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# BOOK REVIEW

## POLITICIZING THE PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH

*Politicizing the Person-Centred Approach: An Agenda for Social Change.* Edited by Gillian Proctor, Mick Cooper, Pete Sanders and Beryl Malcolm. Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire: PCCS Books, 2006. 329 pp. £20.00 pb.

'Surely an approach based on challenging hierarchies and authorities and advocating trust in oneself is political?' Gillian Proctor writes in her foreword, continuing: 'Yet the connection between the person-centred approach and politics is far from clear or straightforward.' This collection begins, with apparent universalism, by posing a set of important questions about the potential applications and limitations of the person-centred approach (PCA) for politically minded therapists and clients. Its concerns about how PCA's emphasis on the individual can and cannot serve community-based political practice would seem to have viable applications for just about any historical moment. But as a volume it is also (as it should be) a product of our time. To me it seemed a political intervention in its own right, voicing the anguish and outrage of a diverse professional community at our war-torn, neocolonial, threatened and threatening global context.

There is a sense of urgency to much of the writing here, a feeling that things are getting worse, that the world is becoming less and less hospitable to social humanist practice. The contributors write openly about global warming, Anglo-American war-mongering, capitalism, terrorism; the political forces that overdetermine our twenty-first century lives. Power and its effects might be seen as a central theme in this collection; treated as a cause of illness, power and powerlessness are also viewed as determining influences on the therapeutic relationship itself. This is reflected, both on the microcosmic and macrocosmic level, in concerns about the ways in which the therapeutic relationship can replicate social injustice and inequality, and about how therapy is itself subject to the regulating and commodifying institutions of (capitalist) culture. Contributors raise questions about time-regulated therapy, accreditation, and ideology-laden conceptions of mental health/illness, as instances of how institutional values (such as those of the NHS) can come into conflict with the goals of the person-centred approach. Many seem to regard it as a matter of conscience to ask questions about therapy's complicity in preserving the status quo: as Mae Boyd puts it, 'We may negotiate all things but we do so from a position of power. Expertise in all its forms is a source of disempowerment and we would do well to look to those who develop anti-professional critiques' (p. 297). Many of the essays examine how ideologies about class, gender, ethnicity, culture and (dis)ability can penetrate the client-therapist relationship. Some contributors go so far as to ponder the question of how they can con-

tinue to practice, given the evidence of PCA's vulnerability to the very forces whose effects it tries so to hard to alleviate.

There is an emphatic leftist tone to almost all of the writing here; Karl Marx is often invoked (particularly his concept of alienation, which roughly aligns with Rogers' notion of 'estrangement'). The ideas of the influential Marxist educationalist Paulo Freire have also inspired many of the contributions, as has the work of Michel Foucault. I was occasionally anxious about the ease with which the term 'global capitalism' was bandied about in some of the essays, because its elasticity seems to me to render it largely useless in the crucial practice of identifying a precise target for social activism. Similarly, I was concerned that some of the essays showed a tendency to indict our 'postmodern' condition (our advanced technology, our ostensible dependence on the Internet, virtual communication, video games, and so forth) in a way that obscured the Marxist underpinnings of much postmodern thought, as well, importantly, as its availability for radical political critique. These same essays struck me as worryingly technophobic, viewing the younger generation as the hapless victims of an overriding technology-crazed commodity culture. (I doubt my students would see themselves that way; nor should they.) Where the use of contemporary technology was seen, unproblematically, as the outpouring of (negative) consumerist desire I wished the contributor would install Ubuntu on his/her computer rather than Windows. (Ubuntu is one of many open-source operating systems that are available free of charge to anyone who wants to use or modify them, provided any modifications they make are then made available to anyone, free of charge. Appropriately, 'ubuntu' is a southern African word that describes in a completely uncapitalist

way what it means to be human. My point here is not that technology and capitalism have nothing to do with each other, but that the ways in which human communities adapt technology to their own ends has the potential to change the way we view intellectual property. That seems to me as good a blow against 'global capitalism' as any.)[1]

For me, the strength of this book lies in its diversity (its multiculturalism and polyvocality) and the depth of its political commitment. Its tone ranges from pessimistic to hopeful, from darkly or sourly reflective to affirming and even joyful. As in other volumes on PCA, there was a wonderful mixture of the technical and the testimonial; the range of essays in both categories was impressive and the combined effect moving, thought-provoking and deeply engaging. The collection is enthusiastically interdisciplinary and left me, even as a non-therapist, with many ideas about how to improve my pedagogy and examine and evolve my own political practice. It includes invaluable contributions from practitioners in minority communities who redress the 'Westernness' of our understanding of what it means to be a person and an individual. While it is true to the potential pitfalls of Rogerian individualism, it also emphasizes, as feminists have been doing for years, the personal dimension of the political. It ends by implying that perhaps it is only by acknowledging our subjectivity and personhood that we can be truly political. Thanks to PCCS books for publishing yet another important volume on the topic of PCA.

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[1] My thanks to Andrew Brooks, Nick Kirby and Peter Mendham for illuminating me about the open source movement.