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RETHINKING CIVIL RESISTANCE IN THE FACE OF RIGHTWING POPULISM: A THEORETICAL INQUIRY

JANJIRA SOMBATPOONSIRI

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine some theoretical limitations potentially undermining civil resistance campaigns countering rightwing populism, and suggests how we might rethink the politics of nonviolent struggle. It argues that protests against rightwing populism have generally tackled the 'supply side' of populism or populist leaders. However, little attention has been paid to the 'demand side', which explains why constituents vote for populists. Increasing support for populist leaders reflects a collective perception that established political institutions are not living up to the expectations of ordinary people. In response to rightwing populism, civil resistance movements will need to engage two fronts of the struggle. The first is economic inequality perpetuated by a neoliberal order against which rightwing populists claim to defend the 'people'. The second front entails a cultural reconstruction of the notion of the 'people' in response to cultural anxiety that has given ground to populist nativist discourses. This article proposes that both of these tasks require a conceptual reconfiguration of nonviolent resistance regarding power and culture.

Keywords: populism, rightwing, civil resistance, neoliberalism, culture, identity

Introduction

From Donald Trump to Marine Le Pen, from Nigel Farage to Rodrigo Duterte, and from Recep Teyyip Erdogan to Viktor Orbán, 'populists' have increasingly attracted global attention with a variety of explanations for the rise of rightwing populism. While populist politics supports popular defiance of broadly defined 'elites', populist leaders potentially mutate into autocrats. Owing to this tendency, various civil society groups have increasingly relied on nonviolent methods to resist populist figures. Civil resistance scholarship embraces these efforts to defend liberal democracy from rightwing populism. This scholarly position not only overlooks the complex relationship between democracy and populism, but it reflects an ideological outlook underpinning analyses of civil resistance. Gene Sharp's theory of power has influenced contemporary studies of citizens' nonviolent struggle for freedom from non-democratic regimes. It is routinely suggested that dictatorships should be toppled. While this theoretical compass may be useful for activism against authoritarian governments, it

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can be counterproductive in the context of contemporary rightwing populism. The rise of rightwing populist leaders in mainstream democratic politics reflects a deeper democratic crisis. 'Overthrowing' populists in power, therefore, does not necessarily address these crises, and diminishes the voices of the aggrieved electorate.

This article's arguments are twofold. First, effective civil resistance against rightwing populism necessitates a nuanced approach to populist politics, which addresses both its 'demand' and 'supply' sides. Second, theoretical reconfigurations of civil resistance in the face of rightwing populism are needed. These should set the stage for engaging in the debates concerning neoliberalism as a form of structural violence and cultural reinterpretation of what defines the 'people'. This article focuses on the unfolding development of a rightwing populist surge in the US and Europe and civil resistance campaigns against it. The unit of analysis is the nonviolent or civil form of protest action, which is explicated in the civil resistance literature as the central ingredient generating broad-based mobilisation and thereby offering movements leverage over the more powerful adversaries. This article seeks to address problematic premises of these theories and explore ways in which they can be invigorated in the wake of rightwing populism.

What Is Populism? And What Is Its Breeding Ground in the 21st Century?

Existing academic debates suggest that populism is a vehicle for expressing popular grievances of those identified as the 'people' against the loosely defined 'elites'. The 'people' are usually portrayed as authentic, while the elites are viewed as corrupt and self-serving (Espejo 2017; Inoescu & Gellner 1969; Kazin 1995). These rhetorical characteristics can be incorporated into left and right spectrums of political ideology (Laclau 2005). On the left spectrum, populism is an antidote to liberal democracy, which has increasingly imposed an economic framework and cultural values on the 'people' without popular consultations. Established political systems moreover respond to demands by transnational, but unelected, institutions, rather than constituents who call for redistribution and participation in decision-making (Mouffe 2005; 2016). However, on the right spectrum, populism runs counter to pluralism, thereby fundamentally threatening democracy. Populist politics are based on the demarcated boundary between 'us' the people and 'them' 'the elites', and the rhetoric that the latter is the adversary of the former. Rightwing populists inject a cultural element into this equation by additionally identifying the foreign 'other' as the threat to the people. Meanwhile, domestic critics of rightwing populists are usually depicted as traitors. This framing justifies repression of dissidents and the bypassing of checks and balances (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 3–4; Müller 2016). The US in the late 19th century and Latin American countries at the dawn of the 20th century experienced the tide of leftwing populism, while Europe suffered from rightwing populism in the aftermath of the First World War (Cammack 2000; Kazin 1995; Mudde 2007).

Regardless of whether it is left or right, populism constitutes a language of protest against what is considered an established political order. Instead of taking to the street, in populist protest movements the people channel their demands through a (typically charismatic) leader. It is the populist leader that promises to deliver the people's wishes. Understanding political mechanisms underpinning populism requires us to contemplate both the demand side (populist supporters) and the supply side (populist leaders).

Demand Side

The demand side of populism sheds light on reasons why constituents endorse a populist leader or his/her policies and rhetoric. Existing explanations for contemporary support for rightwing populism, particularly in the US and Europe, are twofold: economic grievances and cultural backlash. These forces interact intrinsically and potentially reinforce each other. The economic explanation focuses on the impact the neoliberal economic framework has on inequality.

Economic explanation: neoliberalism, inequality and votes for rightwing populists

The Western economic order after the Second World War was characterised by booming manufacturing industrialisation, government provisions of welfare, and consequent transformation of (especially 'white') working class to middle class (Piketty 2013, 153–154). The neoliberal age began during the economic downturn in the early 1980s, which was caused by an energy price hike and intense manufacturing competition. The latter led to overcapacity, decreasing profits for companies in the US and Europe. Neoliberal policies were introduced to boost income growth for companies through the deregulation of business, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and cutbacks in fiscal expenditure on social welfare (aka austerity) (Brown 2015; Harvey 2007). The end of the Cold War marked the inception of globalised neoliberalism married with globalised democratisation. Industries can cut costs through the transfer of manufacturing to developing countries with lax labour laws and lower wages than in the West, or through the import of cheap labour. Influenced by the neoliberal framework, international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and lately the European Union, have imposed policy packages focusing on privatisation and austerity on countries undergoing economic recession (Simmons & Elkins 2004).

While these aspects of economic globalisation have created unprecedented growth for many countries and a tremendous decrease in global poverty, inequality has risen (Ostry et al. 2016). Two decades after the neoliberal experiment, people living in the most affluent country on earth typically earn 134 times more than those in the most impoverished part of the globe (see Milanovic 2016). In addition, inequality has widened the income gap between the richest and the rest in developed countries. For instance, in 2014, after decades of neoliberal policies culminating in worsened unemployment rates, rising debts, and high costs of public service, the share of wealth among the richest 1% has historically increased from 29% to 49% of the US aggregate income, while that of the middle class has shrunk from 62% to 43%. Unlike their parents who could achieve the 'American Dream', the millennials born in low income families have found it extremely difficult to achieve economic mobility (Pew Research Center 2015).

Rightwing populist figures have attracted growing support, not from the poorest, but rather from the dwindling middle class population affected by increasing inequality. A case in point is the so-called 'Obama-Trump voters' (those voting for Barack Obama in 2012 and for Trump in 2016) and 'drop-off voters' (those voting for Obama in 2012 but failing to cast the ballot in 2016). More than 50% of Obama-Trump voters and 43% of the drop-off voters said that their incomes were falling behind the cost of living. 'Rustbelt' towns and cities such as Youngstown, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Michigan were footholds of Obama-Trump and drop-off voters. And these places have been affected

by industrial decline and economic globalisation (Sargent 2017). Similarly, studies show that inequality played a role in influencing Brexit votes among the older generation (50–64 age group and 65+ age group) who have witnessed gradual inequality since the 1980s. They blamed the EU for it (Furedi 2017). The majority of the population in the north and northwest of England where manufacturing industries have been transferred overseas voted for Brexit (Dorling et al. 2016).

Cultural explanation

The cultural backlash explanation of rightwing populism originates in a liberally inspired argument favouring cultural diversity and global citizenship. The explanations concerning populism can be somewhat simplistic, linking popular votes for xenophobic figures with voters' inherent racial prejudices. These voters are sometimes described as white (often Christian) men whose privileges 'are being stripped away by those they view as outside interlopers' (Beauchamp 2016; McElwee & McDaniel 2017). A more nuanced approach suggests that rising support for rightwing populists relates to changing values and a lost sense of community among the younger generation who grew up in post-industrial societies. The majority of rightwing populists' constituents in Europe tend to be male without college degrees. Their 'life world' is characterised by strong ties with national identity within tight state boundaries, a sense of group loyalty, family values, and traditional gender roles. Post-industrial societies saw a rapid change in these values (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 29–30). Moreover, open borders and cultural globalisation brought about cosmopolitan values that cherish self-identification transcendent of nation-state boundaries. Many youngsters tend to travel overseas, and live in urban areas. This international exposure generally contributes to tolerance towards cultural and gender diversity, and acceptance of migrants. Considering these new values to be the hallmark of a progressive lifestyle, cosmopolitan populations may accuse traditionalists as 'deplorable' (Müller 2017). However, these globalist discourses concerning diversity and political correctness create a backlash by pushing those questioning these discourses towards the right. Accordingly, the cultural grievances of rightwing populists' constituents focus not only on foreign threats, but on liberal advocates perceived to undermine their values and police their behaviours (Haidt 2016).

Supply Side

The supply side of rightwing populism denotes the way in which political leaders as well as their ideologues forge moral frames based on popular resentment. Rhetoric fanned by populist leaders is characterised by three components. First, the notion of the 'people' is authenticated and unified in a cultural sense. Second, the moralistic imagination shapes the perception that the 'people' are neglected by their elites and exploited by outsiders. Lastly, by claiming the homogeneity of the 'people', populist leaders reinforce a social divide, pitting their popular base against critics accused of disrespecting the people's voice (Müller 2016). While the rhetoric reflects populists' inherent ideologies and beliefs (be it left or rightwing), it shows their articulated strategies to seize crisis-driven opportunities. The 2008 financial crisis, the 2009–2012 Euro crisis, and the 2015 refugee crisis, for instance, provided rightwing leaders and parties with rhetorical ammunition. By highlighting elite failure to tackle these crises, and offering alternative solutions, populists modified their political positions to capitalise on crises (Moffitt 2015). Owing to this strategic articulation, parties such as the

Alternative for Germany, France's National Front, and Austria's Freedom Party have moved from the fringe to political centre-stage.

Economic and cultural grievances are at the core of populist rhetoric because these shape electoral frustration with mainstream parties. Trump's rhetoric and European populists' anti-EU discourses reflect a common diagnosis that the 'people' have been victimised by

Economic claims more or less constitute a common ground for leftwing and rightwing populists.

incumbent liberal institutions. Populist leaders promise to redeem the economic sovereignty of their nations through trade protectionism and tightened borders (Ross 2016). Historically, economic claims might sound convincing for many constituents whose experiences of economic recession propel them to mistrust the 'establishment'. Economic claims more or less constitute a common ground for leftwing and rightwing populists (Badiou 2016; Hassan 2016).

Nevertheless, rightwing populist attribution of economic malaise to cultural minorities differentiates them from leftwing populists. Rightwing ideologues forge the notion of homogeneous people through the cultural demarcation of 'us' the majority insider versus 'them' the minority outsider. This cultural boundary may be based on race (white vs. coloured minorities), religion (Christians vs. Muslims), and atavism (native citizens vs. refugees/migrant workers). Culturally unified people are said to be the 'forgotten or silent' majority whose lost voices are rejuvenated by the populists. Their analysis of what has gone wrong in society often conflates economic regression with real or perceived civilisational degeneration. Minorities are accused of exploiting native populations, introducing cultural degradation, and threatening security of local populations. Rightwing populists have historically relied on this nexus between economic grievances and cultural anxiety to popularise their electoral campaigns (see van Kessel 2015, 18–28).

Civil Resistance against Rightwing Populist Leaders

Rightwing populists in the US and Europe have faced increasing waves of citizen protests. In the US, protests between 2015 and 2016 gathered relatively small numbers of participants. However, after Trump's electoral victory, the demonstrations attracted several thousands to millions of protesters and were staged across the country. Participants generally opposed Trump's illiberal agenda and autocratic or allegedly fascist traits. Small-scale protests such as those staged by the Antifa group (shorthand for anti-fascists) were characterised by a mixed use of violent and nonviolent methods (see Bray 2017). However, large-scale demonstrations with more than 1,000 participants in one event have been largely nonviolent. In civil resistance scholarship, this correlation between the nonviolent nature of resistance and the critical mass of participants has been underlined as the key leverage of movements over the more powerful adversaries, who may appear to have unbeatable military prowess and resources. This advantage is likely absent in movements prone to violent tactics (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011, 39–41). Far from being exhaustive, the following list of actions is included in this section because they demonstrate the nexus between nonviolent characteristics and mass participation. This list covers the period between 2015 and 2017 where rightwing populist figures achieved unprecedented electoral gains, becoming the head of government, joining the government coalition or consolidating their

position as the opposition. Against this backdrop, three patterns of civil resistance against populist figures in the US and Europe have emerged.

The first pattern is nonviolent demonstrations staged to express collective frustration over populist figures' electoral gains, and to counter their illiberal attitudes and policies. In the US, Trump's victory provoked protests in several dozens of major cities and university campuses. Participants expressed their disagreement with the chauvinistic nature of the new administration, while mainly advocating identity-based justice (e.g. gender sensitivity, racial fairness, cultural inclusion).¹ One of the most peaceful events was the Women's March organised in January 2017 and 2018 where millions of ordinary citizens took to the streets in Washington, DC as well as other cities and towns across the US (Hartocollis & Alcindor 2017; Lopez 2018).² Upon the announcement of the Executive Order that would ban citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the US, protests took place across major cities and airports as participants expressed solidarity with immigrants (Taylor 2017). In March 2017, thousands of supporters of the Affordable Care Act (or Obamacare) carried out demonstrations against the Republican attempt to repeal this Act (Weigel 2017). And in April 2017, hundreds of thousands of scientists protested against the government cuts to the science research budget and political backsliding on climate change (Milman 2017). Protests such as the Tax March also address potential nepotism and lack of transparency under the Trump administration (Stein 2017).

In Europe, protests against rightwing demagogues gathered pace, especially after the 'Brexit' campaign and Trump's victory. For instance, the 'Pulse of Europe' movement has been organising gatherings every Sunday across towns and cities in western Europe. Participants are encouraged to share their experiences of cross-European border stories, including those of cross-national couples (McGrane 2017). In central Europe where rightwing figures currently dominate the political landscape, tens of thousands of Polish, Austrians, Hungarians participated in anti-rightwing party protests (Deutsche Welle 2018; Kelly 2017; Peto 2018). Major cities such as Berlin and London saw carnival-like protests where participants collectively danced to a techno beat and carried out multicultural parades (Aziz & Rehman 2017; Chase 2018).

The second pattern of civil resistance entails boycott and non-cooperation. In the US, the major focus was on boycotting retailers that sell Trump family products. Punning on Trump's misogynist statement leaked during his election campaign,³ the 'Grab Your Wallet campaign' publicised a list of Trump's business partners, threatening them to drop Trump products or face mass boycott. The campaign went viral, gathering 626 million of Twitter impressions (McGrath 2017). So far 22 retailers have dropped Trump lines, including the Department Store Nordstrom which stopped selling the Ivanka Trump brand (Kramer 2017). In response to Trump's denunciation of immigrant workers, Mexican workers announced the 'Day without Immigrants' where immigrants refused to spend money or work. The purpose was to show the government the significant contribution of immigrants to the US economy (Yan & Williams 2017).

The third pattern of nonviolent protests were campaigns calling for impeachment of populist figures and strengthening parliamentary lobbying. An example of these initiatives is the US-based 'Impeachment Project', a broad opposition comprising civic groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union. Their objective was to collect evidence for lawsuits against Trump's potential violation of the constitution (Gold 2017).

Founded by formal congressional staffers and modelled on the Tea Party, the 'Indivisible' campaign mobilised 400,000 people to participate in at least 600 town halls to pressure their representatives on issues such as immigration and Obamacare repeal (Kamp 2017). These resistance efforts succeeded in putting a temporary pause on the immigration ban and increasing pressure on Congressmen and senators as seen in the Obamacare repeal (Alter 2017).

It is noteworthy that anti-rightwing demonstrations often occur in parallel with or even as a rivalry with pro-rightwing demonstrations. As happened in the US, the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic and Italy, the tit-for-tat protest tactics turned initially peaceful protests into clashes with the police or between the two group members (Barnell 2018; Ellyatt 2017; Johnston 2016; Strickland 2017). As a result, demeaning stereotypes each side holds in respect of the other are reaffirmed, and polarisation deepened.

Unpacking the Theoretical Underpinnings of Civil Resistance

Although analyses on the effectiveness of these civil resistance efforts are currently limited, emerging commentaries of civil resistance scholars tend to discern populism as a threat to democracy, encouraging the overthrow of 'authoritarian populists' (Chenoweth 2017; see also Beauchamp 2017; Puddington & Roylance 2017; Shahid 2017). Approaches to nonviolence are generally classified into two ends of the spectrum. The principled approach denotes the endorsement of nonviolence as a way of life that discourages one from committing any kind of physical or psychological harm against all beings. At the other end of the spectrum, nonviolence is conceptualised as a set of practical techniques used by grievance groups to wage an unarmed conflict against a more powerful opponent (Weber 2003). Over the past few decades, this 'pragmatic' approach to nonviolence has been mainstreamed in the academic and activist realms thanks to scientific methodology increasingly employed to conduct research, and the globalisation of nonviolent action training academies (Schock 2013, 279–282). Theoretical underpinnings of this approach accordingly became relatively dominant in the field, with burgeoning advocacies for democratisation.

A pioneering theorist of the pragmatic approach is Gene Sharp whose liberal bent influences his understanding of the power of nonviolent action. Drawing on John Locke's social contract theory with a touch of anarchism (Sharp 1973, 28), Sharp's consent theory of power is premised on the assumption that power diffuses throughout

The challenge group tends to gain increased popular support, while chipping away at the opponent's legitimacy.

society, and because of this the populace can oust a tyrant if they collectively withdraw support from him or her. Challenge groups are advised to analyse the sources of power of the ruling elites, devise a strategic plan that would undercut these sources of power, and employ different methods of nonviolent action to achieve the shifting of power from the elites to challengers. The nonviolent nature of these methods is crucial for three reasons. First, it induces mass participation in the campaigns. As nonviolent actions are most likely low risk, they are accessible for people from various backgrounds, age, and gender. Second, in the face of repression, when challengers practise nonviolent discipline — and do not resort to violent retaliation — this often generates public anger and the government's excessive use of force can 'backfire'. The challenge group tends to gain increased popular support, while

chipping away at the opponent's legitimacy. Lastly, nonviolent responses to repression can lead to loyalty shifts by security forces. They may refuse to execute the orders of their commanders, and even join forces with the protesters (Sharp 1973; see also, Bond 1994; Chenoweth & Stephan 2011, 30–61; Erickson Nepstad 2011; Martin 2007; Schock 2015, 156–172).

Sharp's theoretical explanations of civil resistance have been adopted and further developed by contemporary scholars in the field who share his liberal leaning. Civil resistance is conceptualised as a political means to achieve freedom identified as the ultimate goal of a polity. Forms of governance that obstruct the achievement of this goal are potentially considered oppressive. To be fair, 'freedom' according to Sharp, is broadly defined to include not only political freedom, but also freedom from economic injustice (Sharp 1980, 310–311). Few scholarly works look into civil resistance for redistribution (Schock 2009; 2012).

Civil resistance is conceptualised as a political means to achieve freedom identified as the ultimate goal of a polity.

However, the dominant trend in civil resistance research prioritises the struggle for political freedom identified as a core element of liberal democracy (see, for example, Ackerman & Duvall 2000; Ackerman & Kruegler 1994; Bartkowski

2013; Chenoweth & Stephan 2011; Karatnycky & Ackerman 2005; Stephan 2009). This is why adversaries of movements are often portrayed as autocratic regimes and dictators whose ruthless rule should be toppled and replaced with liberal democracy. Particularly in the post-Cold War era, civil resistance gained political currency when liberal democracy and the neoliberal economy emerged as the dominant global order (Fukuyama 1992). The knowledge of civil resistance has contributed to pro-democracy activism conducive to authoritarian breakdown in Eastern Europe, the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, Egypt, Tunisia and many more.

However, the conceptual association of civil resistance with democratic change is at the expense of dismissing other forms of oppression less visible than repressive dictatorship (Martin 1989; McGuinness 1993). This dismissal is partly strategic as a result of issues of resources and an attempt to mainstream civil resistance in the American context, but it is also ideological. Liberal underpinnings of civil resistance scholarship imply that the neoliberal economic framework is not considered to be problematic although it perpetuates structural violence (Galtung 1969). Nonetheless, this faceless form of violence has inflicted a 'slow death' on billions of the world population subjected to unequal access to basic human needs such as healthcare, education, and employment. In addition, inequality contributes to socio-political instability, elite capture of political power, and subsequently democratic rollback (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006). Civil resistance scholarship's limited analyses on grassroots movements fighting against economic injustice and neoliberal policies in some ways reflect the hegemonic nature of the neoliberal order. Hegemony organises knowledge and generates collective perception of what is deemed relevant and irrelevant, true and untrue, and right and wrong. It also shapes the way we think of how to make things right without disturbing the established order (Gramsci 1971). Liberal influences in the field of civil resistance make it hard for researchers to identify neoliberal hegemony as an oppressive force basically because our core theory endorses parts of its ideology (Chabot & Sharifi 2013a; Meckfessel 2016).

If neoliberal order and the consequent inequality contribute to increased frustration among the electorates who have turned to rightwing populists, civil resistance scholarship has thus far failed to address this 'demand side'.⁴ The ideological bias favouring liberal regimes has led existing analyses to equate populism with authoritarianism without taking into account deeper socio-economic crises propelling segments of constituents to endorse rightwing populists. This development yields two results counterproductive to effective civil resistance against rightwing populism. First, civil resistance campaigns that only target populist leaders without appealing to their popular base can paradoxically strengthen these leaders. Rightwing demagogues claim to represent the voice of the people against elites in times of political despair. These campaigns may reinforce a popular perception that anti-populist protests dismiss the 'people's voices', thereby bolstering the status quo. Although a large segment of the population may not necessarily endorse populist discourses as currently evident in the widespread protests in Europe and the US, elected populists still claim that they represent the 'people'.

Civil resistance campaigns that only target populist leaders without appealing to their popular base can paradoxically strengthen these leaders.

Second, by opting for illiberal policies, populists provoke protests from the liberal segment of society, while mobilising their mass supporters to the streets. The tactic of 'divide and rule' creates difficulties for civil resistance campaigns designed to build cross-group coalitions broad enough to undercut populist leaders' pillars of support. If the main advantage of civil resistance is this ability to generate broad-based support for the campaigns, targeting populist leaders disables this effect. It potentially consolidates populist rhetoric against liberal elites, thereby sustaining the antagonistic line between those embracing liberal values and those who do not.

Rethinking Civil Resistance in the Face of Rightwing Populism

In countering rightwing populism, civil resistance scholarship needs to engage in two theoretical debates in order to address the 'demand side'. The first debate concerns power. The current theoretical framework is fixed on a dichotomous relationship between the ruled and the ruler, shaping links between populism and authoritarianism. Power in fact operates as complex networks of influence in political, economic,

Through a deepening of the power concept, civil resistance scholars and practitioners can address problems of inequality and neoliberal economic framework underlying the current political system.

social and cultural domains. Removing a person in power does not imply fundamental social change. Through a deepening of the power concept, civil resistance scholars and practitioners can address problems of inequality and neoliberal economic framework underlying the current political system. Strategically, this facilitates a realignment with supporters of

populists who do not necessarily agree with their xenophobic rhetoric. This realignment implies the dismissal of a generalisation that all populist voters have an anti-progressive agenda. This can help make broad-based mobilisation more effective despite populist divide and rule tactics. Eventually, the rethinking of 'power' in civil resistance campaigns needs to counter neoliberal hegemony, while serving as a platform for discussing how to transform the current system. This is reminiscent of the 'constructive programme' Gandhi advocated in his

independence campaign (Gandhi 1945), or the idea of nonviolent ‘utopian enactment’ (Vinthagen 2015) that proposes inclusive action plans to overcome economic injustice.

The Spanish movement-turned political party, *Podemos*, is a good example of this strategic shift. The *Indignados* movement emerged in response to EU-imposed austerity in Spain. It mobilised supporters across diverse segments of society who shared common economic grievances. The aim was to resist neoliberal policies, and at the same time encourage popular participation in the envisioning of a more just and more democratic society. The *Indignados* movement later turned into the political party *Podemos*. It advocated the curbing of neoliberal policies, stressing the importance of redeeming the economic sovereignty of the state for the benefit of its citizens. Presenting itself as an alternative to rightwing politics and neoliberal forces, *Podemos* won third place in the 2016 election. Spain is one of a few European countries that has so far escaped the plague of rightwing populism (Errejon & Mouffe 2016).

The second theoretical debate civil resistance scholarship should engage concerns culture and identity. Rightwing populism has capitalised on cultural anxiety in times of rapid cultural change. It has propagated the idea that the response to increasingly cultural

fluidity and a borderless world is to homogenise race-based communities, close borders, and build walls. Civil resistance scholarship can address this cultural anxiety by suggesting how culture and emotion are crucial for reconstructing a common identity across political camps.

It is necessary to reclaim cultural spaces through the reinterpretation of what it means and how it feels to belong to a nation.

This does not mean that one should emulate nativist rhetoric and chauvinistic resentment of rightwing populists. However, it is necessary to reclaim cultural spaces through the reinterpretation of what it means and how it feels to belong to a nation.

Emotively, nationalism is associated with ethnic, racial, or religious solidarity, but also fear of external threats and disgust of other identity-based groups (Brubaker 2004; Heanly 2013; Nussbaum 2015). In countering rightwing populism, civil resistance scholarship needs to tackle this emotive foundation of nationalism. Research should examine the ways in which campaigns can be designed to stimulate national solidarity, and at the same time propose a new political framing which broadens the racially and religiously exclusive components of the nation. Protest repertoires play an important role in reinterpreting emotions of the nation through the use of carnivalesque humour, music and cultural activities. The messages may emphasise the importance of defending one’s political community, but link nationhood with confidence, pride and self-esteem as a progressive nation, rather than fear and loathing of others (Berezin 2002). Civil resistance scholarship should further explore the role ‘emotions of peace’ have on channelling a collective desire to preserve one’s own culture to constructive emotions (Hutchison & Bleiker 2008; 2015; Sombatpoonsiri 2015, 71–75). Existing scholarly debates in civil resistance will need to revisit the way in which cultural components such as language, symbols, religious contents, and myths can mobilise mass support for populist figures, and analyse how these cultural elements can be rearticulated so as to create progressive identities of ‘we the people’ (see Sørensen & Vinthagen 2012). Such remodelling would possibly bridge the gap of national divide, thereby weakening populists’ identity-based rhetoric.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the pragmatic approach to civil resistance is insufficient in tackling the complex phenomenon of rightwing populism, owing to underdeveloped theories and liberal bias. These have led existing analyses of civil resistance to identify populist figures as the cause of democratic backsliding and overlook deeper economic and cultural crises. Dealing with these setbacks would require theoretical configurations that empower civil resistance analyses of the hegemonic webs of neoliberalism and the current state of cultural anxiety accounting for increased popular support for populist leaders. Such a theoretical overhaul would shape the practical guidance civil resistance scholars can offer challengers of rightwing populism. This practical advice includes the realignment with the 'economic losers' who voted for rightwing populists, and the construction of a cultural narrative that accommodates those anxious for rapid change. The realignment potentially undermines populists' rhetoric that anti-populist protests stem from liberal elites, thereby mitigating the effects of polarisation. Overcoming populist divide and rule tactics potentially makes civil resistance campaigns more inclusive and bolsters nonviolent mobilisation across the political spectrum.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

¹ It should be noted that some of these events started out as peaceful and developed into vandalism. See CBS (2016).

² For crowd estimate data on the Women's March, see Pressman and Chenoweth (2018).

³ Prior to the presidential election, a video clip was leaked, containing Trump's 2005 vulgar comments about women which included 'when you're a star ... you can do anything ... Grab 'em by the pussy'.

⁴ There are, of course, commentaries about civil resistance in the age of neoliberalism (see, for example, Lawrence 2013). But what is missing is systemically academic treatment of this topic, which at times leads to critiques that civil resistance is ideologically compliant with neoliberalism. See, for example, Chabot and Sharifi (2013b).

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