



## Neoliberal psychology

by C. Ratner, Cham, Switzerland, Springer, 2019, 209 pp., \$149.99  
(Hardcover), ISBN 978-3-030-02981-4, \$109.00 (eBook), ISBN  
978-3-030-02982-1

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**To cite this article:** Juliano Camillo (2022) Neoliberal psychology, *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 29:1, 101-104, DOI: [10.1080/10749039.2021.2005102](https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2021.2005102)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2021.2005102>



Published online: 12 Nov 2021.



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## BOOK REVIEW

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Machado de Assis (1839–1908), one of the greatest Brazilian writers, has pleased us with an insightful short story called *Canary Thoughts* (Assis, 2018). The story is narrated by an ornithologist named Macedo, who unexpectedly ran into a cage inhabited by a canary in a junk store. Extraordinarily, the canary was able to trill ideas about the world that sounded like the human language to Macedo. When asked if he missed the infinite blue sky and the world outside, the canary readily responded:

“What does ‘infinite blue sky’ mean? [...] The world is a junk shop, with a small, square wicker cage hanging from a nail; the canary is the master of the cage he inhabits and of the surrounding shop. Everything else is illusion and lies.” (Assis, 2018, *Canary Thoughts*, para. 14)

Amazed, Macedo decided to take the canary with him and study this astonishing phenomenon. After a while, living with Macedo, the world to the Canary became:

“a fair-sized garden with a fountain in the middle, a few flowers and shrubs, a little grass, clear air and a scrap of blue up above; the canary, who is the master of this world, lives in a vast white circular cage, from which he views all these things. Everything else is illusion and lies.” (Assis, 2018, *Canary Thoughts*, para. 24).

Sometime later, after escaping and being eventually rescued by Macedo, the canary presented his new definition of the world: “it is an infinite blue space, with the sun up above.” And the junk store, the garden, the fountain . . . “Do such things exist?” (Assis, 2018, *Canary Thoughts*, para. 34).

*Canary Thoughts* rapidly came to my mind when I started reading Carl Ratner’s *Neoliberal Psychology* (Springer, 2019). Naturally, the book is not about canaries or fictional stories. Rather, it is about a very real phenomenon: “the psychology of people living in neoliberal capitalist society. Their psychology is neoliberal psychology” (p. ix). However, wandering through the lines of the short story, I lightly imagined “canaries” living in “neoliberal cages/gardens/skies” and the methods Macedo would have used to comprehend the complex relationship between psychology and environment.

In his *Neoliberal Psychology*, Ratner gives no space for mind-wandering. He brings together powerful theories to grasp subjectivity/psychology within neoliberal societies, and also builds a strong criticism of neoliberalism, taking into account its origin and strategies used to empower itself and maintain its pervasive structure.

The book emphatically denounces that psychologists have been ignoring “the dominant character of human psychology in the world today” (p. xiii), as neoliberal psychology does not exist for them. Neoliberal psychology stands both for the psychology/subjectivity of people in neoliberal society and for the academic discipline. The urgency of such theory and methodology relies on the fact that neoliberalism has become, as Ratner argues, the “dominant form of society around most of the world” (p. 15) as it penetrates our “institutions, values-concepts, artifacts, structures, politics-power, social class, economics, dynamics, contradictions, and struggles” (p. 16).

Ratner acknowledges that the neoliberal ethos provides us with psychological tools for “perceiving, feeling, thinking about, remembering, motivating, expressing, desiring, and disliking things” (p. 10). However, he does not assume a simplistic or mechanistic view through which comprehending neoliberalism automatically means comprehending neoliberal psychology. Even though the analysis of neoliberal society contains the keys to understanding neoliberal psychology, such examination must be combined with a cultural-psychological theory that brings together culture and psychology (and the disciplines of sociology and psychology, overcoming their traditional boundaries). In the book, this

cultural-psychological theory appears as macro-cultural psychology, which has been consistently formulated by Ratner throughout many of his previous works, and it comprises the development of macro aspects of Lev Vygotsky's work.

Culture indeed assumes a primary role in Ratner's discussion to the point that psychology is "culture-centric." This happens, as I understand Ratner's argumentation, first, because culture, by its social and historical nature, is the very source of the individual's development. Psychological functions do not belong to the individualistic realm but take place in collective life, and as products of the historical development of humanity. Second, because the development of a solid cultural-based theory supplants biological reductionistic approaches to the human mind and development, expressed in terms of genes, neurons, and brain functions. Last but not least, because a scientific (and emancipatory) cultural theory can never be politically indifferent regarding the oppressive character that cultural tools can assume within neoliberal political and economic systems, constraining human development.

To substantiate this discussion, Ratner calls on many authors; such as Basil Bernstein, to shed light on how social structures produce not only distinctive jobs, rights, and power, but also an uneven distribution of linguistic codes and knowledge among people; Pierre Bourdieu to show how habitus is culturally organized meaning making; and Michel Foucault to point out that we live under a dictatorship of a class that imposes itself by institutional and constitutional violence. By fully embracing Vygotsky's statement that "each person is to some degree a measure of the society, or rather class, to which he belongs, for the whole totality of social relationships is reflected in him" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 317), Ratner shows that "we do not simply live in neoliberal capitalism; we live neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism is our life, and we are the life of neoliberal capitalism; we are neoliberal subjects, we are neoliberal agents" (p. x).

Central to Ratner's analysis is the comprehension that neoliberalism (or hyper-capitalism, super-capitalism, uber-capitalism, as mentioned in the book) makes use of maneuvers to invigorate itself by intensifying and extending the capitalist macro-cultural factors, the class structure, and the obfuscation of capitalist destructiveness. Ratner then takes political economy, educational institutions, and ideology as the three powerful cornerstones of neoliberal society.

From a Marxist perspective, the book exposes how all services tend to become mediated by a capitalist institution that generates profit for the owner at the worker's expenses, and how commodification has become universal: beauty, taste, emotion, identity are all commodities that people should buy. The intensification of capitalism, however, would not be so effective without an educational system that reflects and reinforces the class structure. According to Ratner's reasoning, education in neoliberal society is less about enlightenment and human fulfillment and more about providing people with tools to occupy specific positions in the social structure.

To complete the discussion around neoliberalism's cornerstones, the book deals with ideology as a psychological tool that forms and frames our experience. Unlike any other cultural factor, ideology, Ratner argues, is ubiquitous and systemic. Because of that, it satisfies the demand for a tool to "obfuscate any and all social oppression" (p. 106). Every oppressive society has developed ideological forms to mystify and beautify all kinds of oppression. Neoliberalism, for example, has produced an individualistic form of ideology, i.e., entrepreneurialism, which obfuscates oppression by inculcating the idea that everyone can completely manage his/her own life as an independent entrepreneur.

The sixth chapter of *Neoliberal Psychology* brings together all that was previously discussed to consolidate neoliberal psychology in its "mature" and most developed form. Ratner explores the potential of such a theoretical perspective to analyze a set of examples and situations that are intrinsic phenomena of a neoliberal society. The most explored example is hookup sex, which, in Ratner's analysis, differs fundamentally from casual sex, as the former is structured from the very beginning by economic pressures and neoliberal values. Those who get involved in hookup sex (mainly women on university campuses) manage their sexuality in a business model, weighting "costs and benefits of personal involvements vis-à-vis socioeconomic requirements. This means they are using neoliberal ideas or cultural tools, and acting as 'active agents of neoliberalism'" (p. 170). He argues that

entrepreneurial ideology has affected feminism and gender studies when they provide an individualistic solution to sexual violence, without touching the social structure, or when “they fail to consider macro-cultural, political-economic forms of oppression against women” (p. 187). From Ratner’s point of view, the error of the gender-centric approaches is to treat “gender as a thing in itself, divorced from the political-economic core of society” (p. 188), or to take gender as an independent phenomenon in relation to social class.

My brief exposition does not do justice to the richness of details and examples *Neoliberal Psychology* brings. Conclusions are well-drawn; there is a balance between theory (presented and developed) and empirical evidence throughout the entire book, making the argumentation very strong. The examples also have a didactic function; they put the reader into the neoliberal landscape. For example, in order to avoid the discussion of macro-cultural psychology becoming abstract, Ratner offers us the iconic first chapter with snapshots of our lives within neoliberal society. Reading this chapter, I found myself many times performing the “neoliberal medical encounter,” trying to be productive and avoid any expenditure of time. As a professor, I found myself on a number of occasions managing publications as commodities or conceiving the syllabus of my courses as a labor contract, which just quantifies hours, activities, and credits.

The consideration of the reader is also expressed through the way ideas are presented. The author assumes a consistent argumentation (slow, step-by-step), and many times he rewrites things in different forms to meticulously shape complex concepts. This preoccupation also shows that the book is addressed to a large audience, not only to professional psychologists. In my understanding, it is for those who are interested in comprehending how we bring forth ourselves in the neoliberal era and how, through a deep understanding of our time, we can imagine an alternative future.

*Neoliberal Psychology* is a must-read book. It brings many insightful aspects (theoretical, methodological, and political) to advance the understanding of our society. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that the analysis presented in the book cannot be mechanically transposed to any situation. *Neoliberal Psychology* provides us with powerful tools, but they are powerful to the extent to which we recognize their limits and assume that analyzing the world is an open endeavor, liable to constant reformulations.

In his analysis, Ratner deliberately assumes that the USA is a prolific terrain to locate the purest form of neoliberal psychology, which eventually merges with other national cultures. He considers that “social and psychological effects of neoliberal capitalism are easiest to locate in their purest form in countries where neoliberal practices are most dominant and salient” (p. 2). This assumption might overlook the fact that the development of neoliberalism (capitalism/imperialism) in the USA (or other central capitalist countries) is deeply interconnected with the underdevelopment of other countries (in Latin America or Africa for example). In this perspective (I am drawing on Marxist dependency theory – see, for example, Sotelo Valencia, 2017), underdeveloped countries are not merely late in their adoption of capitalism. On the contrary, central and peripheral countries share the same unified (although not identical) process of the development of neoliberalism while occupying different positions in the global market and suffering distinct consequences.

I argue that the development of neoliberal psychology in peripheral countries must also be under scrutiny, since it has been first and foremost produced in a certain position in the world, and it is not just, in the perspective I underline here, a secondary effect. Indeed, dominance and salience of neoliberal practices are not just a matter of how much (or how intense) neoliberalism has penetrated a specific country. We need to take into account that, from the very beginning, dependency shapes political, ideological, and educational structures (to use the three cornerstones of neoliberal society from Ratner’s analysis).

The distinctiveness of occupying a certain position in the world highlights the urgent challenge of continuously conceptualizing human subjectivity from real practices, as an everlasting process of people collaboratively and purposefully transforming the world and themselves through unique contributions (Stetsenko, 2017). For better or worse, there is no ready-made path to be followed in the history of humankind. Neither has history reached an end with neoliberalism, nor should all

countries inexorably follow a straight line delineated by the unrolling of capitalism in central countries, as the only one possibility. At this point, there is no reason to avoid accepting Ratner's invitation to agentively bring an alternative future into existence "through creative imagination, and struggle against a tenacious set of established conditions" (p. 180).

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Antti Rajala and Mara Mahmood for the essential comments and suggestions that made the final version of this text possible.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2021.2005102>

