

The challenge of right-wing populism— A human rights approach

Edited by Carolyn Noble and Goetz Ottmann (Eds.)

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This is a very timely and important edited book and makes an important contribution to contemporary social work literature. A wide sweep of topics is traversed in its 16 chapters which address both the causes and impacts of populism across Australia, Europe, Scandinavia and North America.

Like many social workers, I have felt deeply distressed by the growth of right-wing extremism visible in the vicious campaigns against abortion rights in the US and elsewhere (Lavalette et al., 2022), the attacks against rights for transgender and non-binary people (Kant & Boskey, 2022; Miles, 2018), and the extremist opposition to public health measures everywhere over the last two years of the Covid-19 pandemic (Beddoe, 2022). This book contributes to a greater sense of understanding of how the dynamics of populism work and intensifies my belief that social work must make a very strong stand against these threats to human rights. This is not a time for weak responses.

In the first chapter, the editors, Carolyn Noble and Goetz Ottmann, introduce the focus and aims of the collection and provide some helpful definitions. Populism, they assert, is linked to charismatic leadership, encompasses a broad spectrum of groups and actors, sometimes bringing together previously disparate—even antagonistic—groups in a common cause, often with a single target for their violent actions e.g., refugees, welfare claimants, ethnic groups and religions and, as we've seen in Aotearoa

over the last 18 months, the groupings of politicians, scientists and academics at the heart of the Covid-19 response. Leaders of populist movements spin webs of dis/misinformation and highlight cultural targets that they believe to threaten the structures of power (particularly patriarchy and white supremacy), often claiming that the only way to respond to the threat posed by one or other groups is by “disposing of political processes, limiting human rights, and appealing to specific forms of nativism over universalism and globalism” (Voss et al., 2018, p. 113). The editors note that women, and ethnic, cultural and religious and other minorities are framed as scapegoats for many social discontents. Emotive language is employed, along with blatant misinformation to build a base in groups where the conversation becomes increasingly virulent. The racist and misogynist tropes build into full-blown hate speech and threats of violence and destruction.

Noble and Goetz set up the main premise of this book by arguing that social work must see the rise of populism for what it is—a very dangerous attack on hard-won human rights as social and political protections are framed as threatening the way of life of dominant groups and the structures of power that maintain their dominance.

It is impossible to fully describe all of the contributions in this collection, so this review will focus on several chapters that are particularly useful for students, educators and researchers.

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WORK 35(1), 119–121.

In Chapter 2, Jim Ife reworks his earlier article (Ife, 2018) to encompass events over the last few years and deepen his analysis of the relationship between neoliberalism and right-wing populism. This is an excellent chapter and will be very helpful for students in teasing out the threads of ideology. Ife argues that social workers must accept that productive dialogue with the fundamentalist right wing is not feasible as social workers are likely seen as part of the elite professional class and supporters of the other groups seen as parasites—immigrants, refugees, Indigenous people, welfare claimants and so forth. Right-wingers see dialogue and mediatory efforts as signs of weakness, to be exploited.

Right-wing populism, building on social discontent festering in neoliberal austerity regimes, threatens progressive policies, services and workplaces. The combination of white fragility, populism, xenophobia, and late neoliberalism form the focus of Chapter 3 by Donna Baines and Virginia Mapedzahama. Drawing on DiAngelo's 2018 work, Baines and Mapedzahama argue for work to be done to create safe social work classrooms and social work services where attention is paid to recognising and addressing the way whiteness dominates with unquestioned cultural norms. Using two workplace vignettes, the authors show how white fragility leads to resistance to positive change and the marginalisation of nonwhite voices.

Peter Westoby addresses the potential for building on the radical tradition of community development in social work as a means of countering right-wing movements. Westoby advocates three main strategies: re-emphasising the importance of social connections for good, providing educational support for political change and progressive community building, and finally building a "countervailing organisational force" (p. 51).

Gender is central in analysis of right-wing populism. In "The rise of angry white men",

Bob Pease explores the gendered nature of contemporary right-wing populism with a focus on the strong links to hyper-masculine leadership and the targeting of women and hard-won feminist gains. Pease explores the sense of male entitlement that leads privileged men to feel that their power is being diminished when women's voices are heard. Such men feel that they are victims of feminism. The propensity of the right to strike back at feminism and make claims about a crisis of masculinity creates dangerous conditions for women, especially women of colour, as these ideas influence lawmakers. Abortion and contraception bans and barriers, reduced health care for pregnancy and increasing surveillance of pregnant people threaten really fundamental rights. Populist men (and women) will support contraception and abortion bans even though they will have benefited themselves from reproductive health care. Pease's chapter provides some useful ideas about how to prepare students for encountering misogynistic populist ideologies.

Continuing with the exploration of gender in populism, in Chapter 6 Carolyn Noble applies a feminist lens to the problem of right-wing populism. Noble explores the ways in which populism performs gender in very conservative, traditionalist ways, reifying "family values" in order to push back challenges to sexist stereotypes, sexual harassment, rigid roles and opportunities for women. The rise of political leaders who personify hyper-masculinity and aggressive, even violent tendencies has characterised so much of politics over the last few years.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 examine the impact of right-wing populism on welfare regimes in two contexts: Finland and Australia. Katie Turtiainen and Tuomo Kokkonen in Finland explore welfare from a social citizenship perspective. Goetz Ottmann examines welfare authoritarianism in Australia while Edwards, Mendes and Flynn explore welfare chauvinism in right-wing politicians'

attitudes towards Muslim refugees and Indigenous Australians.

This is an excellent book and will be of great interest to critical social workers and educators. The final words in this edited collection are those of Marcus Woolombi Waters, a Kāhīrangi journalist and academic. Waters provides a strong finale to this important collection of essays and I will finish this review with this powerful quote:

What we are witnessing is the rise of a dark, at times, overwhelming, challenge to our humanity, reflective of a cruel in a different world. The neofascist politics and right wing populist nationalism movement is a powerful indictment of neoliberalism and gangster capitalism, a totalitarian culture that casts a giant shadow over western governance, which has moved from welfare to warfare against those most vulnerable. ... A mean-spirited heart contained within a rapacious nature of those most privileged that derails any notion of empathy and compassion.... In short what we are witnessing is the emergence of an unprecedented survival of the fittest benefiting those most privileged at the cost of our environment,

and those most vulnerable and sacrificing, what is left of our humanity (p. 225).

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Reviewed by [Liz Beddoe](#), University of Auckland