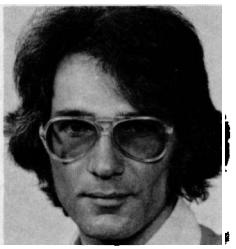
HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AS LIBERAL IDEOLOGY: THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL ROOTS OF MASLOW'S THEORY OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION[1]



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Humanistic psychology can best be understood within its cultural context. It is within this context that I advance the claim that humanistic psychology in general, and Maslow's theory of self-actualization in particular, have their genesis in liberalism.

My purpose in this article is to try and reveal both the nature and consequences of the link between humanistic psychology and the liberal tradition using Maslow's theory as a concrete case for analysis. This analysis is part of a larger goal to examine the social and historical basis of psychological theory and ideas (e.g., Buss, 1975, 1976a, 1976b, 1977, 1978).

THE BIRTH OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY: THE LIBERAL RESPONSE TO CONSERVATISM

Over a period of some thirty years Robert Nisbet (1953, 1966, 1968) has been arguing that the historical roots of classical sociological theory lie in the conservative response to modernity. Thus the writings of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Tonnies, and others, may be seen as a quest for community in an age of increasing fragmentation, isolation, alienation, and bureaucracy. The latter are all due to forces of modernization such as the division of labor, and increasing rationalization or routinization of institutional services. During the nineteenth century, traditional society

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was crumbling under the heavy weight of rapid scientific, technological, and socio-political change, and the classical sociological theorists attempted to preserve the idea of community at a time when its continuing existence was in serious doubt. The rising tide of individualism (part of the growing liberal consciousness) seemed to show no sign of ebbing. Thus we can modify Nisbet's thesis slightly. Classical sociological theory can be seen as a conservative reaction to the growing liberalism which emphasized the autonomous individual.

Recently Westkott (1977) has argued that modern (as opposed to classical) sociology is also conservative in nature. However, in contrast to Nisbet's emphasis upon conservative theory, Westkott (and before him, Birnbaum, 1971, pp. 81–93) has argued that modern sociology draws its conservative tendencies from method. Its methodology, inherited from Comte, emphasizes the present and the process of collecting facts. This produces "a 'situational conservatism' that justifies the factual reality it records [Westkott 1977, p. 70]." Positivism as a method "is the denial of philosophy, theory, politics, and imagination [Westkott, 1977, p. 70]." It creates a conservative disposition that reproduces, rather than criticizes, social reality.

Comte's methodology has also influenced the other social sciences. When the social sciences became the behavioral sciences, positivistic methodology became the common denominator that united mainstream sociology, psychology, political science, and anthropology. It did not matter that most behavioral scientists were themselves self-professed liberals. Their individual politics are separable from the political consequences of their collective professional practice. Westkott's criticism applies to any of the behavioral sciences adopting a similar methodology. In Hampden-Turner's (1971) words:

> their [behavioral scientists] conservatism is latent in the tools they employ. It comes about less by valuing conservatively than by the "value-free" selection of the less than human. . . . He who is silent assents, and to describe the status quo with detailed and passionless precision is usually to dignify it [pp. 17–18].

Although humanistic psychology has been branded by Maslow as the alternative to behaviorism and psychoanalysis (i.e., as third force psychology) it can more accurately be considered as second force psychology, *as the liberal reaction to conservatism* (albeit conservatism in two different guises). Anderson (1974) has recently noted that the political consequences of both behaviorism and psychoanalysis are conservative in nature. In light of our previous distinction between conservative method and

conservative theory, we can be somewhat more analytic than was Anderson regarding the sources of the common conservative effect of both behaviorism and psychoanalysis. Whereas the conservative element in behaviorism stems from its positivistic methodology, in psychoanalysis it is more rooted in theory. Thus Freud's deterministic, fatalistic, and pessimistic view of humanity offered little, other than trying to get along as best one could in a basically static, evil society. For Freud, the nature of society was derived from the nature of the individual, that is, from a biologically based, ahistorical view of humanity. Since human nature was basically irrational, destructive, and, of course, unchanging in his theory, there were no grounds for expecting improvement in the human condition, no plan for implementing social change. Humanistic psychologists reacted to a negative view of humanity that carried with it a latent conservatism (for a discussion of Freud's conservative theory, see Roazen, 1967). They certainly did not see in Freudian negativism any support for the idea of radical and revolutionary change that some have seen (e.g., Brown, 1959; Jacoby, 1975; Marcuse, 1955; Reich, 1970; Robinson, 1969).

In summary, then, liberal humanistic psychologists rejected the conservative implications that both behaviorism and psychoanalysis seemed to entail. A mechanistic, deterministic conception of the individual left no possibility for an active, self-determining agent who could transform and change his/her situation. Behaviorism left no room for contemplation, speculation, or reflection about one's experience. Classical psychoanalysis offered little in this area as well, since one's experience and theorizing could ultimately never break through the prison of a deterministic past and predetermined future. To the liberal mind, freedom, liberty, and personal development or progress were ideals that were inconsistent with the conservative methodology of behaviorism and the conservative theory of psychoanalysis. It was on the basis of such liberal values that humanistic psychologists launched their critique of the two "traditional" psychologies. Thus humanistic psychology began as a radical and revolutionary liberal movement, much like the liberalism associated with the Enlightenment in which genesis also lay in criticizing the established order from a consideration of freedom, liberty, and individual progress.

In criticizing the conservative implications of both behaviorism and psychoanalysis, humanistic psychologists were really fighting a battle on two fronts: (*a*) attempting to deal with the very real problem of an alienated, determined, controlled, and objectified human existence; and (*b*) opposing the conservative ideology which had had the net effect of reproducing that reality. With respect to alienation, humanistic psychol-

ogists were reacting to the true content of both behaviorism and psychoanalysis. That is to say, the origins of both behaviorism and psychoanalysis can be seen as tied to a specific socio-historical condition, and as such, they offer certain insights into that condition. A deterministic, mechanistic, and pessimistic conception of the individual was tied to a social reality which was indeed consistent with such an image. However, the error of both behaviorism and psychoanalysis was to accept current reality as absolute reality. Behaviorism in method, and psychoanalysis in theory, universalize and thus conserve and preserve a human condition that should be transformed. Their built-in conserving tendencies tend to perpetuate that social reality which spawned their being. Thus they are both ultimately ideological in the Marxian sense of that term (see Lichtman, 1975).

Both behaviorism and psychoanalysis "reflect" social reality (the deterministic, alienated, mechanistic existence associated with advanced industrial capitalistic society), and this is their truth-content. Yet, at the same time, both also involve a distortion or an "inversion" of that social reality, which means both absolutize what is really an historically unique situation. This is their "falseness" dimension. For Marx, an ideology both "reflected" and "inverted" social reality and thus contained both truth and falseness.

While humanistic psychology as a liberal theory offers quite a different view of humanity than do the conservative theories of both behaviorism or psychoanalysis, it does not escape the latter's ideological fate. Although it started out with a revolutionary bang, humanistic psychology has ended up with a co-opted whimper. There can be little doubt that, historically speaking, third force psychology was a progressive movement. However, its critical foundations have gradually eroded away as it has become institutionalized and housed within APA as the "official" oppositional wing. What was once an "out" group is now very much an "in" group. The rhetoric of individual development and self-actualization has been taken over by government, industrial, and organizational psychologists (see Harman, 1974), and has been turned into an ideology which maintains the status quo. What was once a theory of revolutionary liberal psychologists is now part of the received doctrine of the liberal establishment–what might be termed "conservative liberalism."

The excessive individualism contained in the doctrine of self-actualization serves to mask the larger social questions surrounding society's structures and institutions. A theory that predisposes one to focus more upon individual freedom and development rather than the larger social

reality, works in favor of maintaining that social reality. While several people have already noted the conformist implications of humanistic psychology (i.e., Adams, 1977; Beit-Hallahmi, 1977; Glass, 1971; Nord, 1977), thus far there has not been an adequate socio-historical interpretation of this dimension. What is required is situating the theory of humanistic psychology within a larger social and political matrix, and, more specifically, revealing the liberal foundations of the theory. The latter permits a deeper, more meaningful critique in the sense of pointing out that it is necessary to transform the social props that support liberal humanistic psychology in order to transcend its individualistic bias. In other words, it is through praxis that more valid theory will develop (and, being good dialecticians, our theory, such as the present critical effort, should also inform our praxis). Let me now try and make the above rather abstract ideas more concrete by focusing upon Maslow's theory of self-actualization.

THE LIBERAL BASIS OF MASLOW'S THEORY OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Having alluded to the link between humanistic psychology and liberalism, it is possible to become a little more specific about that relationship by looking at the structure of Maslow's theory. Conceptually, there can be little doubt that Maslow's psychological theory is founded upon, and implies, the tenets of liberalism. Such themes in his writings as growth, becoming, self-actualization, individual freedom, and tolerance, are all the psychological embodiment of the liberal frame of mind which emphasizes optimism, pluralism, individual freedom, piecemeal progress, and the gradual development toward perfection. Thus although Maslow rejected positivism as a methodology, he adopted a positive or optimistic, rather than a negative or critical approach (Maslow, 1954, pp. 353–362). In this way he shared the liberal disposition to concentrate on the "good," rather than on the "bad," and to attempt piecemeal social change through, for example, the education of individuals, rather than by transforming the deeper structures of society.

Maslow had a vision of the ideal liberal society in which freedom and individual development reigned supreme—a psychological utopia he called "Eupsychia." Thus in common with other liberal thinkers, Maslow shared the dual commitment to (*a*) finding out the "truth"—describing reality as it "really" is, and (*b*) hinting toward a social reality we ought to nurture into being. And the two tasks were often unconsciously fused.

Maslow never did adequately distinguish between, and resolve to some degree of satisfaction, the "is" and the "ought." He attempted to pass his own theory off as based upon purely descriptive statements, rather than containing a hard normative core (Smith, 1969, p. 169). Thus his theory lacks an explicit and self-conscious appreciation of its own value-laden nature, and more specifically, its affirmation of liberal values. The latter was the case in spite of the fact that Maslow gave considerable attention to the study of values.

In regard to Maslow's own values that guided his work, his original sample of self-actualizers, his own personal selection of individuals he considered to be self-actualized, appears to epitomize liberal values. According to Maslow (1954), these people were democratic, autonomous, individualistic, and, true to the liberal penchant for piecemeal progress, preferred to work from within rather than from without the system on matters relating to social injustice.

Like classical nineteenth-century liberals such as Herbert Spencer, Maslow grounded his notion of individual progress upon the universal laws of biology. It was Maslow's absolute, ahistorical view of human nature, as anchored in his concept of the instinctoid, which was the foundation for his theory of self-actualization. His conception of human nature as primary, and the environment as secondary, was much like that of an earlier champion of liberal ideals—Rousseau. Rousseau's "natural man" would almost seem to have inspired Maslow's "concept of the psychiatrically healthy man, or the eupsychic man, who is also in effect the natural man" (Maslow, 1954, p. 340). Thus for Maslow (1954), "Man demonstrates *in his own nature* a pressure toward . . . more perfect actualization. . . . The environment does not give his potentialities [p. 160]."

Whereas Freud's conception of an unchanging human nature was one that emphasized destruction, negation, and despair, Maslow's liberal essentialism was one of construction, affirmation, and hope. The important point here is that the structure of both Freud's and Maslow's view of humanity is identical (ahistorical, essential, unchanging, biological), although the content differs. Although he is not specifically discussing humanistic psychology, Lichtman's (1977) observations on various reactions to psychoanalysis are indeed appropriate:

> the tendency is to negate the Freudian *characterization* of human nature . . . [and] assert the view that the new set of attributes is *given fact* about human beings. Men and women are transformed into a *new* entity, but an *entity* nonetheless. . . . What distinguishes human life, however, what constitutes its

> dignity and unique value, is our capacity to create ourselves in history. . . . [T]he view of a fixed human nature is one of the basic mystifications to be opposed [p. 81].

Thus the theories of both Maslow and Freud are ideological to the extent that they view human nature as an absolute.

Part of Maslow's view of human nature included a consideration of values and ethics. Maslow also attempted to ground his own values and ethics in biology and then passed them off as universal. As noted by Smith (1973), this move is problematic for a truly humanistic approach, that is, an approach that rests upon choice, dialogue, and criticism within the context of a changing socio-historical reality.

Along with his emphasis upon an essential rather than an historical or transformable human nature, Maslow (1954) also stressed inner rather than outer freedom:

> Healthy individuals are not externally visible. . . . It is an *inner* freedom that they have . . . they may be considered to be psychologically autonomous, i.e., relatively independent of culture. External freedom seems to be less important than inner freedom [p. 351].

Here Maslow is following J. S. Mill's emphasis upon freedom or liberty in the internal, rather than in the external sphere. Mill's entire essay of 1859, *On Liberty*, is an exploration of the limits of society's constraint over the individual. The major theme that Mill defends is one in which there is "absolute nonintervention in the private sphere of human affairs [Wolff, 1968, p. 7]." It is a position that Wolff has dubbed "Mill's Doctrine of the Liberty of the Inner Life," and would seem to find its psychological expression in Maslow's theory of inner freedom and self-actualization.

Finally in regard to the political content of Maslow's theory, we can note that in reading various political analyses of liberalism, it is very easy indeed to find passages that could have been penned by Maslow. Thus such classical liberal works as Mill's (1975) *On Liberty* written in 1859, and Hobhouse's (1964) *Liberalism* written in 1911, contain many references to the idea of individual development and self-actualization, although space does not allow us to consider relevant passages.

Important as the above observations are concerning the liberal foundations of Maslow's theory, we can go beyond a "mere" conceptual link between Maslow's concepts and the liberal tradition, and examine the deeper, socio-historical roots that nourished the specific form of liberalism that permeates his psychological categories. My strategy here is to single

out the major underlying contradiction within Maslow's theory—*the tension between his democratic and elitist tendencies*—and place this contradiction within its socio-historical context.

THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL DIMENSION IN MASLOW'S THEORY

The major implicit contradiction with Maslow's theory has recently been made explicit by Aron (1977). According to Aron, Maslow held two contradictory views of self. One view involved a democratic conception of self. It emphasized equality of rights, individual sovereignty, pluralism, and a toleration of others. This side of Maslow placed a premium upon individual choice and development and was based upon a relativistic notion of values. "Maslow's Other Child" involved what Aron has called an aristocratic or elitist view of the self. This elitist view of the self was derived from Maslow's judgment that, in reality, there are better values than others, better ways of living than others, better people than others. According to this side of Maslow, there are two distinct kinds, or what we might call classes, of people: (*a*) those who are self-actualizing, worthy of emulation, psychologically healthy, and in control of their lives (one percent of the general population according to Maslow); and (*b*) those who are nonactualizing, nonworthy of being emulated, psychologically unhealthy, and impotent vis-à-vis successfully charting themselves around life's obstacles. Maslow revered the former and disparaged the latter.

While Aron (1977) has detected and revealed the contradiction within Maslow's thought revolving around democratic versus elitist values, she has not explained its existence. Thus it is not enough to psychologize such a contradiction, and state that "Maslow committed an error in reasoning that cannot be rectified [p. 14]." It makes no sense to ask "Where in this wild dialectic is the *real* Maslow [p. 15]?" since it is not necessary to choose between Maslow the democrat and Maslow the aristrocrat. The "real" Maslow was both. The contradiction in his theory is not a conceptual one. There is no error in logic. Rather, the contradiction is a real contradiction. It is an historical contradiction rooted in a concrete social reality. *Maslow's contradiction is part of a larger contradiction—the contradiction between democratic theory and democratic practice within the modern liberal society.* A more adequate explanation of Maslow's psychological concepts (and their contradictory nature) must involve unearthing their social content and peeling away their surface layers, thus laying bare their historical origins.

Maslow's first systematic presentation of his views, *Motivation and Personality*, was published in 1954. This book contains revisions of several essays dating from 1941 onward, and was written over a period of time which witnessed some very significant political events revolving around the undermining of classical democratic theory. Several mass movements, all of which took a totalitarian turn (e.g., Naziism, Fascism, and McCarthyism), shook the very foundations of a classical liberal democratic theory which had considered the masses as the protectors of freedom and liberty. The growing post-war prolitariate support for Communist parties in such western countries as France and Italy posed somewhat of a threat to classical liberal democratic theory. Rather than seeing the franchise and the further delegation of power to the masses as guaranteeing the preservation of democracy, there developed a growing realization that perhaps the masses could not be trusted to exercise such increased responsibility in a way which was consistent with preserving liberal values. During the early 1950s the lack of political sophistication of the common person was being increasingly documented by social scientists. Such findings helped to fuel the growing disillusionment amongst certain thinkers with classical liberal democratic theory, and the acceptance of elitist theories of democracy (see Bachrach, 1967, for a useful discussion of this point).

The tension between the theory and practice of classical democracy during this period could no longer be ignored. The historical setting that nurtured the development of democracy, that is, the small rural village where each individual was assured of a hearing, was no longer the prototype for the modern democratically run state. In an age of the nation-state there was little opportunity for direct participation of the masses. Along with nationhood, democratic government increasingly involved fewer and fewer decision-makers. Those who continued to espouse classical democratic theory were by now uttering rhetoric. The reality could no longer be ignored—democracy was increasingly becoming the pervue of a very small but powerful elite. What Bachrach (1967) has called *democratic elitism* had replaced classical democratic theory.

As outlined by Bachrach, the flames of democratic elitism were fanned by the mass movements of the 1930s and 40s, and this liberal doctrine became a force to be reckoned with during the post-war aftermath. Whereas earlier liberals had believed that liberal values such as liberty, freedom, individual development, tolerance, and pluralism were to be defended and preserved through increasing the franchise and individual

rights, post-war liberals began to take the exact opposite view. Liberalism was endangered by further democratization, and it needed a "power elite" to safeguard its existence.

We are now in a position to understand better the social basis of Maslow's theory of self-actualization, and the historical roots of the contradiction between the democratic and elitist views of self. Maslow's elite —the one percent of the general population who define and thus control what is meant by self-actualization—are the psychological embodiment of the social elite who are society's decision-makers. *The structure of Maslow's psychological theory can be seen as incorporating the structure of his society. Maslow's hierarchical or "class" theory of self-actualization consists of social categories projected onto the individual.* His is a liberal psychological theory that contains the real socio-historical contradiction between democracy and elitism—the contradiction that had evolved within the modern liberal democratic state. The tension in Maslow's theory of self-actualization between democracy and elitism—between the nonactualized masses and the actualized few—is part of the tension that liberal theorists were experiencing and trying to resolve in the 1940s and 50s. Whereas the latter attempted a conceptual solution involving a defense of democratic elitism (for a review of such attempts and their failure, see Bachrach, 1967). Maslow, as Aron (1977) has made clear, was never sufficiently conscious of the contradictory strains in his theory to attempt such a solution.

Thus, contrary to Hampden-Turner's (1977) argument that Maslow sought to synthesize "apparent" contradictions and transcend false dualisms, I believe that the democratic-elitist tension remains intact and below consciousness in his work. It is driven underground where it can serve an ideological function. And, even if Maslow had been self-conscious of the contradiction in his theory, an attempt to perform conceptual surgery by synthesizing the polarity would not have been the way out. False syntheses are no better than false dualisms. We should guard against applying dialectical thinking in a mechanical or undialectical manner. We need a truly critical approach. We need to turn the dialectic upon itself and adopt the perspective that Adorno (1973) has called "negative dialectics," in order to detect the actual contradictory and fragmentary social reality underlying our theory.

In other words, theory alone will not suffice to save Maslow's theory from its contradictory structure. Since the contradiction of which we are speaking is not a conceptual one but, rather, a real one anchored in a concrete socio-historical reality, its resolution requires transforming that social reality. Thus theory guiding praxis, and praxis, in turn, guiding

theory, are necessary to resolve the contradictory democratic and elitist dimensions in Maslow's theory. The solution to Maslow's contradiction is part of a larger social solution which undermines the structural basis of democratic elitism and establishes a form of democracy with a broader base.

Re-establishing the very important core of classical liberal democratic theory, that is, a broad-based type of political participation, is absolutely necessary in order to achieve the kinds of goals that Maslow's theory of self-actualization is purportedly trying to achieve. Classical democratic theory "is based on the supposition that a man's dignity, and indeed his growth and development . . . is dependent upon an opportunity to participate actively in decisions that significantly affect him [Bachrach, 1967, p. 98]." Having the freedom to be an effective part of those collective decisions that affect one's life must be a prerequisite reality rather than a myth if Maslow's goal of wide-spread self-actualization is to be a realistic one. Democratic elitism, which sustains Maslow's self-actualized elite, must give way to mass self-actualization which, in turn, requires mass democracy. It is in this way that the structure of Maslow's psychological theory can inform our social praxis. Political action and psychological theory are thus connected dialectically.

Of course a plea for a return to the practice of classical liberal democratic theory is unrealistic in an age of the "global community," where increasing centralization of the decision making process has gone beyond the "mere" establishment of national governing bodies, to those with international powers. One must take account of the reality of C. Wright Mills' (1956) "power elite" in an age of increasing complexity, specialization, and bureaucracy. What, then, is a realistic, yet more democratic alternative to democratic elitism in the age of mass society? Bachrach's (1967) proposal for transcending democratic elitism would seem to provide at least a valuable hint in the direction of finding a social solution to the social contradiction that Maslow's psychological theory contains. According to Bachrach's "self-developmental theory of democracy," it is necessary to go beyond a nineteenth-century notion of political decision-making that restricts itself to government decision making. Thus "large areas within existing so-called private centers of power are political and therefore potentially open to a wide and democratic sharing in decision making [Bachrach, 1967, p. 102]." Thus greater effort should be made so that the common person can actively participate in those decisions that affect him/her in the factory and in the community—decisions that he/she considers important and vital, rather than tangential and irrelevant to day-to-day living.

CONCLUSION

In giving Maslow's theory of self-actualization a critical and dialectical reading, we are able to understand its liberal ideological foundations. Ideologically speaking, the validity of Maslow's theory derives from the contradictory social reality it "reflects" and supports—democratic elitism —a two-class theory of individual freedom and development. However, Maslow's theory is at the same time an "inversion" of that social reality to the extent that its psychological categories universalize an historically specific condition, namely, democratic elitism. Maslow's biologically rooted theory of self-actualization freezes human nature circa 1950 and makes an absolute out of two historically evolved classes of individuals. As such, it contains a hidden plea for social transformation once one appreciates that human nature is itself historical and that humanity can create and re-create its own nature through its making of history.

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