

# *The Flawed Political-Psychology of Populist Social Movements*

Ngwane, T., Sinwell, L., & Ness, I. (2017) *Urban Revolt: State Power And The Rise Of People's Movements In The Global South*. Chicago, Haymarket Books.

This book is about contemporary populist political movements for social change. It is not directly about psychology, however, the populism that is espoused is based upon a social-political philosophy that has strong psychological elements. A major political-psychological construct of contemporary populism is that individual and social fulfillment/emancipation consists of individuals – singly and in groups—freely deciding how to act. The essence is this “agentive freedom” to decide and choose. The essence is the freedom to choose whatever one (individual or group) decides. This is why democracy is a cornerstone of populism. Democracy is a decision-making process where every individual is an agency who has a voice. Democracy is indifferent to the content of what is decided. What is important is that agency/voice chooses, and speaks to express its creative, distinctive, individuality. That is what inclusiveness and diversity denote: everyone’s choice/expression shall be encouraged, included, accepted, and validated, regardless of what they think/do/look like.

This is an individual, subjective orientation. Subjective individualism is a psychological orientation about the nature of individual freedom, action, and fulfillment. (It is also an ontology about how reality is formed – by individual wishes.) This is the psychological-social-political kernel of contemporary populism.

This book advertises itself as, “Advancing beyond a liberal perspective, the book unpacks the ways in which Urban Social Movements (USMs) in

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the global south have challenged or transformed how the city is organized and the possibilities that they have created for a revolutionary alternative to the capitalist hegemonic framework.”

However, Urban Social Movements adopt the liberal perspective of contemporary populism whose social-political philosophy and psychology are incapable of mounting a serious, effective challenge to structures of the status quo. I have explained this in other writings (Ratner, 2015, 20016a, 2016b, 2009, 2006, 2005, 2002), and will apply my critique to USMs that are described in this book. I emphasize that my critique is confined to contemporary populism that has been infected by postmodernist, apolitical, subjectivism and individualism. This is a different populism from the political, socialist populism of bygone eras in the West.

A major weakness with the populist political psychology espoused in this book is its abstractness. The book's opening page says, “the hegemony of ruling classes is being directly challenged by mass organizations” (p. 1). “Mass organizations” is an overly broad abstract notion. It includes any and all mass organizations. It does not emphasize concrete, political organizations such as labor unions, the women's international league for peace and freedom, socialist feminism, ecological movements, progressive movements, or socialist political parties. “Mass movements” leave the content and substance of social movements indefinite. This abstraction is designed to grant freedom to any group to challenge hegemony from any perspective they wish to adopt. No program, constraints, theory, perspective, or necessity circumscribes “mass movements.” The weakness is that it opens the door to accepting neoliberal social movements, privatizing education movements, war on drugs social movements, and reactionary mass organizations – for all of these are diverse perspectives of human agency that require inclusion, acceptance, and validation. Recently, the abstraction “free speech” has been proclaimed by reactionary groups and speakers who demand freedom and protection to espouse their ideas.

Mass organizations are “people's movements,” which strive for abstract justice, equality, respect, dignity, commons, and solidarity. Again, these are all abstractions devoid of concrete political content.

The book asks “how do individuals and organizations move beyond the boundaries of constitutional or legal constructs?” (pp. 1-2). What does “move beyond” mean? Does it mean to write letters, take state power, talk to your friends, enroll in psychotherapy, kill social leaders? All of these are some kind of moving away from convention. It does not denote, transform or revolutionize. And what constitutes “beyond legal and constitutional boundaries?” What defines action as truly beyond

existing boundaries, or superficially beyond them, or embedded in them? How do we determine whether Trump's erratic actions are beyond the norms—as he claims—or within them?

Moving beyond legal and constitutional boundaries could include supporting terrorism. The authors of this book never call for specific kinds of analysis of specific reasons for social problems. They never target capitalism, imperialism, commodification, alienation, or even class structure as particularly important problems that must be analyzed from a particular critical perspective or transformed in some fundamental way. Instead, the postmodern, populist critique of the status quo “denounces neoliberalism as a system intended to annihilate human dignity” (p. 82). This is populist jargon that replaces political-economic exploitation and imperialism and commodification with the abstract, humanistic term “annihilate dignity.” It transforms political-economic material exploitation into a humanitarian crisis of disrespect. It also transforms emancipation from upper class expropriation of surplus value from workers, to simply respecting the dignity of peoples' voices, which requires no eradication of class structure or modes of production.

Similarly, “‘Abandonment’ is the term the people of Guerrero use to describe their history of social inequality and dispossession” (p. 79). Abandonment does not say anything about exploitation, imperialism, or commodification, which are concrete political-economic terms. Abandonment simply means not supporting someone. Abandonment can be remedied by expressing concern for people. Solving abandonment does not require understanding or transforming the class structure or modes of production or exploitation. All that is necessary is for the ruling class to “take care of” people in some humane-sounding manner. Indeed, the book emphasizes that protestors of abandonment initiated a “March for Dignity.” It demanded “people's right to land, work, housing, food, health care, education, independence, liberty, justice, and peace” (p. 82). Although these terms can be given concrete meaning there is no political economic transformation of the concrete, structural problems that afflict people. The book says that the protest movement established an encampment to protest “injustices.” The encampment is praised in abstract terms for developing “basic facilities and a distinctly urban cultural and social rhythm” (p. 82). That is all that populism requires. There is no need to mention new governing practices, new economic relations, etc. Just develop a rhythm.

The result was that “Federal police destroyed the encampment” (p. 82). In other words, the movement failed, with no substantive accomplishments either within the encampment or in the broader government

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and economy. However, the authors never dwell on this. They never analyze reasons for the failure, nor do they propose alternative strategies. Instead, they are happy that people are thinking and resisting. This will lead to “opportunity to change the city and the way we think about it...The city is becoming...a means for spreading and practicing ideas of social justice” (p. 84). In other words, the populist movement was really a success although it accomplished nothing concrete and was swept away at will by the government. Success is defined not in terms of material change, but in a change in subjectivity/consciousness. It is enough that ideas of social justice are spread. Of course, social justice is an abstraction that the authors never define. This is a fatal flaw because anyone can claim to defend social justice. Neoliberals claim that they are correcting the injustice of “freeloading” that financially rewards people who do not contribute to society; neoliberals claim to be improving justice by rewarding those who contribute and generate capital, and by punishing those who simply drain social resources – i.e., the poor.

Contemporary populism declares itself successful simply as the “coming together of people for dignity;” it does not matter whether this solidarity produces any substantive structural change in society. This is because populism is really about the “human” element of expression and caring. These are what make it successful. This truncated definition of success is expressed in the conclusion to the account of resistance to evictions in Jakarta:

Although the direct confrontation conducted by the urban poor during the evictions did not necessarily result in victors or any tangible gain, their concrete experience of resisting state power influenced the political process that took place in the city itself. There might be no major structural change within the city’s formal process, but the combativeness of the urban poor when challenging measures that ran against their interest pressured the authorities to become more lenient. The city authorities, whether they want to or not, must take into account the demand of the urban poor to live humanely in the city. (p. 168)

Populist activists have truncated their vision, demands, and success to accepting the absence of tangible gains and resting content with pressuring authorities to “become more lenient” And allow people to “live humanely”. The political structure remains intact. This minimalist program makes no demand on the extant authorities to describe what living humanely means – providing toilets at homeless shelters? speaking politely to homeless people? handing out some food to poor people? This

emptiness allows authorities to simply allow people to voice their opinions, so that they become more “aware of” peoples’ ideas, without the necessity of acting on these ideas. The populist abstractions that grant them the power to define social reality as they wish, grants the same subjective freedom to the power structure to define how they wish to take people into account and improve their life conditions, or not.

There is no need to specify any concrete goals because populism is not about real, concrete, structural, political change; it is about validating subjectivity/agency by voicing ideas and being respected for doing so. And this applies to everyone, regardless of conditions or class position, because the individual is primary. This is why the book has no information about organizing and strategizing against the status quo. It simply praises coming together in feelings of democratic solidarity.

The authors in *Urban Revolt* never admit defeat, or seek to develop more successful analyses and strategies. There is no need to as long as people express themselves and feel solidarity with others. Populism’s aim of subjective expression is so minimal that it can be achieved, even in failed and non-progressive actions. Populists always win, even when they lose! Actually, they lose even when they win because their abstract, nebulous demands can never culminate in substantive social improvement.

This is the flaw in the political psychology of individual-interpersonal subjectivism that governs those contemporary populist social movements that adhere to postmodernist, apolitical, subjectivism and individualism. This includes movements from peace and justice to human rights to cooperatives, and democratic socialism.

*Carl Ratner is a cultural psychologist who emphasizes political aspects of culture and their affects on psychology. His recent work applies these insights to social movements. He has researched cooperatives around the world. He finds contemporary social movements have followed a populist political philosophy that is largely postmodernist and subjectivistic. These are incapable of addressing political and structural causes of social problems. They are therefore incapable of solving these problems. He is currently completing a book on neoliberal psychology that does address political and structural underpinnings of psychology in our era. It also derives alternatives on the political, structural, and psychological level. Ratner’s work can be accessed at: [www.sonic.net/~cr2](http://www.sonic.net/~cr2)*

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