

# URBAN PHILOSOPHY AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM\*

Frank Cunningham

This paper was prepared on November 9, 2016 to replace a scheduled talk (on ‘The Possessive-Individualist City’) for a conference of urban philosophers held two weeks later in the United States. The ensuing discussion yielded a lot of useful ideas while it also reflected the fact that American like Canadian philosophers are, just as much as their compatriots, in a state of shock at the election result. I explained that my credentials for addressing the topic are that, living in Toronto in 2010, I had already experienced an urban version of Trump-style populism in the mayoral campaign that elected the infamous Rob Ford. Like Trump, Ford ran on anti-elite rhetoric which in his case demonized professionals, the press, and politicians of the inner city, and he drew on a defined constituency with many features of Trump’s core voters. This paper is thus able to draw, with some modifications, on one earlier prepared regarding Toronto’s Ford phenomenon.†

## POPULIST CHARACTERISTICS

Many in and out of the media have claimed that the appeal of Trump on the part of enough voters to elect him, thriving as this appeal did on bombastic rhetoric and emphatic repetition of demonstrable falsehoods devoid of reasoned argumentation, was populist in nature. If this is so, then an analysis of such appeal and of ways to combat it is called for. The definition of ‘populism’ in the Free Online Dictionary provides a good place to start: ‘A political doctrine where one sides with “the people” against “the elites.”’ Of course, the specific nature of populist politics differs among its instances. For example, the statism characteristic of European right-wing populism in the 1920’s and ‘30’s differs from the neoliberal version common to Trump and Ford (though like the European incarnation both are scornful of civil-libertarian attempts to constrain the military or police). However three generic characteristics in addition to varieties of anti-elitism are that populism is *homogenizing*, *simplistic*, and *agonistic*.

To describe populism as homogenizing is to say that it employs blanket and ill-defined categories, such as ‘the ordinary people’ and ‘the elites.’ Trump’s campaign also well illustrates the simplistic dimension of populism. His claims that economic prosperity will directly follow from dramatic reduction of taxes, that international security will result from cutting other countries loose to develop mass weaponry, that unemployment will be achieved by slamming the door on immigration are so inattentive to economic, political, and social realities and complexities as to be utterly unrealistic. The agonistic dimension of populism (as this term is employed in political theory to refer to acutely conflictual and antagonistic language and policies) is exemplified by Trump’s demonization of his opponent and by his fear-inspiring depiction of immigrants. Together, the agonistic and simplistic aspects of right-wing populism are essential to the way that right-wing populists invoke scapegoating of supposed enemies of ‘their’ people.

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\* Presented at the Philosophy and the City Conference, University of San Francisco, November 17-18, 2016. Frank Cunningham is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy & Political Science, University of Toronto, and Adjunct Professor of Urban Studies, Simon Fraser University. Web: [www.frankcunningham.ca](http://www.frankcunningham.ca).

† Available at [www.Spacing.ca](http://www.Spacing.ca), search: Rob Ford Populism Cunningham, scroll to ‘What Ford can teach us.’

Viewing the world in an homogenizing, simplistic and agonistic manner, the populist both plays to and helps instil attitudes of *anxiety* and *resentment* on the part of the people it wishes to attract, and it usually has a certain basis for this. Many of those who supported Trump, such as workers in the rustbelt states, are justly anxious about keeping or finding a job and providing for their families. The bulk of his voters are also aware of the inequalities that have grown to giant proportions in the United States, and, though lacking more than superficial understanding of its sources, they are diffusely angry. At the same time many of those with comfortable or extreme wealth also supported Trump, not out of anxiety or resentment but due to self-interested sympathy with his neo-liberal policies, especially regarding taxation, privatization and opposition to government regulations, even if they recoiled from Trump's clownish and brutish dimensions. As in the Toronto case and in that of every other right-wing populist movement, populism draws on both these sources of support.

### **ANTI-POPULIST STRATEGIES**

Here are six possible strategies for reacting to or heading off populism.

#### **Left-Wing Populism**

Some, emboldened by what are sometimes called populist movements against inequalities, see left-wing populism as a way to fight fire with fire. Often these movements are not properly classified as populist as defined here. One can appeal to the broad base of a population without foregoing sensitivity to differences and complexities within that base and similarly with respect to forces a movement opposes. Thus, despite Bernie Sanders' campaign sometimes being depicted as populist, it was neither homogenizing nor simplistic, but incorporated policies attentive to social and political complexities. It was, indeed, rather more refined than the hackneyed Clinton campaign.

It is true that the Sanders campaign put at its centre an antagonistic relation between large capitalist enterprises and working and unemployed people, just as the Trump campaign played to hostility to big business. But what made the latter agonistic in a populist sense is that, in addition to its stance on this matter being patently hypocritical, it also actively encouraged vehement hostility to putative enemies depicted as the sources of people's discontents – Muslims, Mexicans, and others, as well as the Washington elites. This underlines a general difficulty with a left-wing populist strategy. It can be illustrated by considering the anti-1% occupations and demonstrations.

To be sure the pro-equality movements were antagonistic, and if their slogans were taken as components of a political program, they would be subject to critique for being homogenizing and simplistic. Their demonstrations, however, were not full-blown political movements but expressions of extreme discontent with gross and growing inequalities. Were the movements to become fully political, they would need to articulate specific goals beyond just highlighting the inequalities. If they spawned an actual political party, as happened in Spain in the case of Podemos, they would enter mainstream democratic politics, albeit with a stronger and more active popular base than traditional political parties typically enjoy. An attempt to convert discontent into a political party that (unlike Podemos) was populist in the sense here described, would confront political opposition supported by right-wing populism with little hope of prevailing. Those at least in places like the United States who are most susceptible to populist mobilization

are also those most likely to be attracted to the rhetoric of the right. Moreover, to the extent that populism caters to a following that lacks or has suspended reason, a politically successful left populist movement would be open to subsequent demagogic subversion.

### **Remove the Deep Bases of Populism**

This brings us to a strategy premised on understanding the sources of populist appeal. It is doubtful that populist messages could take hold in a population without certain favourable conditions already in place. In addition to sometimes real sources of anxiety and resentment, I think of three more conditions.

*Bigotry and prejudice.* Nearly all populists draw on racist, homophobic, sexist, national chauvinistic or other bigoted and prejudicial viewpoints. Such sentiments are, themselves, paradigms of homogenizing and simplistic thinking, and they lend themselves to agonistic hostility if they can be associated by the populist with whatever the enemy of the people is supposed to be. Trump's blatant appeal to a range of bigoted and prejudicial attitudes was shocking in this regard.

*Thin citizenship.* Aristotle described a citizen as one 'who shares in governing and being governed. He differs under different forms of government, but in the best state he is one who is able and willing to be governed and to govern with a view to the life of virtue' (*Politics* III.13). This is a robust or 'thick' sense of citizenship. Its two main components are that people are not only able to be governed but also able and disposed to participate in governing, where this means civic engagement beyond just voting, and that they partly act out of a sense of civic virtue. That is, they respect one another, act not just out of self interest but to support common goods, and value their polis insofar as it promotes these things.

Contrary attitudes and values both support and are generated by thin citizenship. Denied channels for taking control of their own lives in concert with others, people feel isolated from their fellow citizens and retreat into self-regard and aggrandizement. (This is the culture that the political theorist, C.B. Macpherson labelled 'possessive-individualist' – the topic I was originally to address at the conference.) When civic virtue is lacking, replaced by self-interest and a sense of isolation, and when people are exclusively concerned just to lead their own private lives being left alone to do so, citizenship involves no more than voting, if even this. Such thin citizenship is ripe for populism. Enemy forces are seen as interfering with one's personal aims, and easy solutions to problems not requiring much effort on the part of the thin citizen are attractive.

*Insufficient information and deficient critical thinking skills.* Simplistic policies appeal to populations lacking the information and critical skills to see through them. Trump's endorsement of trickle down economics as the way to create jobs and enhance incomes is a case in point. His supporters are either oblivious to the now proven shortcoming of this neo-liberal ideologically-loaded scheme, or they do not understand its implications and instead take criticisms as further evidence of hostility toward working people by agents of the elites.

These considerations suggest as an anti-populist strategy: exposing bigotry; helping to empower people and to provide forums and institutions to nurture robust citizenship; and engaging in formal and informal educational campaigns. These things most certainly ought to be

undertaken. At a national level they require long-range efforts undertaken by many people and institutions over protracted periods of time -- years if not decades. As will be suggested below, they may be somewhat easier to pursue and can yield results more quickly in cities than nationally.

### **Informed Targeted Campaigning**

Foes of populism sometimes suffer themselves from homogenizing and simplistic thinking. It was not uncommon in Toronto, for instance, to hear critics of Ford writing off all the residents of the former suburbs where he garnered his support as irredeemably susceptible to his approach. In such large and diverse populations, however, this cannot be accurate. Ford won the election with 49% of the vote cast, and the voter turnout, though relatively high, was still under 50%. Analysis of poll-by-poll voting reveals opposition by not insignificant numbers of suburban voters and also a measure, albeit slight, of support in the inner city. Similar observations apply to regions of the country either written off or complacently counted on in the U.S. election by the Democrats, who seemed uncritically to rely on past voter history or outdated and otherwise flawed opinion polls. This suggests that while targeted campaigning makes sense in electoral politics, it requires informed identification of targets. This is facilitated when less reliance is put on past voter history and polling and more on information garnered from ground-level activism.

### **Address Sources of Anxieties**

Earlier it was noted that populism plays to people's anxieties. Sometimes such anxieties are of a racist or other prejudicial nature, but often they derive from other sources. Concerns about insecure employment and flights of manufacturing abroad are cases in point. So an anti-populist campaign might identify and directly address such sources with realistic proposals. Fear of crime is high among many city dwellers, and this is often exaggerated by populist rhetoric. In reaction, one need not just cite statistics demonstrating relatively low crime rates, but also recognize that crime is a problem in many jurisdictions and propose ways to address it as alternatives to those of the populist (which are typically to mete out strong sentences and relax constraints on the police). A downside of this strategy is that alone it allows the populist to define the issues of an election, but this need not be the case if it is combined with focus on other issues. Ford's predecessor, David Miller, identified 13 'priority neighbourhoods' marked among other things by persisting crime and, employing task forces, addressed the economic and other sources of their problems. This approach received widespread popular approval.

### **Treat People as Publics**

Yet another possible strategy is to conduct politics in a way that encourages citizens thinking of themselves as 'publics' rather than as an homogenous mass of 'the people.' This was a main effort by John Dewey who, confronted with perniciously nationalistic politics in the U.S. of the 1920's, urged (in his book, *The Public and its Problems*) that his compatriots regard themselves as publics. A public for him is any group of people whose actions affect one another through time and that, despite different values and world views of its members, confronts common problems that are best addressed collectively: health, education, adequate infrastructures, etc. The ability of people to cooperate in resolving such problems depends in part on viewing themselves as publics which is impeded by divisive attitudes among them.

A limitation of this strategy is that the more antagonistic a situation, the harder it is to encourage people to set aside their differences to address problems in a spirit of cooperation, and it is just these divisive stances that populism preys on and encourages. Employing Deweyan rhetoric, Obama exhorted Republicans and Democrats to cooperate on common problems facing their country. The effort failed mainly due to a combination of agonistic fanaticism and obdurate pro-capitalist politics in the Republican Party. This is not to say that attempts to establish constructive dialogue across divides ought not to be undertaken. However, for it to be effective in a country like the United States (or a city like Toronto) it must be undertaken in such a way as to acknowledge that in addition to sharing common problems publics and also include irreconcilable oppositions. Required is a politics, no doubt difficult effectively to pursue, that recognizes what might be called 'oppositional publics.'

In light of this challenge and the strength of a variety of divisions, I am inclined to classify this strategy a long range one. But, again it may have more chance of success at an urban level, where the common problems people face are evident to them on a daily basis. In addition, cities offer more opportunities for robust citizenship engagement, as in neighbourhood associations and social movements. This, in turn, facilitates cooperation in facing problems together.

### **Alternative Visions**

Populist simplisticism extends to the articulation of visions. Such visions are usually negative -- implying without demonstrating that foiling scapegoated enemies will relieve the anxieties of the people -- and when they do have positive content it is in the form of easy solutions to complex problems: cut taxes, build a wall, tear up treaties, etc. This suggests as another strategy articulating positive and realistic visions that have the potential to appeal to large portions of the population. In contrast to the Sanders campaign, which advanced a vision largely drawn from the protests against gross inequalities, and mainly directed to young voters, the Democratic campaign was notably deficient in this regard. In Toronto a vision advanced by Mayor Miller proposed achieving urban environmental sustainability as an overriding city-wide task. This proposal was well received across the city, and in his two terms he and the city council did succeed in implementing significant, multi-pronged policies to this end. (It is noteworthy that polls at the time of the 2010 election showed that had Miller been running he would likely have bested Ford.)

Still visionary politics is a tricky matter that requires no small measure of leadership ability, and, of course, good communication skills and public presence. The most general challenge to successful visionary politics is to avoid unrealistic utopianism while also inspiring people with the idea of a new and better future. Such politics thus confront what might be called the 'Gramscian problematic' after the efforts of Antonio Gramsci to project a non-capitalist and nationally unified Italy without setting these goals against local, preexisting traditions (or at least most of them) on the part of those whose active participation in this venture he deemed essential.

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Setting aside the left-wing populist alternative, this leaves five candidates for combating populism: one long range undertaking to get at its deep preconditions, another of forging publics, and the three shorter-term strategies of informed targeted election campaigning, addressing

sources of concern, and articulating visions. No doubt other strategies are conceivable. Populism is turned to by conservative forces because it is effective and resilient, so it is doubtful that any one of these strategies can decisively head it off, but perhaps a combination could.

## POPULISM AND CITIES

Populism of the sort that ushered in Trump is necessarily combatted at national or, indeed, international, levels, and whether or how existing political forces are capable of success is something on which I do not feel competent to offer an opinion. However, in a supplemental way populism might be combatted at regional, state, and city levels as well. So in a gathering of urban philosophers it is appropriate to speculate about city-based potentials. That there exist grounds for this endeavour is evidenced in the sanctuary city declarations in several of the country's largest cities and the eloquent speeches by their mayors in defence of them.

*Sources of anxiety.* Some sources of the discontent that breeds anxiety and resentment can be directly addressed in cities. For example, Toronto's efforts in the 13 priority neighbourhoods included instituting programmes for alleviating persisting poverty and unemployment in them. This included mounting projects whereby buildings owned by the city in the neighbourhoods were re-built to be suitable for social housing and other amenities, employing residents of the neighbourhoods for this purpose. While on a national level, conservative politics have largely blocked public work, New Deal-like projects of this kind, they are still possible in many if not all cities.

*Education.* Insofar as public schooling is under municipal control, cities might in their public schools and in other forms of formal and informal education help to provide the knowledge and nurture the critical thinking skills, deficiencies in which support populism. This requires civic education, not just or primarily about formal government institutions, but also education about how actual governance functions and what potential roles citizens have to participate in it beyond voting. Narrowly focussed, technocratic education with rote learning geared to quantitative testing is not conducive to critical thinking, which instead is best acquired by disciplined intellectual engagement with important issues of the day.

*Robust citizenship.* Cities are one kind of Deweyan public, where large numbers of people, mostly anonymous to one another confront daily common problems, for instance of transportation, access to food and water, health care, disposal of waste, availability of recreational facilities, and so on. That the problems are daily and local ones differentiates a city from larger publics, such as a nation. That urban publics are large and anonymous means that, unlike villages, the problems they confront cannot be addressed in accord with standing community traditions or by face-to-face negotiations. Confrontation of urban problems requires, in accord with Dewey's view, that members of a public perceive themselves as such and that they comport themselves, as Aristotle insisted, virtuously. In the large and multiply diverse cities of today, with economic challenges to many within them, this means, in particular, the virtues of *toleration* for those with different views, life-styles, and backgrounds, *concern* for the less fortunate, and seeing oneself as a *trustee* for the city, its neighbourhood, culture, natural settings, and so on rather than regarding these things as resources to be exploited for personal gain.

There is no guarantee that city life will produce these results, and cities, no less than nations, confront, as earlier noted, persisting counter-public forces as, for example powerful constituencies that profit from gentrification. Still, civically virtuous attitudes are more easily encouraged in cities than in regional or national publics mainly in virtue of the opportunities they provide for direct and interactive citizen involvement in urban affairs with the promise of sometimes succeeding. Participation in civic movements, local governance (as on school boards or in commissions), neighbourhood associations, sporting clubs, volunteer charitable work, and the like, bring people from alternative backgrounds together, gives them experience in collective problem-solving, and exposure to political activity beyond just voting.

*Urban/suburban/rural divides.* Ford's victory was made possible by the amalgamation, forced by a conservative provincial government, of the City of Toronto with five of its suburbs. Ford's rhetoric centred on the claim that the former city was an enemy of the former suburbs where he won in almost all their ridings. Similarly, support for Trump was significantly higher in suburban and rural areas than in the cities. This has led some opponents of the right wing, in keeping with targeted campaign strategies, to favour writing off suburban or rural voters, while others urge challenging this political boundary by seeking common ground among these three constituencies. One practical reason to endorse the second approach is that, unless electoral procedures are changed to reflect actual population densities, a candidate can likely win without the city vote, as was the case with Ford and Toronto's inner city.

Attempts to forge rapprochement among these constituencies at federal or provincial/state levels confront several problems, among them that elected officials at these levels owe their positions predominantly to one of the constituencies. But there is some promise of bottom-up progress initiated by cities themselves. With increasing awareness both that economic strengths and a variety of challenges reside in city regions and that such problems as environmental degradation, provision of locally produced food, and securing integrated transportation all require coordination among cities and their surrounding suburban and rural areas many cities are looking for means of cooperation.

In the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, the mayors of the City of Vancouver and over 20 other mayors from neighbouring cities, suburbs and small towns regularly meet as a Council of Mayors precisely to address these issues, take joint action when possible, and lobby as a single unit with higher levels of government when required. Several other such examples can be given across the city regions of North America. Or, at a more local and informal level, in Toronto two of the more active neighbourhood associations, one in the centre of Toronto and one in a previous suburb, have 'twinned,' where this involves their executives attending one another's meetings and the two associations seeking ways to cooperate in addressing shared problems of the sort the Council of Mayors also address. The result in both cases is to facilitate the forging of new urban publics, including cities, suburbs, and rural areas, or at least to temper antagonistic relations among them.

## **PHILOSOPHY**

One obvious role that philosophy can play in combatting populism is to provide training in critical thinking. Of course, this is something that is undertaken in university courses, but it need not be restricted to them. In 2000 the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced philosophy courses in

grades 11 and 12.<sup>‡</sup> While addressing all areas of philosophy, these were structured to include critical thinking throughout. University professors of philosophy in the province were central to the protracted campaign to secure these courses. Some conservative foes of this effort, claimed that the aim of the philosophers was to subvert the minds of the youth. In fact, this *was* one of the motives if subversion means equipping students with the ability to challenge unsubstantiated or badly defended arguments in support of a *status quo* or of the simplistic claims typical of populism.

Philosophers can also, again in and out of the classroom, produce their own arguments against the biases and prejudices on which populism thrives. In the 1970's and '80's philosophers in North America were quite energetic in exposing the fallacious thinking in support of such as racism and sexism, and, with the passing of legislation against the effects of these things they justly took pride in what roles they played. The resurgence of right-wing populism shows that notwithstanding these successes prejudicial attitudes are still all-too-alive. So vigorously exposing their failings, now along with arguments for multiculturalism and against a variety of national and ethnic chauvinisms, is still on the agenda.

There is also some conceptual work to be done of the sort at which philosophers are supposed to be experts. Two of these have been referred to above. Addressing the 'Gramscian problematic' involves finding ways to advance visions that both draw on past traditions and challenge them. Or to put it in terms central to urban philosophy to address a main fault line in urban politics, planning, and design between pro- and anti-utopianism – Le Corbusier vs Jane Jacobs. Recognizing that each side in this opposition has strengths and weaknesses, philosophers might defend one of the sides, or they might seek to supersede the opposition. In either case, the efforts' politically relevant implications would relate to the task of advancing visions alternative to those of the populist. A second problem calling for philosophical interrogation is to make feasible the notion of an 'oppositional public,' that is, to draw on the strengths of Dewey's notion of a public while taking account of intractable conflicts – one might say to modify either of the Deliberative Democracy associated with Jürgen Habermas or the Radical Pluralism of Chantal Mouffe or somehow to combine them. These, and other relevant conceptual problems, might be engaged from any philosophical perspective – Analytic or Continental – or any philosophical school – Aristotelian, Hegelian, Pragmatic, Phenomenological, Post-Structuralist, etc.

## PHILOSOPHERS

Many of the suggestions above pertain to work that philosophers can do in their class rooms or studies, but there are also other venues, of which two sorts merit mention: exiting the ivory tower and taking advantage of the university or college as a public space.

Each Saturday afternoon for some years a philosophy professor, Peter March from Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, went to a local shopping mall displaying a sign saying 'The Philosopher Is In,' and he attracted a regular group of people in the mall with whom he discussed philosophical matters of interest to them. This is a striking example of a philosopher leaving the ivory tower, and there are many other, less dramatic, ways to do this. One is

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<sup>‡</sup> The most recent version is best accessed by searching Ontario Philosophy Teachers Association, then navigating to Links and then Social Science and Humanities 2013.



involvement of philosophers as guest lecturers in secondary (or even primary) schools, which continues in Ontario in secondary-school philosophy and other courses. Other venues are social clubs, community centres, professional associations, and the like. Some university philosophers write columns in local newspapers, and there are contributions to social media. Of course, how such interventions are conducted is crucial: interventions in social media need not be entirely philosophers communicating only with another and other academics; guest lectures need not be of the standard academic 50 minutes and full of specialist jargon; in all interventions listening is as important as sounding forth, and ample concrete and local examples are crucial as is attention to rhetoric (the message of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* is worth taking to heart).

Universities and Colleges are all-too-often 'in' but not 'of' their cities. In addition to counteracting this by taking university expertise into the city, a city can be brought into institutions of higher learning, which are urban public spaces. This is at least true of public institutions, but private ones can also be public spaces, in the way that some privately owned recreational facilities or the more enlightened shopping malls are. Members of a surrounding community should be able to mingle in academic public spaces with students, faculty, and staff and attend open lectures or cultural events. Urban citizens from diverse backgrounds profit from interactions in these spaces, not least by counteracting isolations which are exploited by populists, and they provide yet another venue for philosophers to make available relevant expertise outside the classroom. It is also worth pointing out that in North America a large number of universities and colleges are located in or have branches in suburbs while their student bodies and teaching staff include many from inner cities as well. If faculty living in the cities stuck around after their teaching and other prescribed duties were discharged to take advantage of university and college public spaces for informal interaction with suburban dwellers, this would be a further way of redressing suburban/city divides.

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Another task urban philosophers might take on is critically to interrogate this paper itself. A (hard earned) professional modesty leads me to realize that there very likely are errors, both of commission and omission, to be corrected. However, I hope that critique does not lead to fatalistic and stultifying inaction. The enormous dangers posed to those on both sides of the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel by the new presidency call for concerted proaction on the part of every constituency, each employing positions and talents specific to it.