

Authoritarianism and the Person-Centered Approach:

A Firsthand Account of the L.A. Protests

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Abstract

Eighty years after the defeat of fascism in the Second World War, right-wing populism has seen a resurgence in countries around the world. Since Donald Trump resumed the presidency in the United States, the dismantling of democracy has been taking place rapidly with hardly any pushback from the opposition. All branches of government are controlled by Republicans who, with few exceptions, do not dare go against the whims of the President. Carl Rogers (1977), against the backdrop of the Nixon administration's abuses of power, wrote about "the perfect soil for developing a dictatorship" in the United States (p. 259). As many of his adherents around the world have noted, the person-centered approach places great importance on every human life. With this in mind, many person-centered practitioners have argued against remaining neutral and ignoring issues at large in society, instead advocating for more political engagement inside and outside of counseling rooms. I am one of those who believe we must take action and not stand idly by while our rights are being taken away. When oppression becomes so prevalent in society and democratic recourses are unavailable, therapists—especially person-centered ones—have a responsibility to protest with other like-minded people. Large-scale protests are particularly effective at pressuring governments and have led to the demise of authoritarian regimes. The Greater Los Angeles Area, the second largest metropolitan area in the United States after New York, was the first to be targeted by the Trump administration. Immigration raids and the deployment of troops on the streets have sparked protests across the city. My paper will highlight my personal experiences living in Los Angeles as I join others in protesting the Trump administration.

Keywords: authoritarianism; immigration; Los Angeles; person-centered approach; protest

Almost a half-century ago, Carl Rogers (1977) wrote about what was happening in American society which is even more apt today: “The disarray in our culture makes it less than surprising that there has been a steady trend toward abandoning personal freedoms and permitting stronger hands to take over. There is a drift toward authoritarian control” (pp. 258–259). In conservative-leaning states, there has been a blurring of lines between church and state and a concerted effort to ban certain books in schools in recent years. The second Trump administration has seen a stifling of free speech and the end of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Universities and corporations have followed suit to avoid possible financial and legal ramifications. Transgender Americans have increasingly faced discrimination as their rights have been taken away at the federal level.

Over the decades, many of the problems Rogers identified have been co-opted by the Republican Party. The religious right has been a pillar of the party since the late 1970s and has actively promoted fundamentalist Christianity in the public sphere, arguing against the separation of church and state. While the party likes to champion itself as being for “family values” as it rails against broken families, countless scandals have shown that conservatives are just like everyone else. With regard to the educational system, they have complained about “cancel culture” even though they appear to have no qualms about silencing liberal voices. Ronald Reagan was the first of many to call for the Department of Education to be eliminated altogether since its creation in 1979 by Jimmy Carter and the use of school vouchers has been a Republican talking point for years. Lastly, the party likes to portray itself as being for “law and order” by handing down tougher penalties despite studies showing they do not deter crime (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Economically, we have the same problems as we did back when Rogers wrote about this. While most people now have access to healthcare since the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (also known as Obamacare), it is market-based and insurance premiums go up every year. Republicans have nonetheless tried to repeal Obamacare even though they have no replacement plan. Income inequality has worsened considerably as wealth is concentrated in the hands of the few while many struggle from paycheck to paycheck. Corporations have even more influence and power. Most of those in elected office today are wealthy so not much has changed. Since adopting neoliberalism in the 1990s, the Democratic Party has largely abandoned the working class.

The Declaration of Independence (1776) states that “all men are created equal” and are bestowed with “certain unalienable rights” including “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Rogers (1977) has linked this and the U.S. Constitution, and most notably the Bill of Rights, to the person-centered approach. The First Amendment—which enshrines freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to assemble peacefully—has been under constant threat since Trump returned to the presidency. Rogers (1977) had his doubts about the American people’s commitment to these values and envisioned the possibility of a majority voting for an autocrat, either knowingly or due to indifference or pessimism. This is precisely what happened with Donald Trump. Rogers (1977) recognized the distrust between average citizens and their elected officials in his time, which has only grown since then.

Rogers (1977) was evidently appalled by the Nixon administration’s disregard for the Constitution, as demonstrated by his writings about the Kent State shootings and the

Watergate scandal. Whereas President Nixon resigned after being told by Republican members of Congress that he would be impeached and removed from office, nothing of the sort has happened to President Trump. Most Republican members of Congress have refused to hold President Trump accountable for anything he has done. Republican Senator Murkowski said it best: “We are all afraid” (Hughes, 2025). Moreover, the power of the presidency has increased substantially since Nixon. In *Trump v. United States* (2024), the Supreme Court ruled that the President was immune from criminal prosecution for all “official acts” by a 6-3 decision. This means the President could, in theory, order Seal Team 6 to assassinate a political rival without any legal consequences, as Justice Sonia Sotomayor pointed out in her dissent (*Trump v. United States*, 2024). Rogers (1977) saw the dangers of a presidency with unchecked power which has now become reality.

As all branches of government are currently controlled by conservatives, Democrats do not have much power to influence matters in government. However, they have shown an inability to rise to the occasion and do whatever they can to oppose the Trump administration. Democratic strategist James Carville, who worked on Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign in 1992, has suggested that Democrats “play possum” (Irwin, 2025)—referring to the animal which feigns death when confronted by danger—until the midterm elections in 2026. House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries apparently heeded this advice and went on a book tour after the election to promote his children’s book called *The ABCs of Democracy*. Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer had likewise planned a book tour for his book, *Antisemitism in America: A warning*, but this was postponed due to rising anger after he agreed to a Republican spending bill without

any changes. 2028 presidential hopefuls Kamala Harris and Cory Booker have also since published books and gone on book tours.

Amid Democratic acquiescence, Senator Chris Van Hollen has been an exception. When President Trump and Nayib Bukele, the authoritarian leader of El Salvador, insisted they could not bring Kilmar Abrego Garcia back to the United States after he was deported and imprisoned in CECOT (a maximum security prison), Senator Van Hollen decided to take matters into his own hands. He travelled to El Salvador on April 16, 2025, to meet with Abrego Garcia without prior arrangement and was granted permission to see him the next day. Abrego Garcia was eventually returned to the United States on June 6, 2025. The Democratic Party, afraid that standing up for due process would make them vulnerable to attacks by Republicans, has avoided the topic of immigration altogether.

Thus, the *Fighting oligarchy tour*, a traveling political rally featuring Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has been a breath of fresh air for those appalled by what the Trump administration was doing and the ineptitude of the Democratic Party. No one else of national prominence was speaking up for those of us who were afraid of what was happening in the country. So when they stopped by in downtown Los Angeles on April 12, 2025, I made sure to attend their rally. A series of musical acts, including Joan Baez and Neil Young, played before the main speakers took to the stage. While they focused on the undue influence of Big Tech on our politics and our lives, they did address the creeping authoritarianism. An estimated 36,000 people showed up for the rally, which was their biggest one ever (Nelson, 2025).

In *Politicizing the person-centred approach: An agenda for social change*, Seamus Nash (2006) wrote: “When I, as someone who espouses a person-centred way of being,

witness oppression and injustice to others, I cannot ignore this. Action is imperative” (p. 32). I could not agree more with this sentiment. Under the present circumstances, I feel compelled to act. Too many are passive or in denial and are hoping for everything to return back to normal after the next presidential election. But unfortunately, there is no guarantee that future elections will be free and fair or be held at all. President Trump has suggested that he could remain in power past 2028. (“Trump 2028” hats are being sold on his website.) Political strategist Steve Bannon has gone so far as to claim that the 22nd amendment will not prevent Trump from extending his presidency. With the Supreme Court having taken up President Trump’s challenge to birthright citizenship despite the 14th amendment, this does not seem so far-fetched.

As unorthodox as the person-centered approach was in his time, Rogers was not politically active. Hence, why a great many person-centered practitioners have since called for the person-centered approach to be extended into politics. Dave Mearns (2006), who called person-centered practitioners “political subversives”, criticized Rogers for not understanding how institutions worked as they tend to punish those who go against them (p. 137). Jude Boyles (2006), who worked at Freedom from Torture in the United Kingdom, was vehemently opposed to staying neutral in counseling rooms and believed that talking about injustices with clients was crucial to their recovery. Mae Boyd (2006) went further by arguing that we needed to look beyond counseling rooms for change and link up with political movements and build alliances. Peter Schmid (2014) maintained that one cannot be not political and that being apolitical was actually harmful to clients.

In his concluding remarks, Pete Sanders (2006) summed up what many person-centered practitioners have been calling for: action. Namely, what takes place inside

people's heads stays inside their heads unless they do something about it (Sanders, 2006). Nadya Tolokonnikova (2020), who founded the art collective Pussy Riot, is a big proponent of this idea. At Moscow State University, she had wanted to do actions instead of taking exams, but the faculty of the philosophy department would not let her so instead she settled on writing a paper about "action philosophy" (Tolokonnikova, 2020). Since fleeing Putin's Russia, she has continued to engage in activism and has been effective in bringing attention to the causes she believes in.

Echoing what other prominent activists around the world have stressed, Tolokonnikova (2020) wrote: "Nothing ever changes without people exerting pressure" (p. 56). Collective bargaining, civil rights, and women's suffrage only came about when masses of people pressured those in power to accede to their demands. Unfortunately, politics and elections in the United States have more or less been turned into a spectator sport in recent times. People have taken their rights for granted and assume that the system will continue to function even without their active participation. This has created an opportunity for the far-right to exploit the system, eroding our hard-won rights and refashioning the United States into an illiberal democracy. We must not let them succeed. We must step up and reclaim our rights and push back against what this administration is doing before we lose our democracy altogether.

Mass mobilization can be an effective way to pressure autocratic governments and has led to their downfall. Political scientist Erica Chenoweth (2020) has proposed that no government can survive when 3.5% of the population protests. This, in effect, would mean that the opposition has widespread support amongst the population which can eventually topple the regime (Chenoweth, 2020). A good example of this would be what

happened to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Starting in late 1989, protests were held on Mondays in Leipzig calling for democratic reforms which grew bigger with every passing week. This culminated in half a million East Germans protesting against the government in East Berlin on November 4, 1989 (Judt, 2006). Soon thereafter, the regime gave in to the pressure and the Berlin Wall came down a few days later.

The first mass mobilization against Trump was held on January 21, 2017, a day after he was inaugurated for the first time. Five million people protested in the United States and around the world in what was called the Women's March. The protests were in response to Trump's sexism which came to light during the 2016 presidential race, underscored by his comments caught on the *Access Hollywood* tape: "I just start kissing them ... I don't even wait. And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything ... Grab them by the pussy" (Trump, 2005). I assembled with others in downtown Los Angeles and together we marched. I remember it being packed with people as far as I could see. An estimated 750,000 people participated in the Los Angeles march (Chang, Vives, Smith, Winton & Zhang, 2017).

No such large-scale protest took place for Trump's second inauguration. People were so disillusioned by politics and many withdrew altogether (Barabak, 2024). Black women in particular felt betrayed as other minority groups who were part of the Democratic coalition had switched over and voted for Trump instead of Kamala Harris (Hunter, 2024). I, along with many others, was alarmed by the lack of protests after Trump retook power. Not until February 2025 did the first signs of resistance materialize at Tesla showrooms. Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who had endorsed Trump for president and funded his campaign, was put in charge of the so-called Department of Government

Efficiency (DOGE) which downsized and shut down agencies, resulting in chaos and mass layoffs. Musk and his company were obvious targets for protests and in essence the low-hanging fruit. The objective of what came to be known as Tesla Takedown was to hurt Tesla financially and force Musk out of politics.

I went to my first Tesla Takedown protest in March 2025. I chose the showroom in Santa Monica because I surmised there would be more foot traffic and visibility on the Third Street Promenade. I was right. People with signs would cross the street and cars would honk. I held up my sign and chanted slogans along with other protesters. Tesla employees inside the showroom would look at us nervously. As the protests spread across the country, the media sensationalized any acts of vandalism which occurred and the Trump administration made threats against protesters but that did not deter us. I personally never witnessed any acts of vandalism at these protests. But in any case, I was more concerned about what the government was doing to people than a few damaged cars. Starting in July 2025, protests were held at the newly opened Tesla Diner in Hollywood. We again chanted slogans as cars and buses honked at us. Someone had made an inflatable Elon Musk doing the Nazi salute as he had done at a Trump rally which received a lot of attention. We encountered some right-wing agitators who tried to disrupt us and cause problems at the diner but they did not succeed.

“Hands Off!”, which took place on April 5, 2025, was the first mass mobilization of the second Trump administration. Millions of people were estimated to have protested across the United States (Hands Off!, 2025). Both Donald Trump and Elon Musk were targeted in the protests. I went to the one in downtown Los Angeles and marched and chanted with others. While I was pleased with the turn out, I noticed that a good majority

were older people. Afterwards, I talked to younger people who did not know about the protests until they were over. I encouraged them to pay attention to what the Trump administration was doing and to seek out information about protests in their area. Gay Barfield (2006), who was co-director of the Carl Rogers Institute for Peace, has criticized those with influence for having contributed to people becoming numb to the suffering of others and reckoned we all needed to take a more active role in cultivating understanding of others and their plight.

Like other autocrats, President Trump has designated certain groups of people he does not like as the “enemy within”. Since descending the golden escalator at Trump Tower in 2015, Trump has repeatedly dehumanized immigrants, branding Mexicans in particular as drug dealers, criminals and rapists. Using government agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Trump has gone after citizens and noncitizens alike, arresting and deporting people indiscriminately, and in some cases, murdering them. Rosemary Hopkins (2006), in the aftermath of 9/11 and the “War on Terror”, aptly wrote: “How quickly those in power can use national security and patriotism to deprive everyone of human rights and freedom. How quickly those in power can blame someone else” (p. 287).

For much of its history, the United States has not been a place where everyone was afforded the same rights and protections despite its lofty ideals. A year after the Constitution came into effect, President George Washington and Vice President John Adams approved the Naturalization Act of 1790 in which only “free white person[s]” could become citizens. The Alien Enemies Act of 1798 (which President Trump invoked on Venezuelan immigrants), allowed the President to apprehend, restrain, secure and

remove citizens of countries who have declared war on the United States or threatened the territory of the United States. In *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), the Supreme Court ruled that people of African descent were not citizens of the United States. Not until the 13th and 14th Amendments were ratified following the Civil War did they become citizens. Asians were excluded (Naturalization Act of 1870, 1870; Immigration Act of 1924, 1924) and Chinese were barred from entering the United States (Page Act of 1875, 1875; Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, 1882) until the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943. The Emergency Quota (1921) limited immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. Restrictions were gradually lifted after World War II. Discrimination based on race ended when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 into law.

The first immigration crackdown of 2025 was carried out in the Greater Los Angeles Area (which comprises the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura), presumably because it has a large Mexican immigrant population and Latinx make up over 46% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). On June 6, 2025, immigration raids began in Los Angeles which quickly sparked protests. The following day, protests spread to Paramount and Compton in South Los Angeles where protesters confronted ICE. President Trump used this as an excuse to order the National Guard to be deployed to Los Angeles. Protests were called for on June 8, 2025, in downtown Los Angeles which I attended. By the time I caught up with the protesters, they were at the Metropolitan Detention Center where people including David Huerta, president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in California, were being detained. Lots of protesters were mingling about and a few people were tagging

nearby buildings. Not before long, the streets were completely filled with protesters and traffic had stopped. Cars were used to block off the streets and I could stand in the intersection of Alameda and Temple. People with press badges could be seen walking about covering the protest. I heard flash bangs going off and moved to the parking lot used by the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) when riot police arrived. I chanted with other protesters and even saw an injured man—maybe by a rubber bullet—being carried away by his arms. A Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) helicopter overhead told us to disperse but we ignored the police. There were just too many of us for the police to do anything. When someone told us that zip ties were being handed out to riot police, I decided it was time to go. Later that afternoon, Route 101 was closed down by protesters and Waymo autonomous vehicles were set on fire. This was what got most of the media attention. The next day, SEIU organized a protest in which thousands participated (Branson-Potts, 2025) but I could not go due to work. President Trump ordered more National Guard troops to be deployed and the Pentagon called up the Marine Corps to be deployed as well. Protests continued on June 10, 2025, after which Mayor Karen Bass declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew on downtown Los Angeles from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem (2024), who wrote about killing her puppy with a gun, spoke about the federal government's response to the protests at a news conference in Los Angeles on June 12, 2025:

We are continuing to sustain and increase our operations in this city, we are not going away. We are staying here to liberate this city from the

socialist and burdensome leadership that [Governor Gavin Newsom and Mayor Karen Bass] have placed into this city. (Popli, 2025)

Senator Alex Padilla at this point identified himself and attempted to ask questions when he was pushed out of the room and handcuffed while face-down on the floor by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents. After being released, Senator Padilla gave a statement to reporters:

Just as we've emphasized the right for people to peacefully protest and to stand up for their First Amendment rights ... I was there peacefully ... If this is how this Administration responds to a Senator with a question ... you can only imagine what they're doing to farm workers, cooks, laborers throughout L.A., throughout California, and throughout this country. (Popli, 2025)

On June 14, 2025, President Trump held a military parade in Washington, D.C. to coincide with his 79th birthday. While he had wanted a North Korea-style parade, it was underwhelming as it literally rained on his parade. "No Kings", which took place that same day, was the second mass mobilization. More than five million people across the country protested against the Trump administration's authoritarianism (No Kings, 2025a). I headed to downtown Los Angeles despite knowing that anything could happen this time. I arrived early and was greeted by the indigenous community dancing and performing in a drum circle which set the tone. The land was once home to the Tongva people, who were first oppressed by colonial Spain and later by the United States. They were the ones who led the march through the streets. There were so many people at every street corner and people were cheering at us everywhere we went. It was festive and like a block party.

But there was a heavy police presence around City Hall and as we circled back, we encountered Marines. They looked very menacing with their weapons. A veteran confronted a group of them but they ignored her. One of them confirmed that he had served in Iraq. They were certainly not here to protect us. A flatbed truck with local musicians followed the march and stopped in front of City Hall. Tom Morello from the band Rage Against the Machine was there and gave an impassioned speech directed at those in power about white supremacy. As I was about to leave, I noticed a few protesters wearing red balaclavas and wondered whether Pussy Riot was at the protest. I found out later that Pussy Riot (2025) had carried a banner which read: “It’s beginning to look a lot like Russia.”

Tolokonnikova (2025b) had been doing a durational performance called *Police state* at MOCA in which she occupied a mock prison cell when clashes broke out. Having spent two years at a penal colony for a performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Tolokonnikova (2025b) wanted to draw attention to growing authoritarianism around the world and the plight of prisoners. While the protests were going on, Tolokonnikova (2025b) mixed in the sounds from outside into the performance space. The museum ultimately decided to close down due to safety reasons (Finkel, 2025). When *Police state* resumed the following week, I made sure to attend. I peered through the peepholes of the cell and saw Tolokonnikova using a sewing machine. I heard eerie sounds being played in the background. Afterwards, I walked around the Metropolitan Detention Center covered in graffiti which was being guarded by Marines and saw a few protesters. But the protests had largely subsided by now.

On June 17, 2025, Mayor Bass called off the downtown curfew. The raids continued but many immigrants went into hiding and people were sharing information about ICE in their communities. In mid-July, I drove past a convoy of military vehicles on Interstate 405 and feared for the worst. But days later, the Pentagon announced the National Guard was leaving Los Angeles and then withdrew the Marines. In the following months, the Trump administration targeted other American cities such as Chicago, Portland and Washington, D.C. Beginning in January 2026, the administration went after Minneapolis which resulted in the killing of Renée Good and Alex Pretti.

The third mass mobilization, “No Kings 2.0”, took place on October 18, 2025, in which over seven million people participated (No Kings, 2025b). Republicans made a concerted effort to cast protesters as domestic terrorists in the run-up to “No Kings 2.0”. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson labelled them “the pro-Hamas wing and the antifa people” in an interview (Fields, 2025). I once again went to downtown Los Angeles. The indigenous community was present like last time. Many of the protesters were in costumes to counter the claims that we were dangerous. The route of the march had been expanded due to more protesters being anticipated this time. There were no National Guard troops or Marines so it was not as intense. President Trump posted a response later on Truth Social, showing him flying over protesters and dumping feces on them in an AI-generated video so we must have gotten to him (Mancini, 2025).

“No Kings 3.0”, the fourth and latest mass mobilization, was held on March 28, 2026. At least eight million people were estimated to have participated, making it the largest mass mobilization in the history of the United States (No Kings, 2026). Unlike “No Kings 2.0”, Republicans made little to no mention of it. Perhaps they realized they

could not intimidate us into staying away. But from what I could tell, the crowd in downtown Los Angeles seemed somewhat smaller than the last one. Taking place in the aftermath of the atrocities in Minneapolis and during the war with Iran, many of the signs reflected those issues. My sign read: “Why can’t we call it a war if it is being led by the Dept. of War?” I wanted to call attention to the fact that the Trump administration was downplaying the Iran war despite having renamed the Department of Defense to the Department of War. The press was present at the march and at one point I found myself behind a crew from Univision 34 Los Angeles (a Spanish language channel) which interviewed protesters.

As Tolokonnikova (2025b) wrote in her book *Police state* (documenting her experiences at MOCA), authoritarianism is spreading like a disease around the world. Besides the United States, the situation in Europe today is of particular concern. While democracy and the rule of law are still strong in Europe, the far-right is gaining power in more and more countries. National Rally (founded by a holocaust denier) and its far-right allies won over a third of the vote in the French National Assembly after President Emmanuel Macron called a snap election in 2024 causing political paralysis (France 24, 2024). Alternative for Germany (AfD), classified as a far-right extremist organization by German intelligence (Janjevic, 2025), won almost a third of the vote in the state of Thuringia on September 1, 2024 (Deutsche Welle, 2024). Björn Höcke, leader of the AfD in Thuringia, has been found guilty of using the banned Nazi era slogan “Everything for Germany!” at political rallies. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), whose first leader joined the SS and was imprisoned for three years, won the most votes in parliamentary elections on September 29, 2024 (Liechtenstein, 2024). AfD came in second place with

over 20% of the vote in Germany's general election on February 23, 2025 (Deutsche Welle, 2025a). Reform UK made substantial gains in local elections on May 1, 2025 (Borger, 2025), and its leader Nigel Farage could become the next British prime minister according to polls (Savage, Clarke, & Kirk, 2025). Tommy Robinson, a far-right activist, organized a rally that drew up to 150,000 people in London on September 13, 2025 (Boffey, 2025). While AfD has been strongest in regions that comprised the former GDR, the party tripled its support in North Rhine-Westphalia on September 14, 2025 (Deutsche Welle, 2025b).

With all that is going on in the world, it is easy to become despondent. But that is precisely what the far-right wants. I vow to not stop protesting until the Trump administration collapses. We have yet to reach the 3.5% mark but every mass mobilization has been bigger. To those in Europe, I caution against containing or co-opting the far-right. Europe is, after all, the birthplace of fascism so to say it cannot happen again is naive. Do not wait until the far-right is in power before taking action. It has been agonizing for me to watch people sitting on the sidelines as authoritarianism takes hold. To the bystanders, I say this: What are you waiting for?

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