

Personal growth or social revolution?

Open a few Sunday colour supplements and you're likely to see a mention of some variety of "Personal Growth". Look at the notices on the wall in most health food shops, or look in the back of city's listing magazines and you'll see adverts for this or that new approach. This term has come to refer to a whole variety of psychotherapies, holistic health methods, mystical approaches and self-improvement techniques. You may also see it referred to as "humanistic psychology", "the human potential movement", or "the growth movement". If we were to make a rough and ready list of the sorts of things that might be included under these banners, we could start with encounter groups, meditation, natural health food approaches, Gestalt therapy, massage, and rebirthing. We also get approaches mixing religion and therapy such as "Zencounter" or "Zenanalysis". Many of these approaches have become very popular, and are big money-spinners in the United States.

Changing the individual

So what are the common themes behind all these various ways to personal growth? At the risk of lumping together a lot of approaches whose practitioners hate each other, we could say that all of them aim to increase the individual's ability to live life to the full and experience the world. They're often concerned with emotions rather than our intellect. As Fritz Perls said, "Don't think, feel. Lose your mind and come to your senses".

Most writers in this area concentrate on the need for individuals to become more at ease with themselves. All of them argue that the so-called "normal" way that we live our lives today is frustrating and unsatisfying; and that we only fulfil a small part of our potential. Some writers blame this on the social system. For example:

We are aggressive, compulsive and individualistic because these traits make us easily exploitable as workers and citizens (C. Steiner *Scripts People Live*).

We have created a system that divides society and produces institutions to frustrate individual needs. At the same time, ideologies are created to justify this arrangement and to ensure that it will continue (A. Janov *Prisoners of Pain*).

To this extent, socialists would share their view that the world as it is now doesn't offer most people the chance to grow and develop and agree with a more flexible approach to human nature than the "Original Sin" notions of Thatcher and her cronies. Where we differ from those involved in personal growth is how to radically improve the world.

For example, it can't be stressed enough how personal growth writers see changing the *individual* as the main way forward. For example, here's Carl Rogers talking about how the world will change:

I see the revolution as coming not in some great organized movement, not in gun carrying armies with banners, not in manifestoes and declarations but through the emergence of a new kind of person, thrusting upwards through the

dying, yellow, putrefying leaves and talks of our fading institutions (*Carl Rogers on Personal Power*).

Even more bold is Marilyn Ferguson:

The great shuddering irrevocable shift overtaking us is not a new political or philosophical system. It is a new mind (*The Aquarian Conspiracy*)

Over and over again you see the same themes. The new society will come about through people undergoing change individually. Once enough people have changed radically enough, a new society will spontaneously evolve which will reflect the healthy characteristics of these new persons.

Changing Society

Well, what's wrong with that? Don't socialists want people to change before we can hope to bring socialism into existence.

Well yes, but we see changing present-day society as rather different. To get socialism you need a majority of workers in the world who are clear *beforehand* of how they see a new society working. But personal growth writers are prepared to accept that big improvements can be brought about in the way people relate *without* radically changing society first. For example, Carl Rogers describes how person-centred approaches to management radically improved the experience of individuals in firms. A "happy" by-product of this was increased productivity and profits! Even worse, here's Ferguson again: "The military, with its guaranteed financial base, has more opportunity to fund innovation than any other institution".

The innovation that the military funds has more to do with deadly nerve gases and neutron bombs than peaceful development of individuals. Of course, the military *might* use its resources for the common good to relieve starvation and destroy its weapons, in the same way that President Bush might join the Socialist Party tomorrow. Neither is at all likely, though.

The problem with a lot of writing about personal growth and how it's supposed to bring about social transformation is that changing the person often becomes a lot more important than changing society. Once you've been through some sort of personal growth you may well *feel* that you're living in a different world. Unfortunately it's only your perception of the world that's changed. Capitalism works pretty much the same whatever psychic self-improvement we may undergo.

Capitalism is a world economic system, it isn't just a scatter of individuals with hang-ups. You can't explain the way it works by looking at the individual characters of its component members. For example, social class exists. Rupert Murdoch and a Mexican peasant will still live in a different world even if they punch pillows or play trust games together in the same men's group. Billionaires will live in the midst of the destitute as long as our social priorities are determined by profit and private property. Attempting to get rid of human misery by giving people psychotherapy is like trying to cure cholera by treating each individual case. It may help a few people, but in the long run it's far better to clean up the water supply, or in the case of society, end capitalism.

Unless we change the whole obscene system, there will always be serious limits to what "enlightened" individuals can achieve when they try to humanize its consequences. Socialists argue that unless you change the way that things are produced and distributed, social problems will always come up however mature, feeling or laid-back we all are.

As long as things are produced to make a profit, the poor will stay poor, work will be boring and arduous, states will go to war to win economic influence, and valuable resources will be used up persuading us to buy things we don't want or need. It is a system which gives rise to these problems, not our personal inadequacies. *Any* system based on private property and money is too inflexible to ever meet fully people's needs.

Nice but naive

Now supporters of personal growth would get very angry at this point if they weren't so laid-back. They'd say, "it's all very well talking about some pie-in-the-sky socialism, but what about now? Let's change ourselves and those around us, and that'll change society in a much more solid way. If you fix the shape of the new society too strictly then you won't be flexible enough to new possibilities". The trouble is though, unless you're clear on the sort of society you want, you can end up being pulled in a variety of ways.

Clare and Thompson sum up this dilemma for those going through personal growth:

Which direction should I take? Should I try to imitate Jesus or Henry Ford or Lenin? Should I try to make money or retreat from the market place? Should I go back to sleep? (*Let's Talk About Me*).

It would be nice (but naive) to believe that we were all on the same side, and that people who went through personal growth all came to want to work towards the same exciting and liberating society that we do. However, approaches like Sensitivity Training and Transaction Analysis have been used in the military and large corporations such as IBM and Honeywell (now called Bull). Some growth practitioners have seen the way forward as small businesses. Others have disappeared into communes and co-operatives. The sheer diversity of approaches shows that there's no hard and fast rule. President Bush might not work towards bringing about a moneyless society even *after* he's had personal growth!

None of this is to deny the value of personal growth; it certainly helps some people feel better. What it can't do is change the society in which it is embedded unless it starts to talk about a revolution in social relations. At the moment, it seems more likely that its ideas will be used for harassed executives looking for greater "personal effectiveness", and more importantly, better profits for their paymasters.

Unless you challenge the basis of capitalism your ideas will be incorporated into the very society that you set out to revolutionize. The term "personal growth" has become flexible enough to mean pretty well anything, and it is a truly helpless approach when confronted with a world of starvation and war. As one bank executive quoted by Marilyn Ferguson is reported to have said after the awakening of his staff through personal growth seminars: "For my money, these soul searchers are our future".

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