ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Rethinking the Public Sphere in an Age of Radical-Right Populism: A Case for Building an Empathetic Public Sphere

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With right-wing populist movements gaining ever more traction worldwide, great attention is paid to addressing their exclusionary rhetoric. In this article, I focus on the question how to deal with these radical-right sentiments in our public debates. Believing that both exclusion and inclusion of right-wing populist voices wield counter-productive effects, I juxtapose Habermas's public sphere theory to Mouffe's model of agonistic pluralism and posit that both are ultimately insufficient to tackle the populist danger, albeit for different reasons. However, by synthesizing Mouffe's model with the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman and Iris Marion Young, I introduce the concept of an empathetic public sphere as a model for creating minimal common grounds between right-wing populist "selves" and the "others" they oppose. Finally, I then move this normative model into the realm of media and communication studies and assess how empathetic storytelling might be given shape in today's fragmented media ecology.

Cultivating and developing ever since the late 1980's, "parties and movements espous[ing] a political doctrine of populism" (Betz, 2004, p. 1) have been able to gain ground in many liberal democracies (Betz, 2004; Mudde, 2007, 2010). The democratic problems posed by the gradual rise in appeal of this exclusionary, right-wing populism[1] has since then, either directly or indirectly, been subject to many scholarly attention. However, both in societal and academic discourses this attention often takes shape in a highly moralistic condemnation of right-wing populist logics, hereby a priori excluding its constitutive voices from the public debate (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Mouffe, 2005a). Yet, following Mouffe (2005a), I believe this

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condemnatory attitude only reinvigorates, rather than mitigates, the nativist fears and appurtenant anti-establishment sentiments that drive the radical-right movement.

Therefore, this article's dual objective is to take seriously feelings of disenfranchisement among right-wing supporters, while simultaneously finding ways to soothe and challenge the exclusionary ideals underpinning these supporters' political beliefs that I argue disregard key democratic principles by threatening the position of minority "others" within societies. As such, in this article I aim to balance a tight rope by, on the one hand, searching for pathways beyond moral condemnation—i.e., towards some form of inclusion of the sentiments of citizens holding populist right-wing beliefs into the public debate—without however, on the other hand, digressing into the normalization of the exclusionary and often malignant rhetoric accompanying these sentiments.

To locate these pathways, I anchor my answers in theories concerned with outlining the (pre)conditions of public debate and the creation of lines of understanding between citizens (and their different oppositional social group positionings). As such, the aim essentially is to address the aforementioned exclusive right-wing type of populism by synthesizing and ultimately elevating the inclusive ideals championed by several competing theories aiming at (some form of) mutual understanding to arise from public debate.

In doing so, the first section of this article provides a brief demarcation of the type of populism under scrutiny and its related societal dangers. Subsequently, an (at first glance) appropriate response to the populist surge is proposed via Habermas's ([1962] 1991, 1992; Habermas et al., [1964] 1974) seminal public sphere theory. Yet, in the second part of this article, this theory is then contested for its final impossibility to properly counter radical-right populist logics and ultimately even for its (unintended) collaboration with this branch of populism. Drawing on feminist and poststructuralist critiques, Mouffe's (1999, 2005b) model of agonistic pluralism is juxtaposed to the Habermasian model. However, I argue that both these models, albeit for different reasons, share the inability to ultimately tackle the core of the populist danger. Thus, thirdly, by synthesizing the Mouffian model with the democratic ideals of some eminent theorists of late modernity (i.e., Bauman, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and Young's (1996, 2000) model of political communication, I propose an alternative normative model that I label an *empathetic public sphere*. Finally then, I move to discussing how this model might take shape within today's fragmented media ecology.

Now, to be clear: although many parties could bear responsibilities for creating such an empathetic model (e.g., tech companies, governments, journalists, citizens themselves, academics even), and questions about the different roles these parties can play in this process are certainly important and will briefly be discussed in the conclusion, this article's objective is not to suggest who should control such a sphere. Rather, the aim is to discuss why and under what (ideal-)conditions an empathetic public sphere might be successfully enacted.

Populism and the right-wing articulation

What exactly do we mean when speaking of radical-right populism? First, to understand populism in general, it is useful to draw on Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) distinction between *thin* and *thick* variants. *Thin* populism hereby simply denotes "a political communication style (...) that refers to the people" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322). Yet, to my mind, it is the *thick* variant that defines a radical-right type of populism. Moreover, instead of also viewing this latter variant as a political style of communication, I side with Mudde's (2007) conception of (radical-right) populism as an ideology and conceptualize *thick* right-wing populism accordingly as the underlying ideological base of any *thin* communicative political tactic.

Thick populism in general, is furthermore epitomized by two dimensions on which exclusion can take place: a vertical and a horizontal one (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In right-wing populism specifically, the former is what Mudde (2007) in his maximum definition labels (ideological) populism: the articulation of "the people" vis-à-vis an elite (see also, Betz, 2004; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2010). Yet, as Laclau (2005) argued, the concept of the people in itself is no more than a floating signifier, as such susceptible to a wide variety of different articulations that can have both (benign) inclusive and (toxic) exclusive effects, dependent on the democratic struggles underpinning each particular articulation. In the case of radical-right populism specifically however, the latter of these two effects prevails, for this articulation consists of the translation of the democratic demands of a culturally hegemonic right-wing identity into a rigidly demarcated conception of the people.

Therefore, it is the second (horizontal) dimension that further narrows down the conception of the people in right-wing populist logics (Cammaerts, 2018). This is done so specifically by articulating a highly exclusive notion of the people related to the concept of nativism:[2] the heartfelt believe that the nation originally belongs to supposedly "pure" native citizens; herewith explicitly excluding non-natives from this homogenous conception of the nation-as home-of-the-native (Betz, 2004; Duyvendak, 2011; Mudde, 2007, 2010).

In this sense, the populist radical-right conception of the people, just as its appurtenant ideal of a pure form of *nativeness*, gives rise to a narrowly defined, yet collectively shared, *imagined* national community, much in the way Anderson ([1983] 2016) proposed it. Particularly, right-wing populists establish their positions in relation to what Taggart (2004) coined a *heartland*: an imagined and singular vision of the nation rooted in a supposedly lost and retrospectively idealized past. Additionally, this imagination expresses itself in the discursive articulation of what Appadurai (2006) labels a *majoritarian identity* celebrating the most vividly imagined national traits. And these identities, upon fearing their position as the majoritarian defenders of the heartland to be threatened, have the power to generate predatory identities; aimed towards the expulsion of those non-native minorities not fitting the majoritarian ideal (Appadurai, 2006). Thus, just as the nativist self-identity is discursively constructed around an imagined ideal of *nativeness*,

categorizations of *non-nativeness*, and the nativist fears accompanying such categorizations, are also not fixed pre-discursive descriptors, but are similarly shaped, used and fueled within right-wing populist articulations and narratives about the other.

Moreover, while collectively shared, the populist right-wing identity must additionally be understood as an epitome of the ways in which group identities take shape in current-day late modern times: a time wherein a process of individualization has created a liquid society wherein social categories (e.g., religion, tradition, culture) that before provided individuals with societal embeddedness have melted (Bauman, 2000). The re-emergence of new forms of nationalist (or nativist) sentiments is therefore to be read as a response to cope with this waning sense of social security. Additionally, in late modernity, these sentiments organize themselves within liquid collectives that have little more in common than their shared private fears and troubles; herewith leaving the overarching issues concerning society *in toto* unaddressed (Bauman, 2000).

Thus, this lack of recognition of collective public issues within right-wing populist logics, combined with its aforementioned articulation in terms of a majoritarian native identity, makes this identity a sincere threat for a society's minority members, whose positions become ever more marginalized as populist right-wing logics fight their way into mainstream democratic debates (Cammaerts, 2018; Ghorashi, 2014). And it is here that I urge lies the greatest danger of a radical-right populism for pluralistic liberal democracies. That is to say: rather than drawing a line only at the point of physical expulsion of non-native minority members, I argue it is also—and in fact mainly—the symbolic power contained within the discursive articulation of a majoritarian native identity that endangers the core values of pluralist democracies by reifying cultural differences, herewith presenting a stringent concept of citizenship vehemently marginalizing the position of the non-native other. In a move to then counter this highly exclusive mechanism—and this is the fundamental brick of my argument—one must fight fire with water, i.e., combat ideas of *exclusion* with theories stressing *inclusion*; hereby following Young's (2000, p. 52) belief that democracies "mandate inclusion as a criterion of the political legitimacy of outcomes."

Searching for a solution: The Habermasian public sphere

One such theory is that of the public sphere as originally advocated by Habermas, for it aims at being both inclusive to the multitude of voices within society, while simultaneously offering a discursive model able to build bridges between those different voices (Benhabib, 1992). In order to fully understand this model, as well as to forestall the most basic critique it has attracted, I deem it necessary to briefly clarify a distinction between Habermas's historically located empirical model and his (thereto related) normative one.

In his original work ([1962] 1991) Habermas locates the birth of the ideal-typical public sphere in the socio-historical emergence of an 18th century bourgeois society in which, through the privatization of the social realm, ultimately "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas et al., [1964] 1974, p. 49). Subsequently, the 20th century transformation of this sphere is characterized by the intrusion of private conflict into it (Habermas et al., [1964] 1974). That is, the boundaries of the bourgeois model expand and create space for counter-spheres; something Habermas et al. ([1964] 1974) initially deemed to be detrimental to the workings of the public sphere, for this would introduce conflict into it and herewith shift the sphere's main focus from the generation of a general consensus to that of political compromises. It therefore seems implicit that he regards the early historical bourgeois model, in which counter-narratives (e.g., a feminist one) are generally absent, normatively preferable. However, as he later clarifies in addressing his critics, counter-spheres should not be excluded from the public sphere. Rather, they are to be absorbed into the hegemonic public sphere so that, through a self-transformative process driven by rational deliberation, a collectively acknowledged consensus can arise (Habermas, 1992).

With this emphasis on deliberation, the bourgeois model is not (or no longer) to be glorified for its historical and geographical reality (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013), but merely comes to serve as an early blue-print for the normative discursive model that, above all, aims to promote public connections through discursive communication in today's increasingly pluralistic societies. This normative model describes rational deliberation not as a fixed ideal, but rather as a *procedure* (Benhabib, 1992; Habermas, 1992, 2005) in which one argument is weighed against the other, and where participants attempt to reach consensus via an appeal to validity claims and the force of the better argument (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). More than the representation of a general will, this highly rational process ideally nurtures the creation of a political debate inclusive to arguments of all parties involved, so that all can acknowledge the subsequent consensus (Habermas, 1992). Accordingly, countering right-wing populist rhetoric then becomes a matter of including all parties—nativists and non-natives; "people" and "elite"—into a national conversation wherein the rational exchange of arguments is central to the solution.

Critique and the paradox of hegemony

Notwithstanding its intended virtues, I nevertheless from here on forward assert that the normative deliberative model as described above is impotent in offering any final solutions to right-wing populism (and ultimately even fuels it), for it excludes simultaneously the radical-right populists themselves, as well as the outgroups they oppose. In this section, this argument is further substantiated from a rather abstract and fundamentally theoretical position; largely following the lines of the debate as sketched out by Dahlberg (2013). That is, in outlining the deliberative

model's weakness, I will first side with poststructuralist and feminist lines of cri-
tique and posit that—even when the Habermasian ideal-speech conditions are
met—any consensus arising from a deliberative politics that focuses on rational *pro-
cedural dissent*, persists in itself a hegemonic norm that glances over any form of
substantive difference (Appadurai, 2006; Dahlberg, 2013; Fraser, 1990; Mouffe,
1999; Young, 1996, 2001).

That is to say that, in accordance with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) seminal post-
Marxist and poststructuralist political identity theory, reality (and rationality for
that matter) is not seen as given: as something "out there" waiting to be unveiled.
Rather, every truth-claim is merely viewed as a discursive construct (i.e., a dis-
course). However, in some cases, *hegemonic discourses* can arise that are structured
around certain privileged signifiers (*nodal points*) that seem so logical and whose
argumentative power is so pervasive that they *seem* to represent a fixed version of
the truth (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Additionally, such hegemonic discourses are
both constituted by and constitutive of a society's most dominant group identities,
making reflection on the validity of the truth-claims connected to these discourses
an often futile endeavor. Thus, in the highly rational Habermasian deliberative
model, these a priori existing structural inequalities remain unchecked, making heg-
emonic discourses to feed back into and ultimately dominate the public debate
(Mouffe, 1999). In other words: the Habermasian model stressing rational delibera-
tion between dissenting citizens, overlooks the fact that the "majority of participants
in such a reflective deliberative setting will be influenced by a common discourse
that itself is a complex product of structural inequality" (Young, 2001, p. 685).

Therefore, following this line of reasoning, this article insists that any deliberative
consensus will always, to some extent, reflect underlying power differences that per-
petuate these hegemonic discourses. As such, critique concerning the exclusive na-
ture of the Habermasian public sphere does not, at least not from this perspective,
primarily concern itself with the *external* exclusion of demographic groups from
this sphere, but rather the more latent *internal* exclusion of deviant non-hegemonic
views and ideological standpoints (Young, 2000; see also Dahlberg, 2013). Hence, it
is the innate logic of hegemony—i.e., the seemingly natural construction of domi-
nant societal discourses—that polices the exclusion of non-hegemonic subject posi-
tions within liberal democracies aiming for some form of deliberative consensual
politics.

Furthermore, with regard to right-wing populism specifically, the hegemonic
and counter-hegemonic discourses at stake find their expression within the public
sphere in the shape of public debates over matters of national identity and cultural
citizenship. Additionally, the exclusion-through-hegemony within this debate takes
place at either end of the poles, creating a *paradox of hegemony* in which both inclu-
sion and exclusion of radical-right discourse appears problematic. That is: both the
populist right-wing adherents themselves, as well as their (ethnic) minority counter-
parts get excluded by a deliberative model stressing rational consensual politics.
This I mean, is due to the ambivalent nature of radical right-wing populism as

dealing with two separate hegemonic discourses, making it to constitute (to remain in Habermasian terminological territory) both an *uncompromising counter-sphere* as well as an *extreme manifestation of the hegemonic sphere*.

The first of these—radical-right populism as an *uncompromising counter-sphere*—directly contradicts the abovementioned adage that differing views can be absorbed into the (hegemonic) public sphere (Habermas, 1992), for it alludes to a structural incongruence between liberal democracy and radical-right populism. Now, from a Habermasian point of view, one could state that often the exclusion of the radical-right is *legitimate*, for its lacking standards of rationality in discursive interaction (see for instance the online utterances of hate speech Cammaerts (2009) shows to be rampant among radical right-wing supporters) contribute to "dismal climates of debate" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 92). Yet, as Mouffe (1999, 2005b) counters, rational deliberation itself *illegitimately* sustains a hegemonic liberal-democratic consensual norm, exclusive of profound political differences. The populist radical-right moreover, by its very ideological make-up, constitutes such a profound difference. That is, by denouncing the cadres of liberal pluralistic democracy and being adamant to any political and cultural equality (Cammaerts, 2018; Mudde, 2007, 2010) it diametrically opposes the hegemonic liberal-democratic norm.

Therefore, offering a solution to right-wing populism that emphasizes rational consensus can only evoke a contra-productive effect, for this solution is de facto the source of the populist's exclusion from that very same consensus. To illustrate this point, examples taken from Belgium and Austria provide useful insights.[3] In the former country, the a priori exclusion of the populist right-wing party *Vlaams Belang* from participating in government through a so-called *cordon sanitaire*, did not diminish the populist appeal. On the contrary: as Cammaerts (2018) illustrates, we can now witness the ongoing flourishing of exclusionary nativist language within the Belgian public debate.

A similar situation occurred around the turn of the century in Austria where both consensual politics and moralistic exclusionism of right-wing politics created a landscape ripe for the populist movement to gain traction. That is, the Austrian "Grand Coalition" of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (German: *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs* [SPÖ]) and Christian-Democratic Austrian People's Party (German: *Österreichische Volkspartei* [ÖVP]), that for decades sustained the Austrian consensus, quickly became the mark of populist right-wing arrows after Jörg Haider took over as leader of the Freedom Party of Austria (German: *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* [FPÖ]; Mouffe, 2005a). This was due to "the refusal of the SPÖ and the ÖVP (…) even to consider the possibility of an alliance with the Freedom Party [which] allowed it to be perceived as victim of the political establishment, and reinforced its populist appeal" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 64). Moreover, the moralization of the populists' ideas merely fueled their sense of being an "us" vis-à-vis an out-of-touch elite (Mouffe, 2005a). Thus, bringing back these examples to the earlier theoretical argument: the focus on maintaining a Habermasian rational-consensual approach sustains a hegemonic liberal-

democratic ideal that ultimately serves as a catalysator for right-wing populist antagonisms, rather than an antidote (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006; Mouffe, 1999, 2005a, 2005b).

Second however, the radical-right populist movement simultaneously constitutes an *extreme manifestation of the hegemonic sphere*. This is perhaps understood easiest by reminiscing that the radical-right identity as I presented it, is built upon Appadurai's (2006) concept of a majoritarian identity. In other words: via its articulation of a narrowly defined nativist conception of the people, it is intrinsically linked to a nation's cultural majority. In this sense, it is less a *normal pathology* (a commonly reoccurring abnormality), but rather a *pathological normalcy* (Mudde, 2010): an extreme version of the "normal" hegemonic discourse. Thus, although excluded from the liberal-consensual norm, its intrinsic rootedness in the nation's cultural norm enables radical-right populism to significantly steer the mainstream (i.e., hegemonic) cultural discourse.

That is to say: by pressuring consensus-driven mainstream parties to assume a more nativist right-wing rhetoric, it succeeds in normalizing its exclusive message (Cammaerts, 2018; Ghorashi, 2014). A recent example of this can be found in the Netherlands, where incumbent prime minister Mark Rutte of the neoliberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Dutch: *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* [VVD]) swooped to victory during the 2017 elections by adapting the nativist rhetoric of the populist right-wing Party for Freedom (Dutch: *Partij voor de Vrijheid* [PVV]; Cammaerts, 2018): proclaiming in an open letter "to all Dutch people" that non-natives should "act normal, or get out" (Rutte, 2017).

Similarly, another poignant example of such normalization practices, in this case through the media, could recently be found in France, where in September 2018 right-wing political commentator Eric Zemmour attacked the French-Senegalese Hapsatou Sy, his fellow guest on a national television show, for having a non-French name, calling hers "an insult to France."[4] Yet, it is not even that such racist and xenophobic statements have increasingly been allowed a national platform, the normalization of this right-wing rhetoric was shown even more in the way the subsequent debate took shape. Instead of an immediate denunciation of Zemmour's exclusionary statement, it was weighed and measured. "Do we need a politics of names?," *Le Figaro*, the second-largest French national newspaper, for instance asked their panel in one of their video segments, herewith adding to a serious mainstream debate over the preservation of a supposedly historically rooted French national identity (*Le Figaro*, 2018).

Hence, by allowing this question to be seriously debated, a public sphere arises wherein the right-wing discourse and its appurtenant exclusionary beliefs become increasingly normalized. Put less abstractly: by a priori framing national debates in terms of a distinction between a "normal" native (in these cases Dutch or French) majority and supposedly deviant non-native minorities (i.e., *they* do not act normal; *they* have aberrant names) an essentialized notion of the non-native as an absolute other becomes further engrained within mainstream societal discourses. Thus, such

practices of normalization translate into an increasingly pervasive nativist hegemonic cultural discourse on the nation and nationhood. Now, given consensual politics' inherent complicity with hegemonic discourses (as discussed above), a deliberative solution can hence be expected to only reinforce and further normalize populist and nativist beliefs, herewith further marginalizing the position of the non-native other.

In sum then: Habermasian approaches to address radical-right populism fail to do so on two counts: first for its structural inability to include right-wing populists themselves into the hegemonic liberal-democratic consensus, and second for its tendency to exclude minority others whenever the populist rhetoric becomes mainstreamed into the hegemonic cultural norm. Following this paradox, both ignoring right-wing voices as well as incorporating their exclusionary arguments into a *seemingly* rational debate are equally undesirable strategies in countering radical-right populism. Thus, another solution is called upon; one that *does* answer and confront the nativist fears driving right-wing populist sentiments, without normalizing its exclusionary messages into the hegemonic discourse.

Agonistic pluralism: moving beyond rationality

An answer, according to some, is to move away from a model fetishizing consensus, to more conflict-driven solutions (e.g., Mouffe, 1999, 2005b; Young, 2001). Young (2001) therefore emphasizes activism's potential to truly rupture with hegemonic bonds upheld by deliberative practices. To my mind though, right-wing populism, with its anti-liberal-democratic rhetoric, already represents an antagonistic "activist" movement. The main issue here therefore is not how to mobilize antagonism, but, as Mouffe (1999, 2005b) stresses, how to transform this antagonism into *agonism*: a form of politics that instead of aiming for consensus embraces group conflict and difference, yet simultaneously contends that a bare minimum of mutual recognition is necessary for conflict to "take shape in a legitimate way" (Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 973).

To do so, we nevertheless have to cast aside deliberation's rational bias, and acknowledge that emotional identifications are often at the core of a politics of conflict and difference (Mouffe, 1999, 2005b; also Ahmed, 2004). As Mouffe therefore asserts, agonism does not grow from rational argumentation, but through the creation of space for the expression of emotions and passion over certain issues, so to foster a space "which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 16).

By postulating a sharp distinction between the public sphere as a domain of rationality and the private as a realm of the affective (Berlant, 1997; Fraser, 1990), the Habermasian model however, disallows emotions a place within the political. Yet, this distinction hinges on a rather narrow and ultimately exclusive understanding of the political as a realm of merely purposeful, rational and public deliberation. And this becomes problematic when confronted with the nature of contemporary

public and political life, that (increasingly) contains a private and emotional dimension. Partly, this reinvokes the feminist axiom that, for many groups suffering from structural oppression, the personal very much is political (see Gorton, 2007)—and, as Berlant (1997) shows, in a time wherein public discourse greatly concerns itself with the intimate sphere of our private lives (think for instance of current debates on "traditional" norms of gender and sexuality), this feminist adage, as well as its reversal (i.e., that the political is personal), rings true more than ever.

Yet, perhaps even more fundamental is that Habermas's rational-deliberative model ignores the emotional nature of the ways in which political identifications get shape during late modernity. That is: it remains blind for what follows in Bauman's (2000) analysis of individualization; namely that the public sphere today is filled with private concerns, which, when shared, come to constitute liquid communities that could, somewhat oxymoronically, be described as *privatized publics*[5]: "communities of shared worries, shared anxieties, shared hatreds (...) nail[s] on which many solitary individuals hang their solitary individual fears" (Bauman, 2000, p. 37). While this already alludes to the appurtenant importance of emotions in the process of creating (antagonistic) collectives, Ahmed's (2004) work subsequently makes this more explicit by showing how such seemingly private emotions are in fact also very public; i.e., how they do not just reside *inside* individuals, but move *between* both individuals and groups; how they are hereby central in delineating categories of "us" and "them." Hence, as she puts it: "how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically, 'takes shape' only as an effect of such alignment" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 54). And it is for this reason that a public sphere model that marginalizes the expression of private and emotional arguments, will inherently fall short in challenging radical-right sentiments, for it fails to include emotionality as a key dimension of what makes people—and in this case specifically right-wing populist supporters—assume political positions to begin with.

Thus, in line with already long-established feminist critiques (c.f., Fraser, 1990), we are in need of a broader conceptualization of the political: one that does not merely stress public processes of rational deliberation as acts of political participation, but views the entirety of private concerns and emotional identifications that shape collectives and create antagonisms as part of the dimension of the political (Mouffe, 1999, 2005b). Then, with this understanding, it becomes apparent that solutions to soothe antagonist tensions can impossibly involve ignoring private issues or expunging passion from the public sphere of debate, as these are part and parcel of what makes us engage politically (Dahlgren, 2009).

Therefore—to return this argument back to Mouffe's (1999, 2005b)—in dealing with differences within the public sphere, instead of aiming for a rational consensus, we should do the opposite and welcome the underlying passions driving differences into the public sphere. Yet, simply doing this is insufficient, as it often are precisely these passions that make up the fiercest antagonisms (c.f., Ahmed, 2004). The subsequent challenge therefore becomes to "mobilise those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs" (Mouffe, 1999, p. 756) In other words: to find ways

to nourish the already present emotions in such a way that antagonisms can successfully be transformed into agonisms.

From consensus to common ground: towards an empathetic public sphere

While I thus agree on the public necessity of allowing emotions into the public sphere to create agonistic rather than antagonistic relations, Mouffe's answer however, contains a certain ambivalence that in the end also hinders the formulation of a solution in addressing radical-right populism. Agonism, as Mouffe concedes, needs something shared: a common ground. The populist radical-right however, is vehemently antagonistic, "and it is here that the limits of a radical plurality of voices within a democracy expose themselves" (Cammaerts, 2009, p. 570). Any sufficient answer to right-wing populism cannot simply include the populist voice, embrace the appurtenant emotions and subsequent conflict, and then await for agonism to grow. Instead, I urge the creation of minimal commonality must be shaped actively in order to soothe the virulence from the radical-right ideology. However, since Mouffe (2005b) contends that radically anti-democratic language should be expelled from the agonistic debate, her work ultimately fails to offer a solution to right-wing populism beyond antagonistic conflict and the exclusion of radical-right viewpoints; herewith discarding any possibility for agonism to grow.

A way beyond this *impasse*, I argue following late modern theorists (Bauman, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), involves the active reinvention of society by ways of imagining new public structures within an increasingly individualized society, in order to render an agonistic pluralist solution possible. Yet, the analysis of individualization becomes problematic when confronted with the reality of right-wing populism as a collectively imagined majoritarian identity. After all, individualization theory *seemingly* suggests the erosion of solid collective identities; herewith implying the impossibility of an agonistic pluralism that puts collective struggle at the center (Mouffe, 2005b). Nevertheless, I argue it is possible to theoretically reconcile the late modern analysis of individualization, with the Mouffian ideal of agonistic pluralism by positing that right-wing populism could only emerge as a specific collective identity *because of* individualization.

Here, I like to part ways with Beck who makes a similar claim (in Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), but views the nationalist identity as reactionary: a mere lingering backward answer to globalization and individualization. The analysis proposed here instead follows Bauman's (2000) abovementioned notion of *liquid collectives* consisting of *privatized publics*. Through this conceptualization, I urge to view the radical-right group identity not as a deviant and outdated reaction to an otherwise individualized reality, but rather as a primary example of the ways in which shared private fears (i.e., lacking focus on public issues) translate into a plethora of antagonistic political group identities within (and because of) that reality. (Bauman, 2000). (Ant)agonism in the Mouffian sense, must then not be interpreted as a sharp right-left distinction (Mouffe, 2005b) but rather as a battle between politicized liquid

collectives "infected" by individualization. The ultimate puzzle thus becomes to "translate [shared] private troubles into public issues" (Bauman, 2000, p. 51), i.e., to formulate some sort of public sphere theory able to create public connections between antagonistic, individualized collectives.

Yet, how to move beyond a rational consensus on the one hand and antagonistic conflict on the other in order to identify the common ground on which these public connections can be constructed? To answer, a first question that needs asking is: what does *common ground* conceptually mean here? What exactly distinguishes it from a rational consensus? The common ground as perceived here, is simultaneously less and more than a consensus. It is less, since it does not necessitate citizens to ultimately agree on the content of issues; it does not ask them to overcome their differences. Yet, it is also more, for instead of overcoming differences, it requires citizens to do the opposite: to actively bring their *substantive differences* into the debate and through that, search for fundamental grounds—the core tissues—connecting these differences (Ghorashi, 2009). Thus, common ground as a concept revolves around Hannah Arendt's sense of plurality: "the dialectic of *sameness* and *otherness*" (Silverstone, 2006, p. 36). It is about acknowledging differences, i.e., recognizing the "otherness of the other" (Beck, 2001, p. 275), while simultaneously (re)discovering commonalities in our fellow existence as human beings (Beck, 2001; Silverstone, 2006). And from there on, minimal common ground(s) can create bases to transform antagonism into agonism.

Armed with this conceptualization, the answer that I propose here for creating such common ground(s), rests strongly on Young's (1996, 2000) political communication model and is, in line with the earlier plead for allowing emotions into the political, what I call an *empathetic public sphere*. On the one hand it exists of embracing conflict in the sense of accepting the profound, emotionally-charged, differences between group identities, while on the other hand maintaining (and here we find ourselves in line with Habermas again) that communication between groups is the *sine qua non* for any mutual recognition that can foster the creation of true agonism (i.e., a common ground). However, I propose this is not to be achieved via rational deliberation, but rather through discursive acts of mutual greeting, rhetoric, and narrative in order to foster empathetic dialogues in which one actually takes the time to listen to people's stories in order to confront oneself with another's position and beliefs (Ghorashi, 2014; Young, 1996, 2000). The basic conviction here is that "there are always moments in (the) stories (. . .) which others identify with, no matter how extreme the difference assumed at the beginning" (Ghorashi, 2014, p. 60). In responding to right-wing sentiments, instead of searching for a rational consensus, the empathetic public sphere's key objective thus becomes finding moments of mutual recognition between the nativist *self* and the non-native *other* in order to rediscover our fellow humanness.

To be clear: this is not a plead for simply providing right-wing voices with a public space to express their stories unchecked, for that would merely reinforce the normalization of the exclusionary ideas I earlier argued to be problematic. After all,

while the abovementioned hegemony paradox might hold up in theory, in practice we see that, even though populist right-wing supporters might indeed genuinely *feel* their voices suppressed, they are in fact relatively well-represented in mainstream discourse. Their beliefs are both widely voiced via established political parties (see Betz, 2004), as well as extensively featured in media discourses, for they succeed in playing into media logics through what Cammaerts (2018) calls a *politics of provocation*. This thus makes for a public sphere in which the voices and stories of subordinate groups are muffled even further. Hence, to avoid replicating and reinforcing such existing hierarchies of difference and to actually confront the right-wing's exclusionary ideas, within an empathetic public sphere, the voices of nativist right-wing supporters and non-native minority others cannot be treated equally. Instead of simply including both groups' voices, communication must therefore revolve around an act of (re-)balancing their power within the discourse, whereby first, a discursive space is guaranteed and safeguarded in which the stories of minority others can be shared and listened to.

Building an empathetic public sphere therefore requires the effort and willingness to start a radical rethinking and remodeling of the ways in which we structure our public debates. It essentially is a mean to find common grounds across what Hochschild (2017, p. 19) describes as the *empathy wall*: "an obstacle to the deep understanding of another person." Envisioned therefore is a public sphere filled with the often untold—or rather: unheard—stories of a wide variety of different social groups, among whom should *also* (but not in the first place) be the populist radical-right's supporters. And it is by recognizing ourselves—both our sameness and otherness—in the stories of others that we can then work towards finding novel connections in order to build the empathetic common ground necessary to overcome antagonistic differences.

More concretely, in confronting radical-right populism, the empathetic sphere thus aims to challenge the viewpoints of those citizens supporting populist right-wing logics by regularly confronting them with the stories and experiences of the unknown other(s), while vice versa, trying to include the stories of right-wing supporters into the discourse and connect these stories back to these same others. Without a doubt, no less than Habermas's, this model is quintessentially normative; yet replacing the Habermasian rational human being for an empathetic one.

However, this does not mean that the empathetic model bears no practical potential for improving the quality of actual communicative practices. Examples from earlier research already show how story-sharing can unsettle hegemonic discourses, hereby opening up space for other perspectives (e.g., Ghorashi, 2017; Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014). Moreover, Korstenbroek (2017) illustrates how, after providing right-wing populist supporters with the time and space to share their stories, moments of mutual recognition arose during post-interview conversations between researcher and respondent(s), despite profound political differences. Surely, given the reality of a polarized public sphere laden with antagonistic tensions, it certainly is a stretch to argue that something approaching such agonism can be reached through empathetic dialogues outside the confines of these academic research

settings, where the actors involved already agree on taking the time to listen to each other. Nevertheless, this is exactly the argument I wish to make. In the next section I therefore aim to discuss how an empathetic public sphere might be thought of in the context of today's media ecology

Empathetic storytelling in times of fractured media ecologies

Insofar, the problems and possibilities of dealing with right-wing populist sentiments in the public sphere have been examined rather abstractly. Yet, how do we move beyond abstract normativity to operationalize a sphere wherein an empathy-based model as introduced above becomes possible? Since, as Mouffe (2005b) contends, politics might indeed be a terrain of inherent conflict, in this section I primarily wish to focus on the role of media, who could nowadays be argued to more than ever before shape our "mundane but ubiquitous relations" (Livingstone, 2009, p. 6). As a result of this, a public sphere exists that, "however we define or criticise it, is essentially a mediated public sphere" (Silverstone, 2005, p. 199). And it is only through this mediated sphere that normative theories can (and might I add must) take the shape of empirical solutions (Habermas, 2006).

Moreover, echoing Silverstone (2006) I argue that media, being both constructors *of* and constructed *by* reality, carry a unique opportunity to shape and redefine images of self and other and herewith inform (empathetic) deliberative practices (Dzur, 2002). As such, their role in the public sphere essentially becomes a moral one. That is: to ethically represent today's diversity of worldviews by employing Arendt's notion of plurality, and as such present a media ethics that on the one hand aims at presenting conflicts and profound group differences, i.e., *showing us the otherness of the other*; while on the other hand assists in the promotion of mutual understanding and the search for bridging solutions to the most pressing issues dividing contemporary societies (Silverstone, 2006), i.e., *evoking a sense of sameness*.

However, this implicit notion of a mass-mediated sphere wherein "traditional" media channels ubiquitously determine the frame of public debates, quickly runs up to its limitations when considering the fragmented nature of today's public sphere. This follows what Fraser (1990) already observed thirty years ago; namely that in today's pluralistic and individualized democratic societies, it makes more sense to speak of multiple public spheres, rather than a singular one. Yet in recent decades, this fragmentation has been deepened by rapid changes within contemporary media ecologies. Digital developments have provided vast publics with the opportunity to further shape their liquid group identities within the granular subspaces of a Web 2.0 environment; allowing access to participatory spaces to challenge or adapt hegemonic media framings (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Chadwick, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2015). Although the positive and negative democratic implications of this development have been widely debated already, in this final section, I specifically consider how the affordances within this patched media ecology might enable or hamper the construction of empathetic spheres.

On the one hand, critics have rightfully pointed out several societal dangers accompanying the rise of Web 2.0 platforms, among which an important one is the space they provide for raising racist or otherwise anti-democratic (e.g., right-wing populist) voices (c.f., Cammaerts, 2008, 2009). Moreover, this issue is aggravated by "the systematic construction of parallel online political realities that enable citizens to live within "filter bubbles" co-produced by social networks, platform algorithms, and affordances" (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 245); a phenomenon that complicates the possibility of creating lines of mutual understanding between antagonistic groups of citizens, for it locks the different hegemonic and counter-hegemonic subject positions into disjointed epistemic universes, hereby further obstructing the shared formulation of a common ground.

On the other hand however, digitally networked platforms could possibly offer fertile soil for empathetic connections to grow. An argument of this sort is offered by Papacharissi (2015), who shows how social media offer storytelling infrastructures that give rise to *affective publics* within novel spaces that often challenge or reconfigure conventional narratives. Likewise drawing on a conceptualization of the political beyond the mere public and rational, Papacharissi (2015, p. 24) describes these spaces as "third places where social, cultural, political, and economic activities frequently converge [and] give rise to political expressions aligned with individual repertoires of self-expression, lifestyle politics, and personal reinterpretations of the political." Communication within such spaces is messy and does not follow strict "rules" of rational deliberation. Yet, it enables us to *feel* as if *we* are there with *them* via vicarious engagement with the (personal yet political) digitally mediated stories of others (Papacharissi, 2015). And by feeling a way into the lives of others, one starts the process of crossing empathy walls.

Nevertheless, it might be that such empathy merely reverberates within the walls of the own ingroup, which would ironically strengthen antagonisms (see for instance Simas et al., 2019). Given that the argument insofar has been that exclusionary radical-right thinking can (only) be challenged by connecting its supporters to the stories of others, the trick therefore is to generate empathetic storytelling that resonates beyond our own ingroups. This is by no means an easy task, and surely, the solution of an empathetic public sphere circumscribes both a normative model as well as a new utopian vision for dealing with populist right-wing sentiments, which often seems a far cry away from our current realities of highly antagonistic public debates rife with polarizing conflict. Yet, let us, for now at least, refrain from calling the construction of empathetic public spheres impossible. Instead, I highly encourage empirical research into ways of sparking such spheres into being. Moreover, reiterating that digital affordances can potentially fuel practices of affective storytelling and empathetic recognition (Papacharissi, 2015), the Internet might perhaps a fruitful place to start thinking about constructing empathetic public spheres.

Conclusion

Outlining a *paradox of hegemony* in which both inclusion and exclusion of right-wing populist voices wield counterproductive democratic effects when pursued through Habermasian approaches stressing rational deliberation and consensus, this article presented the concept of an *empathetic public sphere* as an alternative to move beyond this paradox. That is, rather than adding to the normalization of right-wing ideas by plainly including them, or to the fueling of these ideas by bluntly omitting them, a space is imagined in which right-wing populist sentiments are listened to, yet simultaneously confronted regularly with the—often personal—stories and narratives of those (non-native) others they oppose. Through this, the aim is to find pathways *beyond empathy walls* and reach upon minimal common grounds with others across these walls.

However, there are considerate shortcomings and limitations to this argument that warrant further scrutiny. First, on a theoretical level, the suggested model does not (yet) circumscribe a public sphere theory as complete as Habermas's, since in its current form the empathetic model does not explicitly provide an explanation of how to inform political decision making processes. In that sense, the empathetic model might be read more as a rather inchoate basis to rethink communicative practices, which *could* still be expanded to a more full-grown theory bearing clear political ramifications.

In practical terms, doubts over the feasibility of an empathetic model are also justified. For instance, the rejection of basic liberal-democratic principles at the core of populist right-wing logics, combined with its virulent hostility toward any cultural deviance, brings Mouffe (2005a, 2005b) to believe there to be no moral basis from where to transform radical right-wing antagonisms into agonistic variants. Instead, she pleads to fight back, i.e., to collectively construct reformative movements that bring together several different democratic struggles, in order to starkly challenge right-wing thoughts (Mouffe, 2005a)—and arguably, this is indeed what is asked for in the intrinsically conflict-ridden arena of politics. Nevertheless, I have argued that media, containing the symbolic power to (re-)shape worldviews (Silverstone, 2006), can re-articulate conflicts by assuming a media ethics offering windows of understanding on the *otherness of the other* (Beck, 2001). Moreover, while simultaneously acknowledging the democratic challenges and dangers social media pose, their possibilities for generating affective connections, allows us to muse about the possibilities of designing digitally mediated empathetic spheres.

Lastly, an empathetic sphere based on the extensive sharing of stories, requires time to develop and endure (c.f., Ghorashi, 2014; Silverstone, 2006), which is a rare commodity in both our hasty late modern societies (Ghorashi, 2014), as well as in today's media systems driven by commercial interests (Habermas, 2006). Thus, who will be responsible for shaping the conditions to create and test such a sphere?

While there are many parties (such as traditional media journalists, social media platforms and big tech companies, politicians, and citizens themselves) to be

involved, perhaps a first step for us is to think about the engaged role academia can play: could we assist in the search for both time and space for empathetic spheres to arise, and if so, how? Asking ourselves these questions, forces us outside the academy's ivory tower, and into the control tower (see Nyre, 2009) to address the most dire issues confronting today's fractured public sphere(s). By this, we engage in normative research, without however becoming society's sole moral arbiters. Instead, academic knowledge would "merely" inform and encourage further "experimentation" with ways of constructing new forms of connectedness within our public spheres (Dewey in Nyre, 2009). Additionally, by engaging with society in this way, we could empirically examine the worth of theoretical solutions such as the one proposed in this article.

Data availability statement

No new data were generated or analyzed in support of this research.

Notes

1 Notwithstanding differences of nuance (see Mudde, 2007) the terms radical-right populism, populist radical-right, and right-wing populism will be used interchangeably to denote a similar concept throughout this article.
2 Although the argumentation throughout this article is rather universal, this conceptualization of nativism is rooted mainly in (Western) European examples and therefore does not immediately translate to other contexts.
3 Since they are rooted in *governmental* discourse, these examples do not intend to represent instances of *public* discourse within an ideal-typical Habermasian public sphere (i.e., separate from the governmental sphere). Instead, as it can be assumed such examples find replication within the public sphere beyond government discourse, they mainly serve to illustrate how Habermasian approaches fail in addressing exclusionary right-wing sentiments.
4 Although Zemmour's televised statements were of similar caliber, this specific statement was cut from the original broadcast and was later posted online by Sy herself (c.f., Le Monde, 2018).
5 In his later work Habermas also recognises this fragmentation of the public sphere "into a huge number of isolated issue publics" (Habermas, 2006, p. 423), which he accredits largely to the rise of the Internet. However, what is missing here is a link to the emotional alignments making up these publics, which I argue can be found in Bauman's analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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