problem with utopian socialism is that it's utopian. It's not grounded in a realistic understanding of human nature' (p. 141). While socialism, for instance, tends to focus on human beings' most basic needs – such as food and shelter – humanism goes on to consider the more complex, creative and growth-oriented desires that people have. A humanistic perspective can also help to understand why radically egalitarian 'leveling schemes' may be 'destined to fail' (Corning, 2011, p. 73): because people need things to strive for, and to be able to differentiate themselves from others. In addition, instead of demonising those in positions of power and privilege, a humanistic standpoint strives to understand the vulnerabilities, fears and feelings of inadequacy that may also be driving a need for control. Closely connected to this, in terms of political activity, humanistic thinking can help ensure that revolutionary leadership does not fall into the dogmatic, sectarian authoritarianism that it is striving to overcome. As Freire (1993) writes, 'dialogue is the essence of revolutionary action' (p. 116). While '*psychotherapy and politics each problematize the other*', then, '*each contribute to solving problems that the other faces*' (Totton, 2005, p. xvii).

In terms of the contemporary political landscape, there are echoes of this socialist humanist perspective in the *progressive* political vision outlined by Green Party MP Caroline Lucas and cross-party colleagues. They write:

Progressives want to move beyond the current system and create a better one.... Progressives believe in cooperation. We want a supportive and responsive state that brings the best out of people's instinct to share success and support each other in hard times, and which offers genuine equality to all citizens, together social justice, civil liberties, human rights and responsibilities, without discrimination on grounds of gender, age, physical ability, race or sexual orientation.... [Progressives] share a rejection of the politics of fear and division, and wish to move towards a more inclusive society in which every citizen not only has the opportunity to develop themselves to their full potential but has as much control as possible over their own destiny and the chance to shape the society in which they live. This way we believe we will build a society that both empowers people and allows us to love within environmental limits. (Nandy, Lucas, & Bowers, 2016, pp. xix-xx)

Here, a progressive political agenda means a focus on local, community-based developments; but within an internationalist, rather than isolationist, political agenda. It means a welcoming of difference, and a commitment to functioning within planetary and environmental limitations. And, like socialist humanism, it means moving away from a 'disposable consumerism' to a different kind of economy, 'One that meets people's deeper needs while respecting and enjoying the real material world of diverse natural resources' (Simms, 2016, p. 88).

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