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Divisive Nostalgia: How do Dialogues of National Nostalgia Impact on Civil Society's Relationship with Populism?

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Abstract: This paper explores how local civil society organisations respond to populist politics' use of national nostalgia and the extent to which they replicate or resist its exclusionary discourses. Setting out our theoretical framework by drawing on the literature on the relationship between populism and nostalgic nationalism as well as previous studies on how civil society encounters populism, this study introduces a typology of how civil society organisations respond to populist rhetoric, and distinguishes between victims, vehicles, replicators, and resistors. A media analysis of 564 news articles was undertaken to examine instances of local polarisation in the UK

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which arose from national discourses of division around national identity, 'race', religion, and immigration. This was supplemented with semi-structured interviews with key representatives from civil society groups identified as pivotal case studies. To illustrate the findings, four case studies are presented in two pairs. The first pair represents heritage organisations that sought to engage in dialogue around the complexity of Britain's past but found themselves in contention with nostalgic populist ideas. The second pair represents organisations that sought to advance inclusion by incorporating discourses of diversity and equality into existing dialogues of Britishness. This study demonstrates that the different ways of interacting with nostalgia around nationalism can cause civil society organisations to become victims, vehicles, replicators, or resistors of polarisation but that these categories are not mutually exclusive, with many civil society organisations finding themselves in multiple roles as their own dialogues respond to populist discourse which may incur backlash. Care and critical engagement are needed, though these do not inoculate civil society from being targeted, and yet there is hope for a path of resistance.

Keywords: Populism, Polarisation, Nationalism, Nostalgia, Civil Society, Discourse

Introduction

How best to negotiate polarised discourses is one of the more pressing challenges facing civil society in Britain today. In this article we seek to explore how civil society organisations have approached this challenge, focusing on divisions over the best way to understand and interpret British identity and history. We argue that the impact of nostalgia combined with a rise in far-right populism has exacerbated these divisions. We therefore seek to answer the question 'how do local civil society organisations respond to populist politics' use of national nostalgia, and to what extent do they replicate or resist its exclusionary discourses?' To answer this, we analyse two pairs of case studies. The role of nostalgia in interpreting Britain's past is explored through an examination of the divisions that surrounded the National Trust's work to acknowledge their properties' histories of slavery and colonialism, and also through a study of Bristol's M Shed Museum's work to preserve and display the city's

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statue of slave-trader and philanthropist, Edward Colston. The second pair of case studies focuses on the role of nostalgia in constructions of British identity, specifically as it relates to diversity. The organisations discussed are One Britain One Nation, and the backlash to their attempt to have One Britain One Nation Day celebrated in British schools, and British Future, with its aims to engage people and the media in dialogues about integration, immigration, identity, and race.

In connecting polarisation in our case studies with the deployment of populist discourses, we differentiate the cases from other conflicts that are driven more around, for example, issues of resource allocation, economic interests, labour relations, environmental management, or land use. Populism is an ambiguous and contested concept, and we take an ideational approach, understanding populism as a discourse or worldview that is expressed through the use of certain tropes and rhetoric (Morgan 2022; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). At its core, populist discourse appeals to 'the people' in opposition to an 'elite', but Bruhn (2012) elaborates further key attributes of populist rhetoric, including references to the moral superiority of the 'people', claims to represent an 'unheard' group, references to a corrupt elite, suspicion of established institutions, calls for the purification and transformation of public life, demands for popular sovereignty and plebiscitary decision-making, identification of causes and candidates with the 'people' and presentation of qualifications in moral terms, and the characterisation of politics in conflictual or Manichean frames.

Approaching populism in this way has several implications for our study. First, populist discourse is always polarising as it requires there to be an 'us' and a 'them' and reinforces identification with the in-group and rejection of the out-group. While populism primarily opposes 'elites', it can also target and vilify subordinate groups that are constructed to be outside 'the people' and who may be perceived to be favoured by the elite. Second, although not all populism is nationalist, the tendency in many cases to define 'the people' in terms of national identity elides the two (Bieber 2018). Third, claims to moral superiority are frequently founded on representations of 'the people' adhering to traditional values that have been abandoned by the elite, thus drawing on nostalgia, with the aim of populist politics positioned as a restoration of an imagined past (Kenny 2017; Lammers and Baldwin 2020). Fourth, in an ideational perspective, populist discourse is not the preserve of particular parties or candidates but is routinely mobilised in all aspects of public life, including in civil society. Accordingly, this paper contrasts with studies of populism that are concerned with electoral politics by focusing on civil society as an arena in which populism and polarisation are articulated and contested.

This paper begins with a review of extant literature around nostalgia and nationalism against the backdrop of populist discourses, before progressing to examine different

ways that civil society organisations might respond to national populist rhetoric, which leads to the introduction of a typology of civil society responses under the headings: victims, vehicles, replicators, and resistors. A brief overview of the research methods is then provided before our analysis of both sets of case studies is presented. The paper closes by revisiting the typology in the light of these findings. It then draws conclusions on how attempts to engage with identity symbols associated with national nostalgia to promote inclusive dialogue must be done carefully and critically or civil society runs the risk of being a victim of populist condemnation, co-opted as a vehicle for populist ideas or being perceived as a replicator of populist rhetoric.

Literature Review

National nostalgia and nostalgic nationalism

Over the last couple of decades national nostalgia has become a powerful political force across the Global North. National nostalgia is chiefly characterised by a sentimental longing for a period when a nation is believed to have been somehow better than the present (Behler et al. 2021, 2–3). There is no need for individuals to have first-hand experience of this time to experience nostalgia; It is enough to be in possession of memories which have been passed down (Smeekes et al. 2020, 91; Behler et al. 2021, 2). Thus, nostalgia hinges on an idealised imagined past which is distorted with each remembering and retelling (Menke and Wulf 2021, 239). Consequently, the exact period in which this idealised past is supposed to have taken place is rarely clear. Instead, there are a set of tropes which collectively constitute this imagined past, often centring on a 'golden age' of community. Neighbourhoods are remembered as secure places where the community resources of 'kin, cliques and church' were pooled to support people in hardship (Popple 2015, 12; Wacquant 2007, 71; Schreures 2020). A nostalgia for community and the imperative to restore community is thus a feature of populist discourses sitting alongside nostalgic nationalism (Richards, 2019). The nostalgic conception of an English community is a trope that has been fostered by conservative politicians to secure popular support through nurturing a homogenous sense of identity that can be traced back to the early twentieth century (Woods 2005). Now, the support for community and the local is central to contemporary right-wing populism and tied to a suspicion of globalisation that feeds the narrative of nationalism (Ife 2021). Consequently, local and national identities overlap, with this nostalgic view of local communities central to the character of the nation as a whole.

National nostalgia can have positive effects. As a shared emotion it helps to strengthen social connections and reduce anxiety, acting as a collective coping mech-

anism (Smeekes et al. 2020, 91; Smeekes 2015, 54). As such, it is commonly experienced as a response to feeling either culturally or economically threatened (Baldwin et al. 2018, 443). However, this strengthening of group identity usually comes at the expense of an out-group to whom the cultural and/or economic threat is attributed, and who are not perceived to have been a problem in the idealised past to which the nostalgia harks back (Butz and Yogeeswaran 2011). In the face of constant societal crises, people are increasingly being drawn to groupthink perpetuating homogenous communities (Westoby 2021). Right-wing populism often casts the category of 'deserving people' as 'left behind' communities, who are cast in opposition to those portrayed as 'outsiders', thereby promoting anti-immigrant prejudice and intolerance towards refugees and migrants (Kenny et al. 2021; Goodman 2021). Thus, national nostalgia has also been proven to deepen social divisions and increase prejudice (Smeekes and Verkuyten 2014; Smeekes 2015, 64).

Populist and right-wing political parties frequently generate and exploit feelings of national nostalgia invoking its power to unite (in-)groups to increase support. This is a successful tactic, with high levels of nostalgia correlating with increased support for populist and/or right-wing parties and campaigns (Menke and Wulf 2021, 238; Smeekes et al. 2020, 98). Through this process what begins as *national nostalgia* becomes politicised into *nostalgic nationalism*. As Zygmunt Bauman noted, societal change combined with a sense of nationalism creates a longing for a (non-existent) utopia of the past – Bauman's *retrotopia* – which lends itself to a tribalised 'us vs. them' way of thinking (2017). This can be observed in recent political campaign rhetoric in the UK. A well-known example is the 2016 Brexit campaign slogan, 'Take Back Control' in which the implication is that Britain had once had control and subsequently lost it to the detriment of the nation (Lammers and Baldwin 2020).

With community a cornerstone of such ideas, how civil society acts at the local level has the potential to mirror the 'us' and 'them' narratives seen in exclusionary nostalgic nationalism discourses at the national level. This raises the question of how local civil society responds to the exclusionary discourses of populism, which is considered below.

Civil society responses to populism and polarisation

Civil society organisations that are rights-based and conflict with the populist right's ideology can find themselves targeted by populist discourses. This leads to their persecution by politicians and/or in the media, exclusion from policy influencing spaces, and the defunding of their work (Seggato et al. 2022). Targeted organisations are usually rights-based (ibid.), but other organisations can also find themselves treated this way. Right-wing populists have vilified these civil society organisations as

naïve, corrupt, unpatriotic, or working against the national common good (Hummel 2022). They may attempt to silence such organisations by describing them as too political or questioning their charitable status (ibid.). Individual civil society organisations may respond to being targeted by redefining themselves in line with populist discourses to evidence their patriotism and demonstrate how rooted they are within their communities (Jakatyerina 2021). They may also respond to persecutory practices through the development of strategic lobbying or media competence (Katz and Gidron 2022). Further study is needed to understand how civil society organisations respond when they are the target of politicians or the media (victim).

When civil society groups are persecuted by populist governments, they may be replaced by government support for organisations that are either neutral or advancing values that align with the populist right, particularly religious or family values, nationalist values, or those that promote a nostalgic view of what qualities constitute 'good society' such as diligence, punctuality and duty (Saggato et al. 2022; Gaweda 2021; Schreoder et al. 2023). Funding may be diverted to these replacement organisations and opportunities for collaboration presented, so that the relationship between populist governments and these civil society organisations is two-sided and mutually constitutive (Salamon and Toepler 2015; Toepler 2020). Even apolitical civil society institutions can be adopted by the far right and populist right to advance their ideology and build a network of their supporters under the veneer of neutral centrism (Ince 2023). Some civil society organisations can become a symbol of populist discourses without seeking to occupy this space (Dean 2020). Further research is needed to examine the extent that civil society organisations either actively engage with populist ideology (replicator) or find themselves co-opted by populist discourses (vehicle).

Although civil society is often assumed to be 'upright' and 'noble', the values it embodies vary between organisations. There are cases where collective actions can be used for ill instead of good, such as those associated with the Rwandan genocide (Edwards 2014, 52). While there are clear cases of bad actors, there is an emerging literature about the 'uncivil society' (Schroeder et al. 2022). This is a contentious term, but Seggato et al. (2022) defines it as those groups that reject deliberative processes to give all a voice, and which use othering to obliterate adversarial groups with unfettered political power ascribed to their own constituency. Similar attention is given amongst social movement theorists to an emerging range of protest groups that are driving polarisation and challenging the assumption that social movements are always progressive (Hutter and Weisskircher 2022). Yet it is important to draw a distinction between those 'uncivil' organisations that seek to advance divisive language and those that are unwittingly adopted by populist politics.

Notwithstanding the increased attention on uncivil society, civil society is being identified as a site for confronting and standing in opposition to far-right populism (resistors) (Ife 2021; Popple 2021). Social movement theorists have highlighted the way that social movements can resist populism through protest (Pennucci 2023). Similarly, theorists have identified how independent civil society activity at a community level can promote solidarities and provide a bulwark against populist exclusionary discourses (Kenny 2021; Kenny et al. 2021). Community development theorists have led the calls for practitioners to adopt activities that challenge populist ideas, organise for social and political change, connect with wider movements and/or break down barriers by encouraging dialogue between groups with differing ideas (Kenny 2021). Thus, some civil society leaders adopt the role of peacebuilding with a series of stages for cross-community activity to build trust (Acheson and Milofsky 2011; Rice et al. 2021). The increased interest in the use of meaningful exchanges between people who are in different forms of 'conflict' with each other in order to build understanding has driven the emergence of dialogue studies scholarship (Elsden-Baker 2013). This notwithstanding, dialogue studies must not presuppose that dialogue is inherently positive and a critical eye should be applied to understanding potential negative impacts of such dialogue (ibid.). Some theorists reject the idea that it is possible to create meaningful dialogue with proponents of populist ideas (Ife 2021). Correspondingly, civil society may be intolerant of populist ideas and suspend civility towards its supporters, which contrasts with more tolerant responses to populism (Bourne 2023). Civil society's preparedness to engage in dialogue with both sides to resolve tensions warrants further examination.

Some scholars propose that not all forms of populism are problematic, maintaining that left-wing populism has a more inclusive notion of 'the people' which embraces the outgroups that right-wing populism excludes (Westoby 2021; Popple 2021; and Kwok-kin et al. 2021). Stoecker and Witkovsky (2021) differentiate between exclusionary or inclusionary populism outside of the right/left wing distinction, which raises the question of whether it is possible to adopt populist tropes, such as nostalgic nationalism, in a way that is inclusionary. An alternative consideration is the extent to which civil society seeks to subvert populist movements. Westoby (2021) discusses how the language of anger and outrage can be channelled for the common good in community settings. Van Den Abbeele (2019) explores the extent to which left-wing politics can wrestle the discourses of populism from the far right and find language that appeals to their traditional base when they have shifted towards right-wing populist rhetoric. What these accounts have in common is their willingness to adopt populist discourses and subvert them towards a different agenda. This warrants scrutiny of the discourses found within civil society which might also be making use of populist discourses to advance an inclusive agenda. Yet other theorists warn against seeking to engage with populist discourses because of its fundamental-

ist tendencies to advance one perspective, often to support a charismatic leader, and to suppress dialogue or compromise (Ife 2021). Dialogue theorists have warned of the cosmetic exercise of dialogue where the language of dialogue is used to conceal a very different agenda (Camilleri 2016).

This paper synthesises the above literature to consider the following research question: how do local civil society organisations respond to populist politics use of national nostalgia and to what extent do they replicate or resist its exclusionary discourses?

Research Methods

We began this research by developing a basic framework of polarising dynamics related to populist discourses based on our extensive literature review. We then used this framework to conduct an extensive media analysis of news articles dealing with recent instances of local polarisation in the UK which arose from national discourses of division around issues such as national identity, 'race' equality immigration and islamophobia. 564 relevant pieces of media coverage were analysed. Through this, we identified a set of incidents and civil society responses that had featured in the news which were expanded into a set of case studies in order to further examine the polarising dynamics identified in our conceptual framework. Key individuals who were involved in these incidents or civil society responses were identified through the media analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these individuals to find out further details of what caused these issues to become so divisive, how this has affected communities, and how each civil society organisation or group chose to respond to it. These interviewees were approached through online communications with the civil society groups or organisations to which they belonged. Potential interviewees were sent information about the research, its aims and why their contribution would be valuable with the consent forms via e-mail. All interviews took place online because pandemic restrictions were still in place. For the purposes of this paper, we are presenting the case studies that relate primarily to national identity but also touch on dynamics of race, religion, and immigration. These include the National Trust, M Shed, One Britain One Nation, and British Future. We conducted six interviews across these four focus organisations, to supplement the media analysis. These interviews were then transcribed.

All four of these case study organisations were responding to societal divisions. All four organisations were also selected because they had dealt with contentious events in the national public discourses. Each of them to a greater or lesser extent engaged in a form of dialogue in response to these contentious matters, whether at a local level or through engaging with the media. While only some of them could be de-

scribed as engaging in 'localised community level conflict resolution' (Elsden-Baker 2013, 32) it could be argued that all four of these civil society responses accord with the definition of dialogue:

> the meaningful interaction and exchange between individuals and/or people of different groups (social, cultural, political and religious) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding. (Elsden-Baker 2013, 30)

However, the main contribution this article makes to dialogue studies is to demonstrate the methodological groundwork that needs to be done to understand antecedents of such dialogues. As Carbaugh (2013) explains, to expose the significance of dialogue, we must examine prior utterances and the layers of cultural meaning. In so doing, we can situate knowledge in the flow of social practice (ibid., 20). A readiness to revisit history is a critical value of the dialogical mindset (Camilleri 2016). Thus, this paper exemplifies the groundwork that dialogue studies should do to pull out these many layers of meaning. In this study, this began by uncovering the layers of meaning that have been built up by theorists in different disciplines, with the development of the conceptual framework. The testing of these different conceptual ideas against public discourses through media analysis allowed for a convergence of theoretical and socio-cultural practices. Thus, we demonstrate how we can apply theory to practice, and ultimately utilise practice in the development of theory (Elsden-Baker 2013). It is important to note that while the field of dialogue studies is primarily concerned with face-to-face verbal exchange, it can also refer to writing, including newsprint (Carbaugh 2013,15). This media analysis allows us to access the macro-level discourses that are part of the wider societal geo-political and cultural drivers for conflict (Elsden-Baker 2013). Finally, we extend our analysis of these layers of meaning by conducting interviews with key protagonists engaged in the civil society activity that is being reported in these media reports to drill down to the nested meanings in practice. Before dialogue can progress, we must first acknowledge the monologic convictions of the people in conflict (Arnett 2014), so these interviews enable us to do this. All of this collectively allows us to understand dialogue use at a societal level as much as at an individual level to reveal the culturally embedded assumptions; this is required if dialogue is to be used as a tool for reconciliation (Nagau-Rothe 2015). The contribution this article makes to dialogue studies methodology is to offer a multi-layered analysis of the striations of meaning that underpin conflict in local settings; this analysis can then inform our understanding of dialogic interventions that then follow.

A selection of the media data (205 news reports) and all the interview data were coded using NVivo. The analytical framework was developed iteratively, building on

concepts from our extensive literature review and using both discourse analysis and thematic analysis to extend the coding frame and arrive at a rich conceptual understanding. The existing literature discussed above suggests that the ways that civil society organisations respond to polarising rhetoric can be categorised into archetypes. We began to see these in evidence in the initial analysis of our case study data, and so we created the following typology to categorise these responses:

1. *Victims*: organisations which find themselves targeted as a result of polarisation or populism.

2. *Vehicles*: organisations that are co-opted to further one side of a polarising issue.

3. *Replicators*: organisations that are explicitly aligned with one side of a polarising issue and intend to further it. They form part of the growing understanding of 'uncivil society'.

4. *Resistors*: organisations which either explicitly distance themselves from populist discourse or subvert such discourse to counter polarisation.

In the sections which follow we apply these categories to our data to discover how they relate to our case studies. This typology is expanded on as an analytical tool in the discussion beyond that.

Our typology is intended to develop understanding of the way that civil society organisations respond to *polarisation*, and populist attitudes. While polarisation is often driven by populism, this is not always the case. In this article, however, the polarisation which surrounds our two pairs of case studies arises out of identifiably populist attitudes towards Britain's past. This means that our analyses reveal how they are affected by and respond to polarisation *and* populism; in this specific circumstance the two are inextricably linked.

Preserving the Past: M Shed and the National Trust

Events

In March 2020, countries around the world entered lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK, restrictions were placed on travel, social distancing enforced, and large gatherings banned. It was in this already fractious situation that the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests took place. On 25 May, George Floyd, a Black American, was murdered by a white Minneapolis police officer. His death sparked protests across the globe, as Black communities and their allies defied lock-

down restrictions to call for an end to racial discrimination and violence. On 7 Jun 2020, BLM protestors in Bristol pulled down a statue of the Georgian slave-trader and philanthropist Edward Colston from its plinth in the town centre and dragged it through the streets before pushing it into Bristol Harbour (Grimshaw 2020; BBC 2020). This action sent shockwaves across Britain (and beyond), as people re-evaluated the country's relationship with its colonial past. In Bristol, where Colston's memory was a significant presence, streets and buildings commemorating him were renamed (Cork and Roig 2021). There was a backlash against the removal of the statue and the BLM protest itself, and a retaliatory 'All Lives Matter' protest took place a week later (Wilson and King 2020).

Tensions around the treatment of Britain's colonial heritage were still running high three months later when the National Trust published a report detailing their properties' connections with colonialism and slavery (Huxtable et al. 2020, 5-6). With this, the Trust inadvertently tapped into the tensions that had emerged around the removal of Colston's statue. At the same time, the Trust's actions were themselves shaped by these events, as one interviewee commented:

> 'I think the thing is, the Black Lives Matter movement and George Floyd thing, that wasn't, that didn't just happen. That's the top of years and years of this building. So, you know, the National Trust has been on the same trajectory. It's been years and years of this building, and it all just sort of came to a head.' (Participant 14, National Trust)

The National Trust had been working for some time on developing a more inclusive approach to the interpretation of their properties and artefacts. As one employee noted, 'we had been doing work around this openly for quite a few years prior to 2020' (Participant 11, National Trust). In 2019 the Colonial Countryside project at Penrhyn Castle worked with local school children to develop creative responses to the legacies of colonialism present in the property. The Trust had also done a large amount of training and development with staff and volunteers to explore the issues of Britain's colonial heritage and ensure they were equipped to deal with them appropriately. While there had been a small public pushback against this before 2020, it was only then that this became significant.

In June 2021, a year after Bristol's BLM protest, the recovered statue of Edward Colston was placed on display in Bristol's M Shed Museum. It formed the centrepiece of a temporary exhibition entitled 'The Colston statue: What next?'. This exhibition was a collaboration between the M Shed and the newly established We Are Bristol History Commission, created by Bristol Mayor, Marvin Rees, in the wake of the statue's removal. The exhibition ran at the same time as a large-scale survey which invited Bristol residents to share their views on what should happen to the statue in

future, with the majority feeling that it should remain in a museum (though there was a small but vocal minority, mainly from outside Bristol, who wished to see the statue returned to its plinth) (Cole et al. 2022).

Intentions

The events surrounding the National Trust and M Shed's work form part of what have come to be colloquially known as 'culture wars': arguments (usually online or in the media) over identity and values (Benson et al. 2021). In both cases tension arose from a divide in opinions on what colonial heritage symbolises. The Colston statue was perceived by the BLM protestors to be honouring an oppressive regime and glorifying Bristol's slave trading past, while those who wanted to save the statue saw it as commemorating Colston's philanthropic work, and central to Bristol's identity (Branscombe 2021, 8; Cole et al. 2022, 50). The National Trust was in a similar situation, with their properties seen as either physical legacies of Britain's colonial history or positive reminders of Britain's historical significance.

One of the main goals of the M Shed's exhibition and the National Trust's work was to create space for conversations about contentious aspects of the past and their place in the future. These represent clear cases of dialogic intervention. As one interviewee explained:

> 'We had set up a series of conversations, for staff and volunteers where we'd bring in a visiting expert who'd been doing a bit of research or something [....] it was an open, safe forum for staff and volunteers, to ask questions and to discuss the histories [...] because there's so many things like, you know, what is the right language to use? What are the right words? Are we allowed to say this? Is this ok, is it not? Who is going to find this offensive? Or, you know, this is what I think or believe or held to be true, but it seems to be perhaps not true. Can you help me with that? So, we set up those, they were kind of one-hour, late afternoon workshops with a *panad*[3], so that people could just talk and feel safe, that they weren't going to be challenged or knocked back in any way and with an expert or two in the room to try and help, as well' (Participant 15, National Trust).

Likewise, the M Shed's exhibition was intended to be 'a springboard to then starting those conversations about how people felt about it, and what it represented and all these sort of issues' (Participant 16, M Shed).

[3] Cup of tea or coffee (Welsh)

Using heritage as a springboard for conversation marks a dramatic shift in the way Britain's imperial history is treated. Where once the narrative was one of honouring the contributions of colonialism and empire, in its place is an opportunity for more nuanced reflection on these stories. Thus, they both exhibited the three values critical to the dialogical mindset, which is the acceptance of difference in opinions, the creation of a space for mutual listening, and a readiness to revisit history (Camelleri 2016). By using heritage as a gateway to conversation and change, the M Shed and the National Trust can be seen as attempting to *resist* the polarising effects of national nostalgia. Their interpretations create space to reconcile both sides of the narrative – or at least they attempted to do so.

Backlash

The National Trust faced significant backlash to its work on histories of colonialism, as did the BLM protestors who removed Colston's statue, and the M Shed for its exhibition interpretation. In the M Shed's case popular protest transformed into organised opposition, with the (now defunct) right-wing activist group Save Our Statues created in response to the events surrounding Colston's statue (Scullion 2020). When the M Shed exhibition opened Save Our Statues encouraged people to block-book tickets to prevent people from visiting the statue (Martin 2021; Pritchard-Jones 2021). Likewise, the Trust's actions were met with hostility from National Trust members, politicians, and the wider public. News sites ran articles with inflammatory titles like 'National Witch-hunt: Some of Britain's grandest families have bequeathed their homes to the National Trust – now hijacked by the PC mob' (Adams 2020), and 'National Trust "used £100,000 of public money" to fund campaign ATTACKING Britain' (Maddox 2021). Discontented Trust members responded to the inclusivity work by starting the Restore Trust, which aims '[t]o restore a sense of welcome for all visitors without demonising anyone's history or heritage', and '[t]o present history responsibly and use it as a tool for understanding, not as a revisionistic weapon' (Restore Trust, no date (a)). As well as extensive campaigning via social media and news outlets, Restore Trust has pushed for resolutions at the National Trust's AGM, and promoted sympathetic council candidates (Restore Trust, no date (b); Restore Trust, no date (c)).

Nostalgia is, as explained earlier, a coping mechanism utilised in response to a sense of group threat. Threats to identity produce a powerful response, especially when they produce a sense of 'collective discontinuity' whereby people feel that their identity has been coopted to mean something different from its previous meaning (Smeekes and Verkuyten 2014, 45; Smeekes et al. 2022, 3). In Bristol the protestors were seen to be imposing their own version of history (one where Edward Colston was seen primarily as a slave trader) over the version which formed a key part of

many Bristolians' identity (where Colston was seen primarily as a philanthropist). The M Shed, by interpreting the statue through the lens of protest, found themselves grouped with the former (even though they were not acting as protestors, but simply acknowledging this part of the statue's history). Likewise, the National Trust's report focused on the links between its properties and colonialism/the slave trade, rather than celebrating their aesthetic or historic value. Among the properties it examined were some owned by well-known and often highly regarded families and individuals, such as Winston Churchill's family home (Huxtable et al. 2020, 70). Like Edward Colston in Bristol, figures like Churchill play such a pivotal role in some Britons' constructions of their identity that the suggestion of any association with (let alone responsibility for) unsavoury parts of history becomes a threat to both personal and national identity (Tranter and Donoghue 2021, 997–998).

The backlash against the M Shed and National Trust's work was not universal, and both organisations also received a positive response from large parts of society. These two sides were not equally weighted, with the actual ground-level experiences of people working for each organisation being broadly positive. Within Bristol for instance, the exhibition was deemed a success:

> '...there were a few people that wanted to, you know, lay flowers and things [...] I think there were a few people that maybe said some not very pleasant things. But on the whole, people were really interested' (Participant 16, M Shed).

The National Trust's experience was similar:

> '...there was a sort of standing joke about, you know, armies of locals charging up the hill with pitchforks and flaming torches, you know, but obviously that hasn't really materialised. As I say, you know, there's a been a few, a few keyboard warriors, and there's been a certain amount of raised interest in, in what we've got, which is good. Raised interest is always good' (Participant 14, National Trust).

Though both organisations reported some isolated incidents of staff receiving abuse, or volunteers pushing back, far more positive experiences were reported than negative ones.

Political Consequences

While the National Trust and M Shed may have largely escaped the impact of polarisation at ground level, the higher-level situation was very different. The initial removal of the Colston statue in June 2020 was firmly criticised by several major polit-

ical figures, including the then-Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and then-Home Secretary, Priti Patel (BBC 2020; Grubb 2020). Robert Jenrick, then-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, described the statue's removal as 'mob rule'. As a consequence, the government increased the amount of planning permission needed to remove historic statues, plaques, or monuments, and the controversial Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 introduced measures to allow harsher punishments for anyone who damages a memorial or monument (Home Office 2022; Hansard HC Deb., 18 Jan 2021).

The National Trust also received government criticism, with serious practical implications. Its critics argued that by publishing the report the Trust had acted outside its remit as a charity. Consequently, the Charity Commission launched a regulatory compliance case involving the National Trust (Charity Commission 2021). While this case was ongoing, concerns about the Trust's activities were raised in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, with attempts made to convince the government to review the Trust's actions directly (Hansard HC Deb., 11 Nov 2020; Hansard HL Deb., 3 Dec 2020). The Trust's work was affected by this scrutiny, as one employee described:

> '...there was a kind of moratorium on doing any press at all that came from the central team, because they didn't want to incite more, you know, attention on this sort of stuff, at a time when Oliver Dowden was looking into how the Trust was interpreting history, at the time when the Charity Commission was starting to investigate' (Participant 11, National Trust).

In March 2021 the Charity Commission concluded that the National Trust did not breach charity law, and therefore there were no grounds for further action (Charity Commission 2021). This ruling, however, came too late. Lasting damage had already been done to the Trust's reputation, and the way it is perceived by the government and the public.

As a longstanding cultural institution, the National Trust was expected to comply with a set of norms, presenting an uncritical celebration of Britishness (Hall 2003). Similarly, people had a set of expectations for what monuments like Colston's statue ought to represent and how museums like the M Shed ought to operate. An M Shed employee recounted how 'people thought very much of us as a, you know, we should be an art gallery and we'll be like, you know, restoring the statue and making it all shiny again' (Participant 16, M Shed). Statues and monuments are important to the development and maintenance of group identities, and so to reinterpret them as contentious historical objects is seen by some as inappropriate (Johnson 2002, 294–295).

As histories of slavery and colonialism were seen to be outside the traditional remit of the National Trust they were perceived as 'out of place' in Trust properties. More than that, though, the implication (sometimes explicit) in criticisms of the Trust's work is that racialised histories are 'out of place' in representations of Britain's past (Fowler 2020, 19–26). Nostalgic nationalism, as utilised by the UK government (discussed above), has served to strengthen the image of a mythic (white) British past, and this has resulted in a reduced willingness to accept other narratives (Smeekes 2015, 64). In this way, the National Trust and M Shed became *victims* of polarisation. While they may have set out with the intention of opening up conversations to *resist* polarisation, the political consequences have made it more difficult for this to happen.

OBON and British Future

What happened

Our next case studies deal with the same polarising issues around British identity and nostalgia from a different perspective. One Britain One Nation (OBON) is a community interest company set up by a Punjabi immigrant and former police inspector in 2013. It aims '[t]o create a strong, fair, harmonious and a proud British Nation, celebrating patriotism and respect for all our people' (One Britain One Nation 2022). To achieve this, it runs campaigns and events to promote a sense of collective British identity for people from all backgrounds, with an emphasis on belonging and inclusion. This exhibits the hallmarks of inclusive populism described earlier (Westoby 2021; Popple 2021; Kwok-kin et al. 2021; Stoecker and Witkovsky 2021). OBON shares some characteristics with British Future, a charity and think tank that aims to engage British people in conversations about integration, immigration, identity, and race and whose aim is to promote a 'confident and welcoming Britain, Inclusive and Fair to all' (British Future 2021).

British Future ran a project called Talk/Together engaging local communities in what claimed to be 'the UK's biggest-ever conversation about what divides and unites us, and what could bring our society together in these difficult times' (Ballinger 2020). These activities are aligned with the definition of dialogue (detailed above) in promoting a meaningful interaction between people with opposing views through conversation to increase understanding (Elsden-Baker 2013). British Future were also portrayed by the media as a key commentator for immigration and race, a position which drew legitimacy from the dialogue events that the charity coordinates. It actively engages with ideas of national identity to convey how inclusive Britain is today. The Director of British Futures was quoted by the *Observer* de-

scribing Britain as a place where 'people of different colours and creeds have mixed and learned to live together' (Savage 2018).

Our media analysis gave the impression that British Future was very much able to steer the media's focus. An interview with a spokesperson revealed how cognisant they were of this task:

> 'You want to twist the arms of the media into what would be more interesting than the thing they're thinking of doing. Obviously, sometimes the editor has decided what he wants [....] [T]he media wants something, you know, emotional and exploitative. And we're offering them some other stuff that, you know, the responsible media outlets would like.' (Participant 3, British Future)

British Future were confident enough in controlling the media that they actively sought out attention others shied away from, stating that 'We really want to be in the *Daily Mail*, you know, on the terms you want to be in the *Daily Mail* [...] And so you know, the Jubilee street party was on the front page of the *Daily Mail* and that's a good [thing]' (Participant 3, British Future). In these excerpts British Future clearly demonstrate an intention to influence the way race and immigration are understood in the media and show that they have a clear understanding of how to achieve this. They did not shy away from controversy to do this. When incidents of terrorism drove a divisive backlash, British Future actively engaged in the media to counter it with more inclusive press coverage of faith leaders uniting in expressions of grief and condemnation.

In contrast, OBON was less in control of media attention. In 2019, inspired by the activities they were already doing in schools, OBON began a campaign to have the last Friday in June celebrated as 'One Britain One Nation Day', or 'OBON Day'. This was intended to be an annual event held in schools, aiming to promote unity through national pride. Prior to 2021, OBON Day featured in Yorkshire's regional media. It attracted positive attention from the then-Prime Minister David Cameron in 2015, and subsequently had the support of then-Housing Minister, Esther McVey, and her husband Philip Davies MP. OBON exhibited the two-sided mutually constitutive relationship between government and civil society, described above (Salamon and Toepler 2015; Toepler 2020). Yet it went relatively unnoticed by the national media until 2021, when the Department of Education decided to promote the event on social media and encourage all schools in Britain to participate (Harding 2021; Mills and Smith 2021). This drew attention to a video produced by OBON showing school children singing a song (discussed further below) to reflect their pride in being British. Widespread confusion over exactly who was responsible for OBON Day subsequently ensued, with many incorrectly assuming this to be a

government-led initiative. This led to the public conflating OBON with Britain's right-wing government, and it received widespread backlash online (Dex 2021; O'-Grady 2021). A journalist from the *Independent* explained this phenomenon:

> 'There is an understandable suspicion about something that has emerged with something of a Tory flavour to it, at a time when the Conservatives are trying, somewhat clumsily, to monopolise the Union Jack and love of country, and to make these exclusively Tory traits.' (O'Grady 2021)

While some local newspapers defended the celebration, other local and national newspapers criticised it. It was seen as forced nationalism, with commentators drawing comparisons to Kim Jong-Un's North Korea, Communist East Germany, Vladimir Putin's Russia, and the Hitler Youth. The way it targeted children was seen as indoctrination, described as 'brain-washing' and 'creepy' (Harding 2021). In this way critics viewed OBON's activities as those of an uncivil society organisation advanced by right-wing populist politicians (Saggato et al. 2022; Shroeder et al. 2022).

This criticism was also tied to the devolved nations of the UK. People in devolved nations were especially opposed as the idea of Britain as 'one nation' was found widely offensive in this context, with Nicola Sturgeon describing it as 'ludicrous'. The last Friday in June also happened after many Scottish schools had broken up for the summer, thus excluding them from any celebrations (BBC 2021). Similarly, it was viewed in Wales as overly nationalistic. The Welsh Government was quoted saying that 'it had not engaged in this project' (Mills and Smith, 2021). The name One *Britain* One Nation was interpreted as excluding Northern Ireland.

Despite the criticism, OBON were not displeased by the rush of media attention:

> '...I was interviewed by every national media in this country, as in all the national press, and I was on Good Morning Britain, BBC, Sky News, GB news. I did almost every radio interview with all the radio: Five, Talk Radio, LBC, you know, so many radio stations. Times, and BBC Politics [....] [T]he press were really, really brilliant, you know, because ultimately when they looked into it there was no story there but it's put OBON on the national platform.' (Participant 2, OBON)

OBON may not have deliberately sought out this attention, as British Future did, but they were quick to capitalise on it. This difference in these two approaches to the media is important, and something that we will return to later.

The role of nostalgia

At first glance, nostalgia is less present in these examples than in the M Shed and National Trust. In those instances the divisions centred on whose stories belong in the collective memory of Britain's past. As nostalgia is inherently associated with the past, the connection is readily apparent. OBON relied on a sense of Britishness underpinned by nostalgic ideas. Analysis of media interviews with OBON's founder reveals that, aside from the aim to promote inclusion and eliminate hatred, most criticism centred on the goal to promote pride and loyalty in the nation and celebrate patriotism. This patriotism was focused on celebrating the UK's strength as a nation, as emphasised in the OBON song (reportedly written by Bradford schoolchildren) which included a chorus of 'Strong Britain, great nation' (Harding 2021; Morris 2021). A further aim was to teach British values such as 'tolerance, kindness, pride and respect' (Harding 2021). Nostalgia for British history and heritage fed into this pride in British strength in a manner reminiscent of past celebrations of the British Empire. This was emphasised by the inclusion of the armed forces in OBON celebrations, later joined by recognition of NHS staff's work during the Covid-19 pandemic, drawing on notions of loyalty and service for a Britain under threat which echoed nostalgic memories of wartime Britain.

OBON's mission and aims take for granted the ideas that:

1. Britain is something that exists as a discrete entity with definable values, of which people can and should be proud;

2. traditional symbols of British national identity can and should be used as symbols of pride and cohesion (e.g., the royal family, Union Jack, national anthem, etc.); and

3. immigrants and those from other cultural backgrounds should be integrated into 'mainstream Britain'.

These assumptions, whether or not intentional, reflect a view of what Britain 'should' be like (Mansfield 2019, 44; Jarvis et al. 2020, 95–97). OBON's work was seen to be promoting this idealised image of a 'lost past', which is the very thing upon which national nostalgia hinges (Smeekes 2015, 54). This idealised image does not necessarily encompass the needs or experiences of the whole population. Racialised communities, for example, may feel oppressed or excluded by traditional symbols of national identity (as demonstrated by the way that Bristol's black residents perceived the statue of Edward Colston) (Hammett 2021, 19–20). Devolved nations were also excluded, with their existence erased by the emphasis on Britain as 'one nation'.

OBON's endorsement by the explicitly nostalgic Conservative government strengthened their association with this exclusionary image of an idealised 'lost past'.

While national nostalgia is implicitly present in OBON's framing of their activities, it is more explicitly present in British Future's work. British Future knowingly attempt to reframe existing symbols of national identity to make them more inclusive. As one interviewee explained:

> '...you end up with a set of repeated tricks if you're us. You know, the birthday of the NHS, Remembrance Sunday, and yeah, we could invent days. We could invent 'hurrah for diversity' day [....] But if we take St George's Day and Remembrance and the Jubilee, and just the actual truth of Britain, which is that we are a very diverse society now, turns up in the traditional everyday frames that people already engaged with. It surprises them on St George's Day because the minority group isn't expecting to be welcome. And the majority group isn't expecting to be allowed to be English.' (Participant 3, British Future)

This excerpt illustrates a similar coupling of the diversity of Britain with traditional symbols of British identity as OBON, but in a more intentional manner. An example of this was their response to Remembrance Sunday. British Future drew on the 2010 election survey data, which asked: '["D]o you wear a poppy on Remembrance Sunday?' And 49 or 55% of British Pakistanis say they do [....] So that's over a million poppy-wearing Muslims'" (Participant 3, British Future). British Future felt that this was something they could utilise:

> '...we thought "God we need a picture". We really need a picture of, you know, the million poppy-wearing. So eventually when it was the centenary of the first Victoria Cross worn by an Indian army soldier, Khudadad Khan, through our friends in the Islamic Society of Britain a young fashion designer decided that she wanted to make a poppy headscarf because that was her view, that people should know the contribution of Muslims in the story [....] [A]nd we had a picture, and the Daily Telegraph put that picture on its front page that year and the next year' (Participant 3, British Future)

This provided an opportunity for monitoring deeper changes resulting from the media attention, since:

> '...a lot of people don't know that Muslims have been winning Victoria Crosses for 100 years for Britain [...] [W]e were tracking the num-

> ber of people who know that as an indicator of reducing anti-Muslim prejudice' (Participant 3, British Future).

This suggests that British Future deliberately lent on nostalgic nationalism to advance an inclusive, anti-discriminatory agenda.

In these examples we see that British Future appear to have used a Trojan-horse tactic, consciously using nostalgia to subvert populist narratives and advance inclusion (Stoker 2019; Van Den Abbeele 2019; Westoby 2021). This differs from OBON's use of inclusive populism. British Future's spokesperson recognised when interviewed that the pro-migration rhetoric usually used to persuade sceptics of immigration primarily caused irritation. Instead, British Future sought to engage all of society in expressing their opinion about immigration including those with anti-migrant sentiments, while simultaneously advancing inclusion. However, their spokesperson was keen to distance themselves from the idea that this was duping the public, stating:

> '[P]eople were like "Oh, that's a really good trick, that, isn't it?" And we were like "No... we really kind of mean this"'. (Participant 3, British Future)

Their sincerity in giving all people a voice does not reconcile with adopting the language of nostalgic nationalism as a tactic for advancing tolerance. In this way their approach and that used by OBON both overlap and are subtly different. This is something that is worthy of further consideration.

Replicator, Vehicle, Victim, Resistor

Our attention now turns to a more explicit comparison between these four case studies and their efforts to resist polarising discourses. As we have seen, the civil society activities represented a long-term strategy for promoting inclusive discourse which preceded the controversies in the case of the National Trust's engagement with matters of colonialism and slavery, and both OBON's and British Future's promotion of British diversity. In contrast, the civil society activity was a response to a contentious event, in the case of the protesters tearing down Colston's statue after George Floyd's murder, and also with the development of the exhibition in the M-Shed after the statue's removal. However, all our case studies found themselves in the media spotlight facing controversy. While OBON and British Future sought to engage with the media, utilising the controversy to advance their inclusive narrative, the National Trust and M-Shed's response was to simply weather the media storm and concentrate on the ground-level experience of its staff engaging with the public. Although their staff's experiences were largely positive, this somewhat masked the

greater cost to these two organisations, in terms of their reputation in the case of the National Trust, and to wider acceptance of protest legitimacy in the case of M-Shed. Moreover, although both OBON and British Future did engage with the media, British Future did so with an informed understanding of such controversies, whereas the use of media by OBON was less reflective of the contentious matters that had attracted criticism of their activities and more driven by restating their narrative. Contrastingly, the other three case studies all understood the importance of creating a space for dialogue about contentious issues. Thus, British Future deployed dialogue to capture perspectives on immigration and race, and both M-Shed and National Trusts created spaces for dialogue at the local level to overcome tensions around either statue removal or colonialism. With these heritage organisations, dialogue between opposing groups was seen as an end in itself, but with British Future, it was utilised as a means to an end, by giving itself legitimacy as a commentator on race and immigration. These similarities and differences between the case studies can extend our understanding of the typology thereby demonstrating how it can be used as an analytical tool.

None of these case studies fit neatly into one of these four archetypes. Instead, the typology can be used to show the nuance in how these differing roles should be understood. For example, on the surface it might be said that M-Shed and certainly the National Trust were victims of the 'culture wars' discourse. However, their creation of a dialogue space can be interpreted as a clear act of resistance to exclusionary discourse or division. Similarly, OBON's critics might argue that it is a *replicator* of populism which furthers an exclusionary narrative of Britain by emphasising nationalism. However, OBON's emphasis was originally meant to be on belonging and collective identity; it was intended to combat polarisation rather than exacerbate it. OBON's founder was quoted saying '[t]his country's welcomed people from all parts of the world who have made this country their home. And sometimes what we don't get to hear in this country is the success stories of all those people' (LBC 2021). An interviewee from OBON justified the use of patriotism to achieve this:

> 'There's nothing wrong with patriotism, as long as it's done with inclusion in mind, bringing everybody on board and not leaving a single person out... It's about embracing everybody in the country and making them feel part of something great'. (Participant 2, OBON)

Our analysis suggests that OBON bears some similarities with *victims* of polarisation. It was a combination of the negative associations some people had with symbols of national identity and the government's involvement that made OBON into a polarising force, not the intentions of the organisation. This meant that while

OBON attempted to become a *resistor*, it ended up being an unintentional *vehicle* for populist discourses.

This can be contrasted with the M Shed or National Trust in the way that each organisation utilised identity symbols. The latter two were trying to contextualise the symbols involved in each case (the Colston statue, and the Trust's properties and artefacts). OBON, on the other hand, appeared to use them less critically and without contextualisation. In doing so, OBON found themselves open to misinterpretation and appropriation, whilst the other two became targets notwithstanding their carefully considered contextualisation. In all three cases, the organisations attempted to create a more inclusive version of 'Britishness' by using different identity symbols and markers and found themselves victims because they had inadvertently angered people whose sense of identity was strongly linked to one specific interpretation of those symbols.

This contrasts with the case of British Future. While OBON ended up in this situation unexpectedly, British Future made an active choice to pursue and shape attention from the media. While British Future may deny doing so as a 'trick' to encourage more tolerant attitudes, they nevertheless purposely utilised national identity symbols to advance inclusion. By making this conscious decision to subvert a populist discourse to change attitudes, British Future acted as a *resistor* of polarisation and, crucially, did not become a victim of it.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored the impact of populism and nostalgia on civil society organisations. Existing research shows that there is a link between populism and nostalgic views of community and identity. How civil society responds to nostalgia therefore has the potential to feed into (or rebuff) the 'us' vs. 'them' dynamics which are central to populism and result in polarisation.

Our case studies show that different organisations are impacted by nostalgia in different ways. Heritage organisations, such as the M Shed and National Trust, who work to acknowledge the complexity of Britain's past find themselves at odds with nostalgic populist ideas. While on-the-ground experiences of this tension have been minimal, their actions sparked a government response with major implications for the way Britain's past is remembered. Nostalgia therefore caused these two organisations to become victims of polarisation. For organisations like OBON and British Future, the subversion of nostalgic ideas is a way of incorporating a greater sense of diversity and equality into existing ideas of 'Britishness'. This must be carefully negotiated, as it can easily lead to becoming an unintentional vehicle of polarisation but, when successful, is a useful tactic for resisting polarisation. The typology presented

here can serve not just as an analytical tool but provide a prescriptive framework for how civil society can achieve such resistance.

Negotiating populist discourses of nostalgia as a civil society organisation is complex. Different ways of interacting with nostalgia can cause civil society organisations to become victims, vehicles, replicators, or resistors of polarisation. We show that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and many civil society organisations find themselves engaging with polarisation in multiple ways. It is also common for an organisation to intend to engage one way but find that they are treated as something else. This can have a significant impact on the way that civil society organisations are able to operate, and the level of support (or lack thereof) that they receive.

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