

## Authoritarianism and the Spirit of Poverty

Jennifer Keahey



At the end of the twentieth century, authoritarianism collapsed in the wake of populist resistance. During the 1980s, the Baltic states formed a Singing Revolution to demand an end to Soviet occupation. Meanwhile, South Africa's democracy movement was coalescing in opposition to Apartheid rule. By the mid 1990s, the Soviet and Apartheid regimes had dissolved, enabling the Baltic states to reinstate their national independence and South Africans to establish the conditions for multiracial democracy.<sup>1</sup>

If these revolutionary struggles opened prospects for global democracy, the dissolution of the Soviet Union ushered in a period of free-market triumphalism. Ultimately, the neoliberal approach to globalization erased many of the gains made by twentieth-century labor movements, resulting in economic precarity for the masses. Rather than launching a new generation of labor activism, twenty-first century populist movements have embraced ethnonationalist narratives that shift the blame for precarity onto marginalized peoples. Consider the wave of violent protest that erupted in the United Kingdom in the summer of 2024, when ordinary people took to the streets and attacked immigrant spaces. The far-right capture of populist protest suggests the need to consider the ideal factors, or the less tangible social forces, giving rise to reactionary attitudes.

In this policy brief, I identify a *spirit of poverty*, or zeitgeist of nihilism, as an ideal force supporting the return to authoritarianism. The first half of my brief brings Emile Durkheim and Frantz Fanon into dialogue, joining key concepts from classical functionalism and anticolonial Marxism to explain why economically insecure people are acting against their own interests. I then engage the participatory paradigm, sharing examples from my own praxis to impart methods for counteracting the spirit of poverty. This brief illustrates how sociology, as a multi-paradigmatic science, can play a key role in challenging social and ideological divisions that are threatening democratic functioning.

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Beginning with Durkheim (1893), we may look beyond the material economy to consider the breakdown in social cohesion wrought by the Digital Revolution. Never before have people been so plugged in and tuned out. Our social interactions increasingly occur online, through the post-factual realm of social media, whose platforms reflect dominant norms and values. Most people living around the world today cannot hope to obtain the material standards of living portrayed as the norm in social media, nor do most of us look like those categories of people who are publicly admired. To deflect attention from their ties to global capital, authoritarian leaders have weaponized identity politics, using the playbook of mechanical solidarity to

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these movements, see my book, *Decolonizing Development: Food, Heritage and Trade in Post-Authoritarian Environments* (2024).

inflare culture wars. This is hindering political organizing across social and ideological borders. From a Durkheimian perspective, the toxic combination of mechanical solidarity and anomie are primary features of the spirit of poverty.

For Fanon (1959), liberation struggles are not simply a fight for collective freedom from oppression. As a psychosocial practice, liberation also involves decolonizing the spirit. Fanon identified internalized oppression as both a weapon deployed by colonizing regimes and a symbolic force that causes people to self-perpetuate states of oppression. Although Fanon's focus was on the colonial system, twenty-first century authoritarianism likewise engages internalized oppression as a mechanism of control. By disseminating a motley array of stereotypes that dehumanize most people, authoritarian actors get people to vote against their own interests by inculcating feelings of self-hatred.

If sociology is to play a meaningful role in addressing the collective experience of psychosocial poverty, it is by leaning into our multi-paradigmatic roots, with the goal of reconciling our own ideological divisions. If sociology is to play a meaningful role in addressing feelings of internalized oppression that prevent people from realizing self-determination, or a *spirit of sovereignty* that is capable of counteracting impulses of fear and hate, then let us direct our methods toward the service of building organic solidarity in research arenas and classrooms, where social knowledge is produced and transmitted.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a methodology for building critical consciousness through collaborative research and knowledge sharing. The Colombian sociologist, Orlando Fals Borda (1996) details four rules for engaging in this branch of citizen science. First, PAR calls for partnerships that eliminate the subject-object dichotomy. Second, PAR centers counternarratives that challenge elitist interpretations of historic events. Third, PAR prioritizes community building by opening space in research for people to develop their own knowledges, values, and agency. Finally, PAR asks sociology to demystify science through knowledge sharing within community-based studies and through the various mediums of popular culture.

PAR offers concrete methods for building critical consciousness. However, it is challenging to conduct and requires a rigorous commitment to critical self-reflection and reflexive engagement. These are tall orders for scholars and professionals to fulfill, particularly for those of us who are situated in spaces that reward speed and detachment. I have mentored PhD students who have been advised to employ traditional methods if they wish to get a job. This is unfortunate, as the topics and approaches that interest hiring committees are in flux, and as there are many different ways to package one's skills. Thus, I offer students a different set of advice by asking whether they want to get a job by looking like everyone else, or by standing out from the crowd. Sociology is a multi-paradigmatic science, giving us choices to make. One may choose to do a conventional study that will inform how a select group of scholars think about a problem, or one may decide to conduct research that helps communities obtain the capacity needed to solve problems.



Opinions expressed are those of the authors, not the Section on the Sociology of Development or the American Sociological Association.

PAR also informs my work as an educator, where I have been engaging the participatory paradigm to address the poverty of spirit that I am witnessing in my students. During the pandemic, I pivoted from service learning to an autoethnographic project in my course on Environmental Sociology. Essentially, I asked my students to spend the semester going outside and observing their environment. I used the following readings to inform our engagement:

- Harriet Martineau's classical treatise on sociological research methods, namely excerpts from her 1838 book, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*;
- C. Wright Mills chapter, "The Promise" from his 1959 book, *The Sociological Imagination*; and
- Faith Wambura Ngunjiri and colleagues' 2010 article "Living Autoethnography: Connecting Life and Research."

When I launched this project, I discovered that today's students have little experiential knowledge of their environment. Simply put, youth are growing up indoors and online. For many of my students, the project awakened a hunger for connection. Consider the experience of one young woman, who chose to explore her neighborhood through weekly walks. When she presented her study to the class, she admitted that she struggled to go outside because she suffered from severe anxiety. While walking, she became aware of all the other species sharing her blighted urban landscape and developed a lively interest in birds, with whom she felt a sense of solidarity. By tuning into the birdsong, my student gained the courage of greater self-determination, and at the end of the semester, she wrote a thought-provoking paper that examined the importance of other species to human well-being.

If the spirit of poverty is anomie inculcated by internalized oppression, then liberation may be realized through the deliberate cultivation of organic solidarity. In recognizing its fundamental connection to difference, the spirit of sovereignty cannot be so easily manipulated by discourses of fear. The sovereign spirit is capable of self-determination not because it has power over others, nor because it has been freed from material deprivation. Rather, the sovereign spirit realizes the power that exists within to enact changes in the present moment. Sociology has an important role to play in this process, as it provides the multi-paradigmatic knowledge needed to unpack conflicts and restore cohesion in spaces where social research and learning occurs.