Contain and Control: The Murder of Humanistic Psychology

Introduction

Once upon a time — and it really was something like a fairy tale — humanistic psychology ruled the American mind. In the late 1960s, this upstart "third force" had stormed a profession dominated by two gloomy orthodoxies: Freudian psychoanalysis, with its dark determinism and its insistence that patients were prisoners of unconscious drives, and behaviorism, which treated the human being as a stimulus-response machine that could be trained like a laboratory rat or salivating dog. Against both, humanistic psychology proposed something radical: that people are more than their wounds and their reflexes. They are purposeful, growth-oriented, meaning-seeking creatures with dignity, worth, and unrecognized and untapped potential.

For a moment, the establishment agreed. In 1968, Abraham Maslow, the man whose hierarchy of needs would become one of the most reproduced diagrams in human history, was elected president of the American Psychological Association. At the same time Carl Rogers, the gentle revolutionary of client-centered therapy, was by many accounts the most influential psychologist in America, his portrait hanging in the National Portrait Gallery as a mark of his cultural standing. Rollo May had carried existential psychology across the Atlantic and made anxiety, freedom, and authenticity respectable topics of scholarly conversation. Around them gathered an astonishing constellation of luminaries: Viktor Frankl, Erich Fromm, R.D. Laing, Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls, James Bugental, Aldous Huxley, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber.

The movement did not stay inside the academy. As it grew stronger and bolder, it began to remake American culture. Millions of ordinary people flooded into *encounter groups* and growth centers. Schools, churches, colleges, and corporations embraced personal growth curricula. The very idea that one might go to a therapist not because one was "sick" but because one wanted to become more fully alive — that you might, in Rogers's phrase, become a "fully functioning person" — entered the mainstream. Scholars credit humanistic psychology with turning the United States into a "therapeutic culture" and with expanding psychology from a small guild of about 7,000 members in 1950 into a profession of more than 90,000.

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Then the music stopped.

Within thirty years, the symphony hall was nearly empty. Maslow, Rogers, and May were dead. Deterministic, mechanistic, pathologizing models — the very ones humanistic psychology had risen up against — once again ruled both in the clinic and in the university classroom. Contemporary therapists now practice techniques their founders explicitly disavowed, often without knowing the tradition those techniques quietly absorbed and erased. A movement that had begun to change a nation had become, in the eyes of the profession it once led, a punchline whose legacy was the "crystal healing, aromatherapy, and ...inner child shelf…" of the new age book store (Seligman, 1998).

This is strange enough on its face. Humanistic psychology was fruitful, especially therepeutically (Rogers, 1970, 1989) . It becomes genuinely mysterious when you look at the evidence. The core claims of humanistic psychology — that the therapeutic relationship heals, that clients possess strengths and potentials, that contextual factors matter more than specific techniques — never failed. They were vindicated, again and again, by the very empirical research mainstream psychology claims as its gold standard. The movement died, in other words, without ever being refuted.

In a landmark 2009 article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, David Elkins asked the obvious question: *what happened?* His answer is one of the most disturbing and quietly devastating analyses in the history of the field.

The Victim Didn't Commit Suicide

Previous attempts to answer Elkins's question "What happened?" had focused on the movement's purported flaws. David Cain's widely discussed 2003 inventory, for example, blamed weak research output, poor organization, political naiveté, and a self-defeating maverick streak (Cain, 2003). Elkins respects that analysis but rejects its central premise. By focusing almost exclusively on what humanistic psychologists did wrong, he argues, such accounts "blame the victim." The movement's shortcomings were real but survivable — "we may have shot ourselves in the foot a few times, but those injuries were not fatal. The real death blows came from outside."

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Elkins identifies two murderers.

The first murderer was the conservative political and religious backlash. His case study is the encounter group movement — the most visible and popular manifestation of humanistic psychology. Encounter groups were, as Rogers said, "the most rapidly spreading social invention of the century": grassroots, largely leaderless, reaching into every corner of American life, and genuinely helpful (Rogers, 1970, p. 1). When researcher P.B. Smith reviewed the evidence in 1975, he found that adverse effects from encounter groups were no more frequent than adverse effects in comparable populations not in groups at all. For a movement involving millions of participants over more than a decade, the safety record was remarkable.

So how did it become synonymous with harm? Through stereotype, amplified by power. A handful of "nude marathons," Rogers estimated they comprised less than one-tenth of one percent of all groups, drew lurid national coverage. Right-wing polemicists denounced sensitivity training simultaneously as a communist conspiracy and a Nazi plot; the John Birch Society's magazine attacked it in print, and a segregationist congressman read one such diatribe into the *Congressional Record*. Decades of books from the Religious Right followed, condemning humanistic psychology as narcissistic, blasphemous, and anti-Biblical. Rogers had predicted all of this in 1970 with uncanny precision: encounter groups "breed constructive change," he wrote, "hence, all those opposed to change will be stoutly or even violently opposed" (Rogers, 1970, p. 13). His only error was underestimating how completely the opponents of change would win. The rise of Falwell, Robertson, Limbaugh, and Murdoch completed what the polemicists began: a psychology of dignity, freedom, and growth simply could not coexist with an ascendant authoritarian conservatism.

The second murderer is more shocking, because it lived in the same house and came down from the upstairs: mainstream psychology itself. Elkins documents its method across three mechanisms.

First, **stereotyping without evidence.** When Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi launched "positive psychology" in a special issue of the *American Psychologist* in 2000, they dismissed humanistic psychology as a movement with little empirical base that had spawned crystal healing and aromatherapy — a claim they documented not at all. It was, Elkins notes, a measure of how secure

the stereotype had become that two of the field's most eminent scholars could recycle it in its flagship journal without citing a shred of evidence. Bohart and Greening's published reply noted that the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* had run over one hundred articles on peace, the Holocaust, and social justice — and "no articles at all on crystals or aromatherapy" (Bohart & Greening, 2001).

Second, **erasure**. Seligman's positive psychology reframed humanistic themes while citing almost none of the tradition that had developed them; Carl Rogers, the first psychologist to reject the pathology model and build a research-supported therapy around human potential, appeared in none of its hundreds of references. Nor was Seligman alone: Heinz Kohut built an entire school of self-psychology on the therapeutic power of empathic understanding, never once mentioned Rogers in his writings (Elkins, 2009). The pattern repeated across spirituality, where mainstream texts discovered the topic decades after humanistic and transpersonal psychologists had legitimized it, again without credit.

Third, **minimization.** This was most elegant weapon, because it wears the mask of generosity. Humanistic psychology, the professor concedes, "showed us the importance of having a good relationship with the client." Rogerian therapy is "a good place to start." The movement is acknowledged and diminished in the same breath, its revolution reduced to a courtesy, its science to a warm-up act. "Damning with faint praise," as Elkins says.

Finally, Humanistic psychology was **outright murdered**. I actually witnessed this. I was in the fourth year of an honours psychology program at the University of Regina. After a disastrous attempt to become an engineer, and drawn by the effervescence of psychologist Duncan Blewett, a Humanistic psychology who had done research on LSD in the 50s, I entered into psychology studying various humanistic and transpersonal perspectives. I loved it. However, in my fourth year the Humanistic program was dismantled, its professors shuffled out the door to be replaced by Cognitive and Behavioral scientists. In a single year it was gone, dismantled by administrative decree. I’m certain Regina was not the only scene. I suspect similar murders occurred elsewhere.

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The Real Conflict

Why would a profession and its supporting institutions (Universities, scholarly journals) go to such lengths against a school of thought that had, after all, enriched it? Elkins's insight is that the surface tactics all serve a structural antagonism. Mainstream psychology is built on two commitments: the natural-science model as the sole gold standard of legitimate knowledge — a philosophical position, Elkins dryly notes, that is not itself scientifically verifiable — and the medical model, which frames psychotherapy as the treatment of disorders located inside individuals. Humanistic psychology rejects both. It holds that human beings require a *human* science, phenomenological, qualitative, meaning-centered. I holds that therapy is not a medical procedure but a liberating interpersonal process, a relationship in which a person, supported by another's empathy and genuineness, recovers the capacity to grow. These are not mere disagreements. They are, as Elkins says, a chasm of "Grand Canyon proportions."

It was more than just that though. The problem, as identified by Rogers, is that humanistic psychology empowered people to be something other than what they currently were, or what society and their schooling had shaped them into.

> There is in every organism, at whatever level, an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfillment of its inherent possibilities. There is a natural tendency toward complete development in man. The term that has most often been used for this is the actualizing tendency, and it is present in all living organisms. It is the foundation on which the person-centered approach is built. ... In dealing with clients whose lives have been terribly warped, in working with men and women on the back wards of state hospitals, I often think of those potato sprouts. So unfavorably have been the conditions in which these people have developed that their lives often seem abnormal, twisted, scarcely human. Yet the directional tendency in them is to be trusted (Rogers, 1980, p. 1980).

Humanistic Psychology was beginning to *free* humanity from its chains, and that was a threat to the status quo, a quo which needs everybody to fill in the roles laid out in front of them by the educational system.

Conclusion: The Fromm Test

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In his book, *The Sane Society*, Fromm argued that an entire society can be sick, and that in such a society it is precisely the "well-adjusted" who are ill. Alienation, compulsive consumption, the reduction of persons to functions in a market — these conditions produce predictable suffering: anxiety, emptiness, aggression, despair. Much of what the clinic labels individual pathology is, Fromm insisted, a *sane response to systemic toxicity*. A psychology that accepts the system as the fixed frame of reference — that treats the patient's misery as a malfunction to be corrected so the patient can return, adjusted, to the conditions that produced the misery — is not healing. It is collaborating. It administers palliative care to casualties of a social order it refuses to examine, and it calls this neutrality.

This is why the conflict between mainstream psychology and the humanistic vision is total, and why accommodation was never truly available. Humanistic psychology's founding commitments — to human development rather than symptom management, to potential rather than deficit, to health as wholeness rather than adjustment, to healing as liberation rather than conformity — are incompatible with a framework whose deepest function, whatever the intentions of its practitioners, is to adapt persons to a toxic system. As Maureen O'Hara, Rogers's longtime collaborator, emphasized, humanistic psychology is about emancipation and empowerment; the therapeutic project and the political project are the same project. A psychology worthy of the name must be able to say that sometimes the system is the patient.

That is the vision Elkins insists must be revived — not as nostalgia for the 1960s, but as strategy. His prescriptions are deliberately unsentimental: stop apologizing, organize politically, build institutions, and confront mainstream psychology's failures openly, on the evidence. The research, after all, has never stopped supporting the humanistic claims. What failed was never the vision. It was the movement's willingness to defend it as the fight it always was.

Elkins closes by adapting the ancient sage Hillel: "If not we, then who?" The symphony was silenced mid-movement. But the score survives — and the questions it was written to answer, about what human beings are and what they might become, are not the kind that go away. They only go unanswered.

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