

Why a Richer World Will Have More Civic Discontent: The Infinity Theory of Social Movements

Review of General Psychology
1–16
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DOI: 10.1177/1089268020907326
journals.sagepub.com/home/rgp


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Abstract

Two narratives of economic development are presented. The first highlights contemporary global wealth and income inequality. The second illustrates historical aggregate gains in global wealth and income. Within these two broad narratives of economic development, protests and social movements will arise to modulate feelings of unfairness and deprivation. A new theory of social movements is developed. Collective remembering and collective imagining can inform feelings of unfairness, frustration, and relative deprivation in the present. This theory highlights the importance of a temporal account of the development of social movements within democracies that allow for the expression of civic discontent without brutalization. The theory predicts aggregate global economic development, with unequal economic gains, will always necessitate social movements to modulate economic inequality and circumvent perceived and actual hardship. The implications of this theory for understanding globalization, social movements, and creating fairer democratic societies are discussed.

Keywords

democracy, deprivation, economic inequality, fairness, globalization, imagining, protest, remembering, social movements

Introduction

Two global narratives of economic growth frame perceptions of fairness of economic inequality. The first narrative focuses on growing global wealth and income inequality (Atkinson, 2015; Dorling, 2014, 2018; Moghaddam, 2018; Piketty, 2014). From this perspective, rising income and wealth inequality are immoral, unjust, and unfair. The rich are getting richer, leaving the rest of us in their wake. It is a problem that needs to be remedied.

Simultaneously, the rise in the global floor of wealth, income, and access to goods and services has led to hundreds of millions being lifted out of poverty and improved life conditions for most people on earth in a relatively short period of historical time (Haidt, 2015; Pinker, 2011, 2018; Roser, 2016; Rosling et al., 2018). According to this perspective, increased economic inequality, in the context of aggregate economic growth, is not necessarily immoral (Frankfurt, 2015). Social psychological research highlights how people do not demand economic parity, they want equity (Norton & Ariely, 2011; Power, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Starmans et al., 2017; Tyler, 2011). The psychological mechanism underlying tolerance for economic inequality lies in whether people consider

economic divergence to be fair or not. How people comprehend and orientate themselves within these two narratives of economic development requires a comprehensive theory of social movements. This article presents the *Infinity Theory of Social Movements*. The theory explains how protests and social movements will occur as the world becomes wealthier yet more economically unequal. Remembering and imagining are two key psychological processes informing what people consider to be fair, or unfair, economic inequality. These developmental processes inform feelings of relative deprivation—regardless of actual levels of economic growth or inequality—and underlie perceptions of unfairness and frustration. Violations of expectations of fairness regarding the distribution of economic gains can act as a tipping point to generate protests and social movements. As the globalized world gets richer, yet more unequal, social

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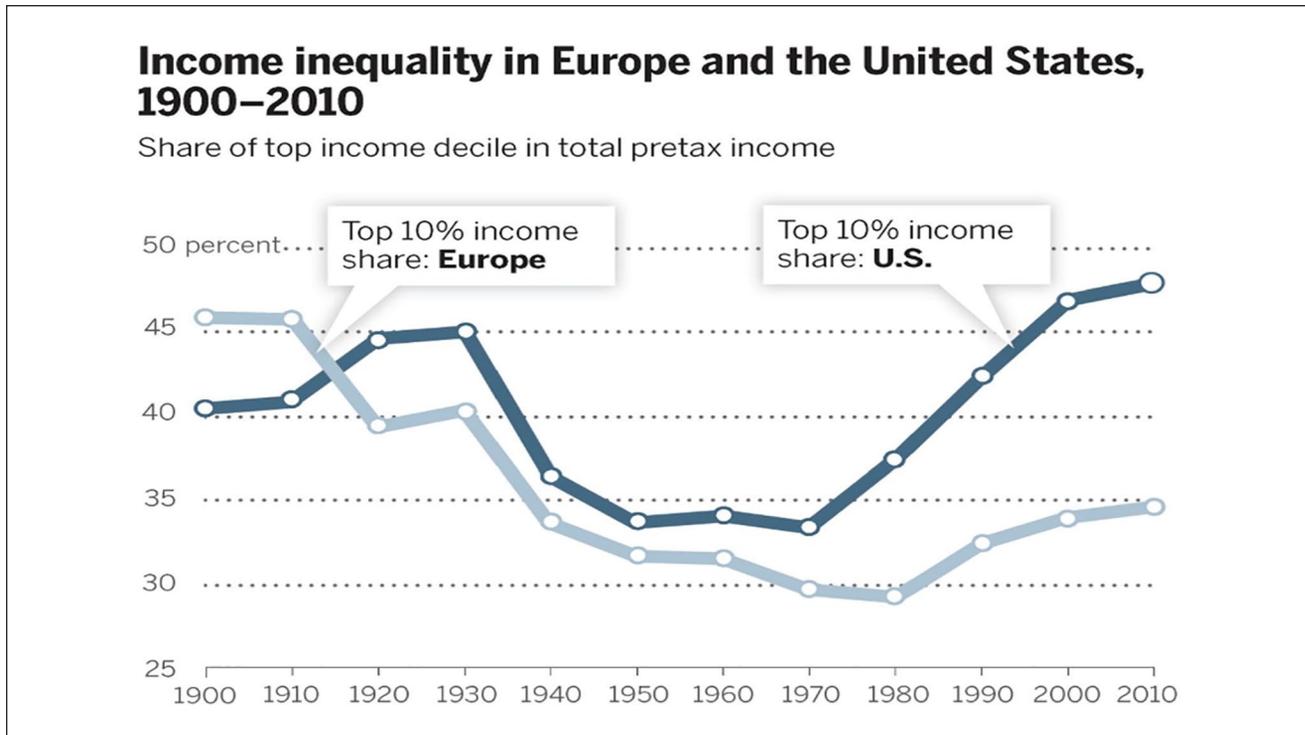


Figure 1. The graph shows the level of income inequality for the top 10% of pretax income earners from the United States and an aggregate score from four European nations from 1900 to 2010.
 Source: Piketty and Saez (2014).

movements aimed at generating social, political, and economic change, are likely to occur to modulate unfairness in economic distributions of income and wealth.

The Rise of Economic Inequality Across the Globe

Global economic inequality is increasing (Atkinson, 2015; Chin & Culotta, 2014; Dorling, 2014; Piketty, 2014; Piketty & Saez, 2014). A report by Oxfam (2016) revealed the richest 62 people are as wealthy as half the world's population. A year later the same organization revealed the wealthiest eight billionaires have as much money (US\$426 billion) as 50% of the world's population (Oxfam, 2017). The gap between the haves and the have nots has widened and become a chasm (Dorling, 2014).

Historical economic data illustrate some of the dynamics of income and wealth distribution in the United States and Europe (Piketty, 2014; Piketty & Saez, 2014). These data reveal a declining trend in income inequality in Europe from the beginning of World War I (WWI) until the 1980s when it again began to increase. In the United States, income inequality began declining in the 1930s and began increasing again from the 1970s.

Figure 1 illustrates the level of income inequality for the top 10% of pretax income earners from the United States and an aggregate score from four European nations (United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Sweden) from 1900 to 2010.

The total net private wealth for the top 10% in Europe and the United States decreased in both Europe and the United States from 1910, and began increasing in both regions from the 1970s, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Income inequality is also on the rise in emerging economies. Piketty (2014) discusses six countries to illustrate growing inequality outside of the West. Growing inequality within emerging economies has been slowly rising for the past 30 years (Ravallion, 2014). Figure 3 examines income distributions over a 100-year period, from 1910 to 2010, in South Africa, Argentina, Colombia, Indonesia, India, and China.

Global wealth and income inequality has been rising since the 1970s. Economic analyses, coupled with political support, and media attention, have put the issue of increasing economic inequality at the forefront of public debate. The "Occupy" protests in 2011 following the unequal recovery in the United States spread throughout Europe. The trope of "the 99% versus the 1%" became common on both sides of the Atlantic. And the widening

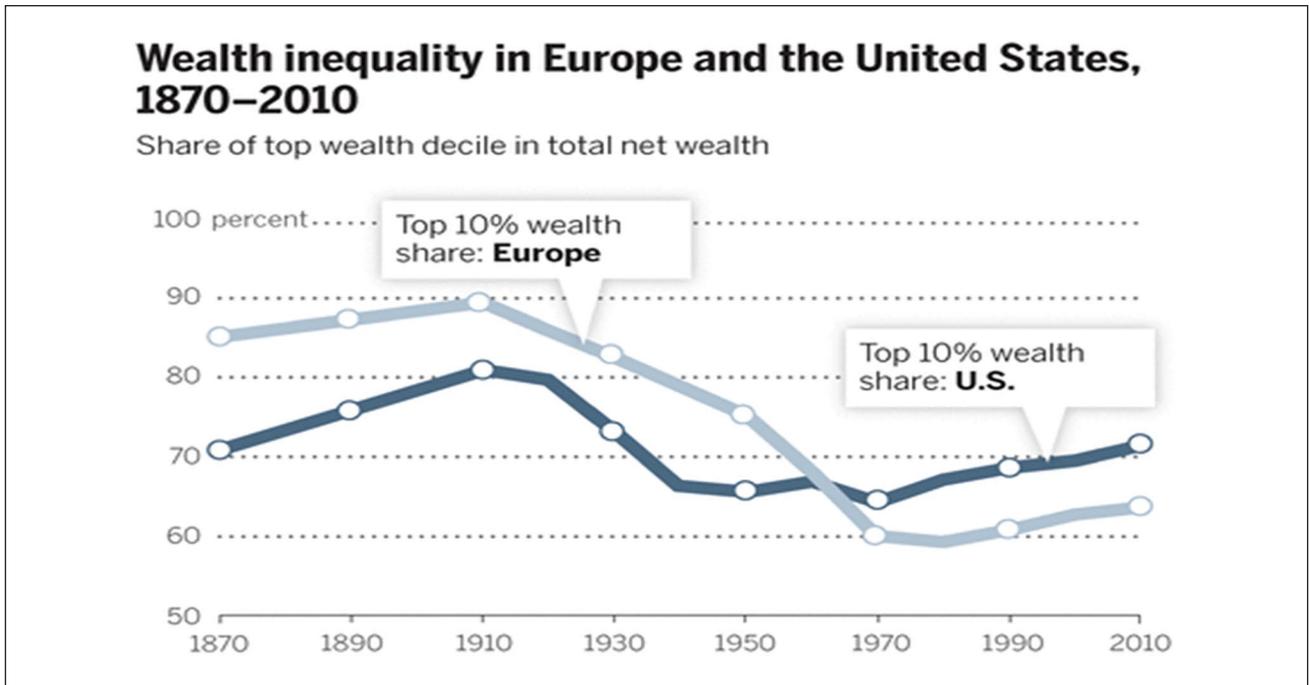


Figure 2. The graph charts private wealth distributions in Europe and the United States from 1870 to 2010. Source: Piketty and Saez (2014).

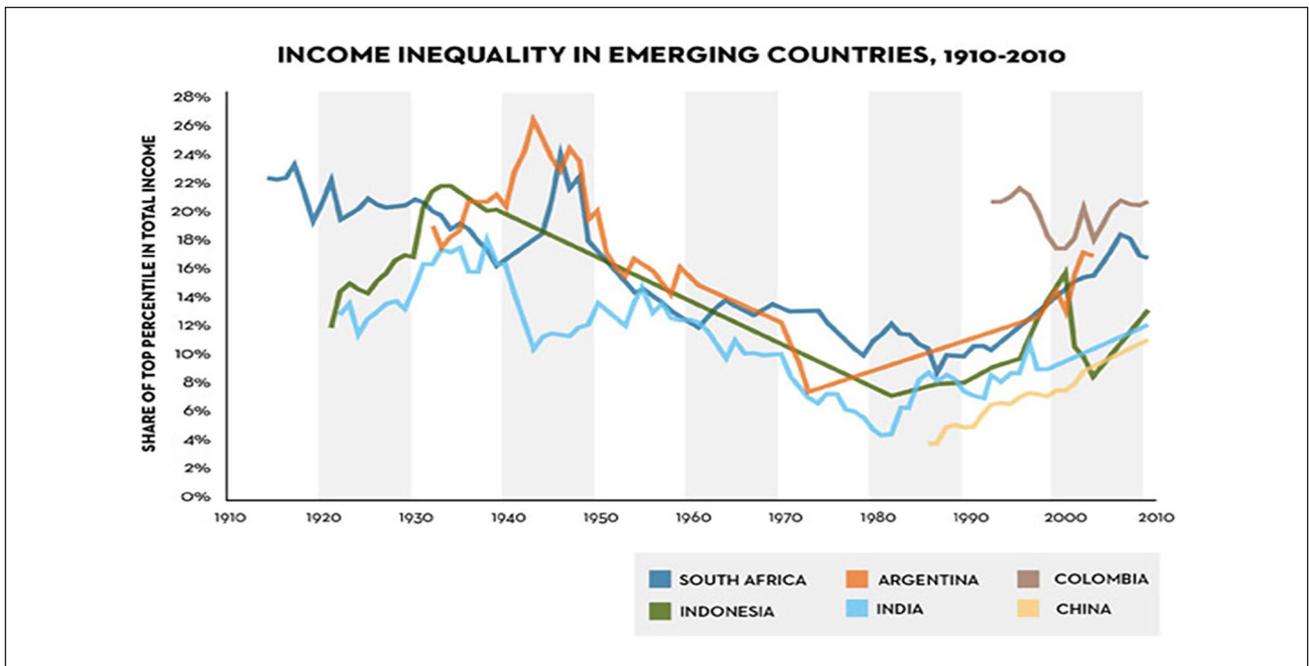


Figure 3. A U-shape curve illustrating patterns of income inequality in six emerging economies. Source: Cassidy (2014).

gap between the rich, super rich, and the ordinary worker is increasing which undermines democratic processes (Moghaddam, 2018) and increases environmental damage

(Dorling, 2018). On average, this is the wealthiest period in human history. But inequality is rising and people are unhappy. They are on the streets.

The Other Side of the Coin—A Rising Global Floor of Wealth, Income, and Access to Goods and Services

There is a clear condemnation of growing economic inequality from the political left (Atkinson, 2015; Dorling, 2014; Krugman, 2013; Moghaddam, 2018; Piketty, 2014; Power, 2017). But this narrative is contested. Figure 1 also shows income inequality in 2010 in Europe is below pre-WWI levels. Although income inequalities in Europe declined when the continent plunged in to a menacing war which aided the realignment of social power, only to increase from the 1970s, the income gap between the rich and the rest remains more equal now, than a nearly a century ago (Scheidel, 2017). The same trend for Europe holds true of wealth inequality: the top 10% of wealth owners in Europe owned 25% more wealth just before WWI than they did a century later in 2010. The trend illustrates growing income and wealth inequality since the 1970s. Figure 3 reveals rising economic inequality in the developing world, but greater levels of inequality have existed in the past.

Viewing these figures in a broader historical framework helps contextualize current debates about growing economic inequality (Pinker, 2018; Shweder, 2017). Economic inequality waxes and wanes: there is not an inevitable progression toward increased or decreased wealth and income inequality in contemporary capitalist societies (Aliber & Kindleberger, 2015; Reinhardt & Rogoff, 2009). Seen in this light, contemporary debates surrounding the rich getting richer, and the emergence of a global super rich, are problematized. This raises some questions: Is the globalization-powered growing economic inequality in Europe, the United States, and throughout the world morally wrong? Does it matter that a small minority accrue vast wealth and income compared with the majority of the world's citizens? How do people understand, and react to, rising global wealth and income, that is being unequally distributed?

Frankfurt (2015) in *On Inequality* argues income inequality is an overhyped phenomenon that is problematic; this focus deflects attention from a more serious issue: the alleviation of poverty. Frankfurt argues the disproportionate attention given to the increasing accumulation of wealth and income by a small minority of people is not as important as the absolute condition of those at the bottom, and attempts to stem this overall inequality trend mean the state of the poor is neglected. Why are people more worried about the rich and super rich than the poor? This line of thought is controversial, but important. It deflects attention from the debates surrounding rising inequality. It points attention toward rising global income and wealth, regardless of how unequally resources are distributed.

We currently live at the most prosperous point in human history (Haidt, 2015; Pinker, 2011, 2018; Roser, 2016; Rosling et al., 2018). Although countries can turn from democracies to dictatorships (Moghaddam, 2013, 2016), millions have been lifted out of poverty, global literacy rates are rising, and child mortality is decreasing (Pinker, 2018; Roser, 2016) reports based from “Our World in Data.” Some claim we live in the most peaceful time in human history in terms of physical violence (Pinker, 2011). Although we may live in a world with less direct physical violence, cultural and structural violence have arguably accelerated with increasing economic inequalities (Galtung, 1990). Still, according to some researchers, although the world is often unequal, unfair, and unjust, most people underestimate how good this contemporary epoch is in terms of reduced aggregate levels of absolute poverty, increased security, prolonged peace, more widespread democracy, and greater access to goods and services especially in relation to education and health for most people (Pinker, 2011, 2018; Rosling et al., 2018).

Throughout most of human history when compared with the present, most people were poor in material goods, there were high levels of infant mortality and a low average life expectancy, and there were far fewer formal educational options for the vast majority of people (Rosling et al., 2018). These rates of progress is impressive from a historical perspective (Pinker, 2018). Yet, this progress is not occurring evenly, or necessarily fairly, according to some (Power, 2018). But locating these inequalities within broader historical time periods is important to comprehend under what conditions can, and do, people accept or tolerate economic inequality. And under what conditions does their perception of fairness change, leading to intolerance and the possibility of protest?

The graphs at the beginning of this essay show increasing income and wealth inequality since 1970. These can be comprehended within a broader historical context. Figure 4 presents a “hockey stick” graph of increasing global prosperity.

Extreme GDP growth began in the 1800s, in the United States and Western Europe, with the development of industrial capitalism (Haidt, 2015; Smith, 1776/2000). The self-interests of the butcher, the brewer, and the baker, Smith told us, drove modern capitalism, increased wealth, incomes, and prosperity for a minority of people and was brutal for the rest.

But after several generations, as indicated in Figure 4, the GDP of Western Europe, Japan, and the United States dramatically increased, with resultant comforts for the vast majority of people in these regions. Despite global socioeconomic inequalities, social injustices, and detrimental damage to the environment, adversely affecting poorer people some researchers predict, and work toward,

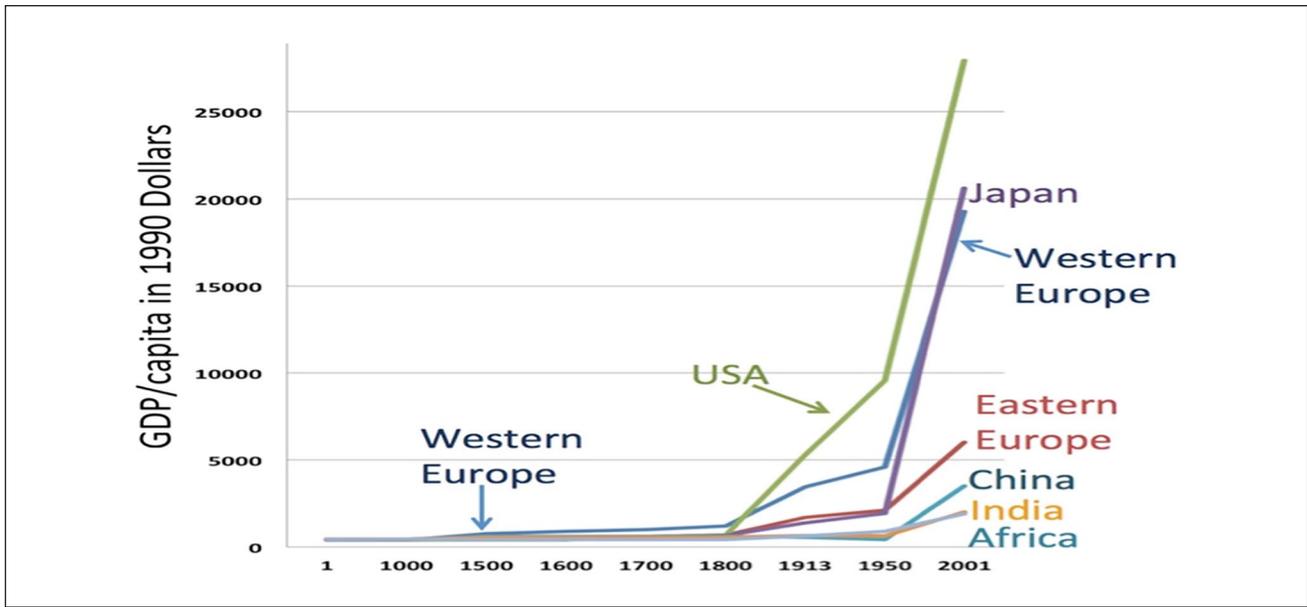


Figure 4. Measure of historical growth of per capita GDP.

Source: D. Thompson (2012).

Note: It is based on Angus Maddison data. This graph was also featured in Haidt (2015). It is adjusted for inflation. GDP = gross domestic product.

a continuation of a global trend that lifted hundreds of millions out of abject poverty over a short historical period (see Haidt, 2015; Pinker, 2018; Sachs, 2005). From this point of view, in the near future, citizens of emerging economies in Africa, China, India, and Eastern Europe could enjoy higher living standards than present due to responsible globalization and fairer international trade.

Perceptions of what is, and is not, considered fair economic development lies at the heart of whether people accept and tolerate aggregate, yet unequal, growth, or, whether they think it is unfair, grow frustrated, and engage in democratic activities, including protesting, in an effort to modulate this trend (Power, 2018; Starmans et al., 2017).

Psychological Perceptions About the Fairness of Economic Disparities

Experimental social psychological evidence suggests people want more equal, but not fully equal, distributions of income (Hagerty & Norton, 2018; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Power, 2018b, 2018c; Tyler, 2011). These findings have implications for comprehending the conditions under which people accept or reject economic inequality. These findings are also related to the economic concept of Pareto efficiency. This is a formulation of allocation from which it is impossible to distribute resources so as to make any one person better off without making one other person worse off. The concept is therefore used to determine when the allocation of economic resources—wealth and income—is

optimal. A distribution is not optimal if income and wealth can be more evenly distributed to improve the lives of one person without adversely affecting another person's well-being. People do not want a completely even distribution of economic resources. They want fairer distribution of economic resources.

Norton and Ariely (2011) examined idealized, actual, and perceived wealth inequality. They found their respondents underestimated the actual level of wealth inequality in the United States. Moreover, when detailing their idealized wealth distributions, study participants described a far more equal state of affairs than their estimates of actual inequality in the United States. Some inequality is preferable. But not as much as those currently in the United States.

The authors discuss four reasons why people in the United States are not demanding greater wealth equality. Their results indicate people are unaware of the reality of wealth inequality; people maintain the status quo because of a belief in social mobility within the United States; socioeconomic groups disagree about how best to curb economic inequality; and people often vote against their self-interests.

Further work develops these insights. People in the United States seem to tolerate economic inequality because they have a deeply ingrained cultural belief in the American dream: people can move up the economic ladder and be financially successful regardless of their starting point (Davidai, 2018; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). These findings are supported by cross-cultural research which demonstrates a belief in social mobility leads

people to tolerate economic inequality (Shariff et al., 2016). Moreover, people systematically misperceive changes in inequality in their country over time (Hauser & Norton, 2017). Laurin et al. (2013) find people are more likely to tolerate inequalities when they perceive the systems in which they are embedded as legitimate and unchanging. These (mis)perceptions of inequality—over and above actual inequality—can drive preferences for redistributive policies. Perceived inequality can be a better predictor of policy preferences than actual inequality (Engelhardt & Wagener, 2014; Niehues, 2014). As a result of the influence of perceived inequality, people's opinions about redistributive policies can be altered with interventions that change the salience of inequality (Card et al., 2012; Cruces et al., 2013; DeCelles & Norton, 2017; Kuziemko et al., 2015).

In sum, experimental social psychological evidence suggests people are misinformed about economic inequality. These (mis)perceptions help explain the status quo: how and why people might accept and even justify economic inequality in their societies. The research suggests some level of inequality is fair and justifiable. This is why it is tolerated, people are inert, and the status quo is maintained, and helps explain why social movements due to economic inequality do not galvanize.

Fairness might be a universal moral foundation (Haidt, 2012, 2015; Huppert et al., 2019; Shweder, 2003) that is evident in humans and non-humans (Brosnan & de Waal, 2003, 2014) and from early childhood (Bloom, 2012). But perceptions of fairness vary across both time and culture (Haidt, 2001; Shweder, 1991, 2003).

One important distinction in determining whether economic inequality is considered fair lies in understanding how people view distributive and procedural justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Distributive justice is concerned with the allocation of resources, such as wealth and income, between people. Procedural justice is concerned with the processes through which distribution occurs. People evaluate institutions, such as their economic systems, in terms of procedural rather than distributive justice (Tyler, 2011). This helps to explain why Pareto optimality is not realized. If the procedure by which the distribution occurs is deemed fair, there is less motivation for civic discontent, regardless of how unequal wealth or income distribution actually is. This phenomenon is not localized to the U.S. context. Rising economic inequality in developing nations can be accepted or resisted. Cultural cognitions, steeped in historically ingrained, institutionally and legally legitimized, political, legal, social, and moral contexts influence whether people accept or reject their positions within nations experiencing rapid economic growth, and (re-) emergent economic inequality (Chua, 2004). How far can the processes of globalization disproportionately increase

income and wealth before tolerance turns to social action, either democratic, or violent?

The Political Consequences of Economic Inequality

The interaction between the two narratives of economic growth is a fundamental driving force, which has taken humanity to unprecedented levels, but more needs to be done for continued economic growth and the fairer and more responsible distribution of economic resources. Modulation takes the form of democratic engagement: perceptions of unfair distribution of economic goods can be highlighted by discourse and demonstrations aimed at effecting policies to alter the accumulation of wealth and income in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. This modulation can be considered within democratic countries more easily because protests can be more openly documented. Although mass movements occur in dictatorships, in democracies there is more freedom of speech and assembly than in dictatorships (Moghaddam, 2013, 2016; Popper, 1966; Power, 2018a). One important manifestation of democratic engagement and civic discontent is street protests (Moscovici, 1986; Power, 2017, 2018c; Reicher & Stott, 2011; E. P. Thompson, 1971; Warren & Power, 2015).

The collapse of the global economy in 2008 highlighted problems with globalization, financial systems, and the experiences of regular citizens within these shifting and unequal economic systems. Citizens in several countries, including Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, protested the implementation of austerity following the 2008 economic crash. But this was just one phenomenon. Unfairness with the distribution of wealth, income, and economic resources was a factor in other global uprisings, revolts, and political turmoil. A Tunisian market worker self-immolated in response to police confiscation of his wares (among other grievances), helping to trigger civic unrest through North Africa and the Middle East known as the Arab Spring (Awad & Wagoner, 2018). Dictators in this region fell, only to return in other forms (Moghaddam, 2016, 2018; Wagoner et al., 2018). *Occupy Wall Street* protests started in 2011 in the United States in response to the “99%–1%” disparities, and spread to Europe. In the runup to the 2014 football World Cup, street protests occurred in Brazil, aimed at highlighting economic inequalities, government corruption, and the plight of ordinary workers who were being exploited and glossed over as the country presented its best possible face to the global public. Venezuelans protested in 2016, sometimes violently, due to harsh economic conditions on large proportions of the population who felt the government was corrupt and was squandering the country's natural resources. In spring, 2018, young Nicaraguans

protested the proposed introduction of social welfare cutbacks, during a period of economic growth. The protests turned violent, as government forces cracked down on initially peaceful demonstrations. The “Yellow Vest” movement in France occurred during a period of economic growth that was not experienced fairly from the point of view of ordinary workers who were hit with a new tax on fuel. People in Sudan revolted in 2019 when the government increased taxes on bread and fuel during a period of economic growth. Also in 2019, street protests ensued in India when the price of onions increased; in Chile when the government increased the cost of using the subway; in Iran when the price of gas was raised. Similarly, in Ireland, people protested against neoliberal government privatization policies during a period of stark economic growth when a new charge on water was introduced that was perceived to unfairly target regular citizens (Power, 2018c). These increases in the cost of living for regular citizens act as symbolic tipping points that help justify and galvanize protests. Although we live in the most peaceful, wealthiest, and prosperous time in human history, we simultaneously live in the age of economic inequality, manifesting in rallies, riots, and revolutions.

Protest, as a Democratic Process, Can Modulate the Distribution of Economic Resources

Protest is just one of a number of democratic activities that can be used to effect sociopolitical change. Voting, lobbying, signing petitions, legislating, are all conventional forms of democratic engagement. Leaking of sensitive materials, such as the Panama Papers, which revealed some of the depth of offshore tax havens, is another. But protest has a long history of association with the potential for political change (de Tocqueville, 1857/1955; Le Bon, 1903/2002; Power, 2014, 2017; E. P. Thompson, 1971). More contemporary work highlights the dynamics of demonstrations and the behaviors of protesters as they seek to effect social and political change (Drury & Reicher, 2018; Lewis et al., 2011; Reicher, 1984; Reicher & Stott, 2011; Warren & Power, 2015).

Protest has a special role as a challenge to the legitimacy of the current system. Yet classical theories tend to pathologize individual protesters in the crowd to delegitimize the grievances and frustrations of demonstrators (Le Bon, 1903/2002; Moscovici, 1986; Reicher, 1984; van Ginneken, 1992). More contemporary psychological theories highlight the roles of socially embedded agentic individuals and groups. For example, the elaborated social identity model examines the micropsychological interactions between protesters and police that can lead to rioting (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Stott & Reicher, 2011). The social identity model of collective action highlights how individual and

group identity impacts support for protest (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Both identity-based theories omit an explicit temporal and ontological approach to understanding the genesis and proliferation of social movements in localized socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Moreover, little consideration is given to the impact globalization processes have in shaping group and individual psychologies within these dynamic cultural contexts. Major theories of social movements in sociology (e.g., Davies, 1962; Stouffer et al., 1949) tend to consider the temporal and ontological dimensions of protest (see Shultziner & Goldberg, 2019 for a review of “stage-like” developments of social movements). However, these sociological theories often neglect a comprehension of individual and group psychology. The substance of how people think, feel, and act is largely absent from these sociological models. It is important to understand the temporal unfolding of protest, and other forms of civic discontent, within broader historical, cultural, economic, political, and legal conditions. Democratic engagement is not abstract; it unfolds in shifting contexts that are at once new, yet bound to the past, with implications for the future. The shortcomings of previous models motivate the need of the *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* to comprehend the generation and proliferation of social movements on individual, social, cultural, and developmental levels as people orientate within their subjective economic and political realities.

In the following sections I draw on cultural psychological approaches to delineate this new theory of social movements. Remembering, deprivation, and imagining are proposed as three interconnected cultural psychological processes that inform feelings of frustration and the development of social protests to modulate perceived unfairness of economic development. Collective remembering of the past informs how people comprehend the present. Feelings of deprivation relative to other individuals or social groups helps account for how people orientate their opinions, attitudes, feelings, and actions. As such it informs whether people think issues like increasing economic inequality are fair or not, and whether they will demonstrate when they feel inequality is unfair. Finally, the psychology of imagination provides a framework for thinking about how people conceptualize the future, how they think it could be, and how a moral future could, and should, be created. Visions of the future impact how we act in the present. It is informed by how people remember, and use, the past. Taken together, remembering, feelings of deprivation, and imagining provide a more comprehensive theory of social movements, that overcomes the limitations of previous psychological and sociological theories, by both developing a temporal account and by highlighting the economic, historical, cultural, and global context in which feelings of deprivation, frustration, and unfairness are experienced and comprehended on individual and group levels.

The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* predicts remembering, imagining, and feeling relatively deprived, or unfairly treated, underlie all economic protest movements. The theory also predicts that as globalization continues—with the world becoming richer, yet more unequal, people's memories of what was, and their imaginings of what might be, will inform whether feelings of fairness and deprivation relative to others will be experienced in the present. There is an infinite looping between remembering the past and imagining the future, that will always lead to civic discontent, if a wealthier world is simultaneously an unfairly unequal world.

These propositions are novel and potentially provocative. To my knowledge, no existing theory integrates diverse social scientific literatures, encompassing experimental social psychology, ethnographic and cultural psychological research, and historical economic analyses, and draws the same conclusion. Regardless of global levels of income and wealth, people will compare their lot to others within the nuances of their shifting historical, economic, political, and cultural contexts and will protest if their expectations of fairness are violated to modulate this frustration. No preexisting psychological or sociological theory predicts this important global phenomenon which should be essential for psychologists and social scientists to comprehend to help generate fairer, more equal, democratic societies.

The Infinity Theory of Social Movements

In this section, I first present a diagram to visualize the theory. I then discuss the basic components of the *Infinity Theory of Social Movements*. In the following sections, I discuss the literature on collective remembering, relative deprivation, and collective imagining in more depth. I briefly illustrate how this model can be utilized. I apply it to comprehend why Irish people protested during a period of rapid economic growth from 2015.

It is useful to conceptualize remembering and imagining like the lines in an infinity symbol. There is a continuous looping from the past to the future, and back again, always converging on the focal point (the present) in the center. Such an elaboration does not imply symmetry regarding the equal weight both the past and future have on appraisals, perceptions, thoughts, and actions in the present. Rather, the metaphor is meant to illustrate the continuous temporal interconnections between remembering and imagining and the impact these dual processes have on making comparisons and subsequent appraisals relative to salient others in the present, as well as how the past and future is understood and used to orientate in the present.

Figure 5 demonstrates that as the world becomes wealthier, but with gains in wealth and income being experienced unequally, the mechanism modulating whether feelings of

discontent are experienced lie in people's perception of whether economic inequality is deemed fair or unfair. Dual economic narratives—represented by the concentric circles—illustrate rises in both the global floor of aggregate wealth and prosperity, and also economic inequality. However, the psychological component—represented by the infinity symbol—illustrates how people appraise their individual, and collective, experiences within these two conflicting economic narratives. How people remember their past, and imagine their future, within these two economic narratives, informs perceptions of fairness, and feelings of frustration and deprivation in relation to salient others. In a globalizing world, who is salient to whom is shifting beyond localities. People often present an idealized version of themselves to others (Goffman, 1956). Technology and ease of travel make previously unimagined groups and lifestyles more concrete and comparable. These distorted representations of others can lead people to feel deprived in comparison (Jindra, 2014; Shweder & Power, 2013). Individual and group comparisons underlie whether feelings of deprivation are experienced. Civic unrest will increase when violations of fairness are experienced, regardless of actual levels of high or low economic equality. In the following three sections I review literature on the three psychological components of the *Infinity Theory*: collective remembering, relative deprivation, and collective imagining. I then illustrate the utility of the theory to understand an economic social movement in Ireland.

Collective Remembering

The ways in which people remember the past have implications for how they act in the present (Bartlett, 1932; de Saint-Laurent, 2018; Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Hirst & Manier, 2008; Power, 2015, 2016, 2017; Wagoner, 2017; Wertsch, 1997, 2008; Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). Wertsch (1997) argued memory is done in a group, not by a group. People in the present do not simply recall a linear version of cultural history. Rather, they exhibit agency. They remember a version of the past. And in this way, remembering is linked to identity. Collective remembering imbues both individuals and groups with a sense of identity and ways of thinking and behaving in the present. Collective memories are shared individual memories that help shape collective identity (Hirst & Manier, 2008; Wang, 2008). Collective memory is constructed using culturally shared narrative templates. These are frameworks for recalling the past but are elaborated upon in the present in light of novel and emerging circumstances (Wertsch, 2008). Therefore, remembering is a dynamic sociocultural process done by individuals who are embedded within social and cultural groups. Memory is used in the present and orientates groups and individuals toward future action. Who remembers the past, why, and when, are pertinent questions. And

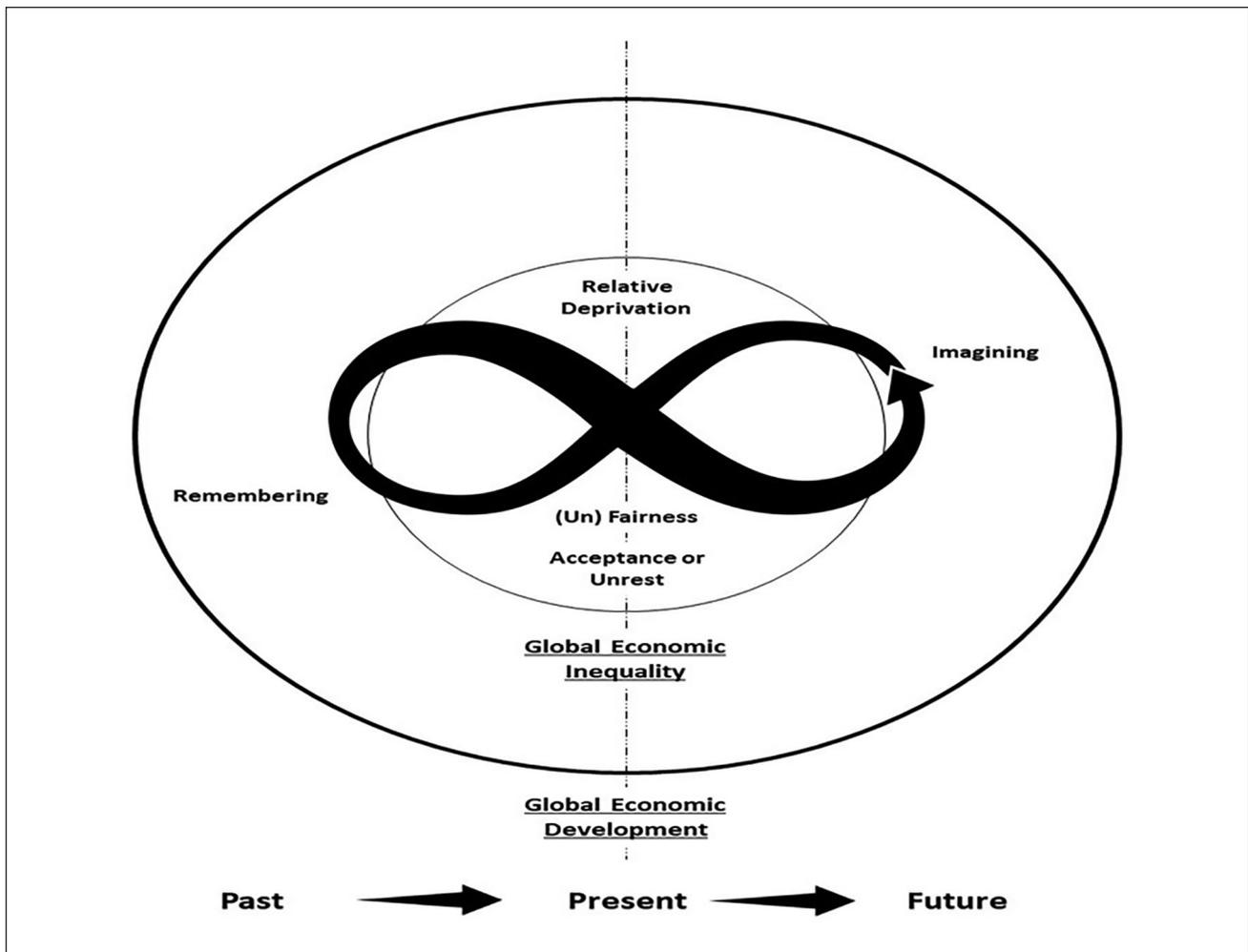


Figure 5. The infinity theory of social movements.

Note. Remembering and imagining inform feelings of unfairness and relative deprivation in the present, in the context of aggregate, though unequal, economic growth, leading to the potential for civic unrest and social movements.

the answers are potentially controversial (Jovchelovitch, 2006; Märtsin et al., 2011; Power, 2013, 2018c; Wagoner & Brescó, 2016). For example, who is identified as either the victims or perpetrators of violent conflict depends on who is recalling and narrating the past (Brescó, 2009; Hammack, 2011). This is because cultural groups, in unique social positions, often vie with one another about legitimate ways of interpreting the past. Remembering versions of the past, whether accurate or inaccurate, inform feelings in the present, and thoughts about the future. Remembering can inform feelings of relative deprivation, frustration, and perceptions of (un)fairness in the present (Power, 2018a).

Relative Deprivation

Relative deprivation theory predicts that when an individual or group compares itself to salient individuals or groups,

and during this comparison, finds itself lacking, discriminated against, or disadvantaged, this leads to angry frustration (Crosby, 1976; Czaika & de Haas, 2012; Pettigrew, 2015, 2016; Power, 2018a, 2018b; Runciman, 1966; Smith et al., 2012; Walker & Pettigrew, 1984). Despite an abundance of recent social scientific research, relative deprivation is not just a contemporary phenomenon. It was a long history ranging from Aristotle's discussion of this topic in politics; to similar views expressed by Marx; developed in the French context by de Tocqueville; and formalized as relative deprivation in a study of promotion rates in the U.S. army (see Davies, 1971; Pettigrew, 2016). From this early social scientific theorizing, Davies (1962) generalized that revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a brief period of economic and social decline. This theory highlighted the temporal component of relative deprivation and the generation of frustration. Revolutions

often occur when a social group's expectations of their economic or social status increases, but these increasing expectations go unfulfilled. This hypothesis aligns with experimental social psychological insights indicating people focus more heavily on financial losses than gains (Thaler et al., 1997; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991).

The types of comparisons people make, to whom and why; feelings of perceived disadvantage; and the possible manifestation of this frustration, all depend on the wider historical, cultural, social, economic, and legal contexts and how these are orientated to, understood, interpreted, remembered, and imagined. However, this contextual and temporal account is often neglected in mainstream social psychological approaches and methodologies used to understand relative deprivation and appraisals of fairness. These contemporary iterations and investigations of the theory tend to be decontextualized from dynamic and unfolding sociocultural, political, and economic realities. They are supported by experimental studies that further separate epistemological knowledge from real world applications (see review article by Pettigrew, 2015). The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* moves beyond reductionist and static theory of relative deprivation by drawing on cultural psychological theorizing.

The cultural psychological tradition provides theoretical frameworks to move beyond the basic relative deprivation and to articulate the premises and propositions of a more comprehensive theory of social movements that occur due to perceptions of economic development. This oeuvre suggests there are psychological universals—all people want, feel, think, act, desire, and judge right and wrong—but these universals manifest in localized contexts over time (Cassaniti & Menon, 2017; Shweder, 1991, 2003). Cultural and moral norms, informed by history and economics, made explicit in laws and institutions, inform the manifestation, if any, of cognitions and behaviors. This has implications for developing relative deprivation theory.

First, comparison groups are always bound in shifting contexts. Who compares whom to who is a matter of understanding the context in which comparisons are made (Power, 2018c). Second, the manifestation of angry frustration also depends on the wider context. On a collective level, in more open democracies, for example, protest is legal and can be made manifest in unfolding social, political, legal, economic contexts (Moghaddam, 2016; Power, 2018c). In contrast, more closed societies, such as dictatorships (Moghaddam, 2013; Popper, 1966), can prohibit peaceful assembly. And third, on an individual level, angry frustration might have different manifestations, such as antisocial behavior, crime, or mental illness (Pettigrew, 2016).

Collective action, in the form of rallies, riots, and revolutions, requires conditions beyond individual frustration to materialize (Warren & Power, 2015). Collective

remembering helps account for intergroup comparisons in the present (Power, 2018a). Imagining the future also impacts comparisons made in the present and appraisals of fairness relative to others and the potential for frustration.

The Psychology of Imagination

Peoples imagination of the future is used to guide action (Power, 2018a; Vygotsky, 1931; Wagoner et al., 2017; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015, 2018). Imagination can be defined as an experiential break from the here-and-now of immediate and proximal stimuli (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). It can be triggered by the creation of ruptures on an individual or social level, by boredom or overstimulation, by a need to generate novelty to progress in the present, or by voluntary uncoupling where one purposefully creates space to imagine. The process of imagining can also be shaped by a range of societal processes including how manifestations of imagination are recognized, and responded to, by others. As such, imagining is a multifaceted and core cultural psychological process (Power, 2018b; Vygotsky, 1931; Wagoner et al., 2017; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015, 2018).

Individual projections of the future, steeped in historical, social, economic, cultural, and legal contexts, impact human development on individual and collective levels. Escaping the fears and anxieties of the past and present motivates people to first conceptualize the future, and then try to actualize it (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). The perception of unfair, unjust, or immoral developments in societies can have real consequences for the generation of social movements aimed at mitigating perceived unfairness (Power, 2018a).

Imagining the future can also have unintended consequences (Merton, 1936). The gaps between what is, what can, should, and will be, are difficult to anticipate. This is because there are as many imaginings of the future as there are people imagining. In this way, individual imagining of collective futures, much like collective remembering of the past, is a contested phenomenon. But imagination, as a process occurring in individuals and collectives, opens the possibility for social change, creates pathways to effect agency, and constructs routes toward alternative societies, ways of life, justice, and the fairer distribution of economic goods (de Saint-Laurent et al., 2018).

Imagining the future informs people's comparisons and therefore informs feelings of relative deprivation in the present. Imagining alternative future societies can galvanize social movements (e.g., Moghaddam et al., 2012; Power, 2018a). Reference groups are not necessarily within physical boundaries. Salient groups can be online or imagined. The proliferation of technology, and social media, presents distorted visions of people's actual lives

to others. In this way, lifestyles can be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or idealized beyond actuality (Jindra, 2014; Power, 2018c; Shweder & Power, 2013). Despite, or because of, such inaccuracies, these imagined other social realities could potentially create angry frustration (Power, 2018c). The manifestation of rising expectations—either realized, partially, in full, or not at all, depends on broader contextual issues. These include how comparisons are comprehended and whether they are appraised to be fair or not. People use the past and the future to sculpt their subjective realities in the present.

This temporal aspect of human activity—remembering, relating, and imagining—provides a framework for conceptualizing social movements. This allows one to think about the motivations behind, justifications for, and projections of, demonstrations, democratic engagement, and social change. Specifically, the theory illustrates how protesters galvanize and maintain these movements, how people explain, justify, and legitimize their involvement within these protest movements, and ultimately how people try to achieve social, economic, political and legal aims by taking to the streets to modulate perceived economic inequality. The development of social movements to modulate feelings of perceived unfairness and frustration due to relative deprivation experienced in democracies (and dictatorships) due to unequal gains caused by globalized capitalism has implications for how we understand social movements; the temporal nature of human development; and the creation of fairer and more democratic societies.

As an example, the *Infinity Theory* can be used to examine the complex and dynamic context that unfolded in Ireland during the 2008–2016 economic recession and recovery. The *Deprivation–Protest Paradox* is the observation as the economy collapsed in Ireland in 2008 people passively accepted harsh austerity, but yet, when Ireland had the fastest growing economy in Europe in 2014 and 2015 there were mass demonstrations, clashes with police, a refusal to register to pay a new charge on water, and other forms of civic unrest (Power, 2018, 2018a, 2018b; Power & Nussbaum, 2016). Previous research examined the cultural and moral psychological reasons for maintenance of the status quo without street protests in Ireland when the economy collapsed in 2008 (Power, 2015, 2016; Power & Nussbaum, 2014).

The Irish economy began an objective economic recovery beginning in 2012 (Fitzgerald, 2014; Honohan, 2014). By 2015 Ireland had the fastest growing economy in Europe but mass demonstrations were galvanized by the introduction of a new charge on water in the context of aggregate and objective economic recovery which people expected to benefit from (Power, 2018c). In this context, I discovered the importance of collective remembering and imagining to feelings of deprivation during hundreds of interviews with

demonstrators at a series of national and local antiwater-charge protests.

Interview respondents were aware of an objective economic recovery but were not feeling the benefits of it in their everyday lives. They deemed this unfair. They felt relatively deprived in relation to salient others in Irish society—politicians, property owners, and the 1%—who they represented as benefiting disproportionately and unfairly during the economic boom. Those protesting had suffered harsh austerity as the economy collapsed in 2008 and expected to reap the benefits during the upturn from 2014. Instead, other groups in Irish society, not those who were protesting, reaped the rewards of a booming economy. Demonstrators drew on the past to make sense of the present. They told me about instances in Irish history where Irish people overcame previous socioeconomic injustices. They said antiwater-charge protests were a continuation of previous struggles against unfair and uncaring governments. In this way, they remembered the past to motivate and justify protest in the present. Moreover, they imagined a future to also galvanize and explain protest in the present. Interviewees explained if they didn't protest in the present there would be full privatization of all water services in Ireland in the future to the detriment of ordinary Irish people. Imagining increased neoliberalism in Ireland, especially in relation to essential water services, was used by protesters to highlight the unfairness of the current sociopolitical and economic zeitgeist. If protest did not take place, according to demonstrators, there would be greater deprivation in the future: powerful, wealthy people, would privatize water services which would be devastating for ordinary citizens. Similar processes occurred in Irish history: a collective memory of previous injustices, and social movements aimed at overcoming these, were used to inform, clarify, motivate, and justify, feelings of unfairness and deprivation in the present and subsequent protests to mitigate these perceived injustices. Importantly, while remembering and imagining in these ways, no protesters I spoke to alluded to how good their living standards were overall in the broader historical context of economic development in Ireland. Instead, the focus was on emerging unfair economic inequality and unjust manifestations related to it, rather than a contextualization of these inequalities in the broader context of Irish economic development and the raising of economic, educational, and living standards for the vast majority of people in a previously, and relatively recently, poor country.

The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements*, therefore, can be utilized and extended by ethnographic research on the development of economic demonstrations in a variety of contexts as they unfold over time. Specific predictions, derived from ecologically formulated hypotheses, can be tested with experimental methods (Power et al., 2018c; Power & Velez, in press). The Irish case points to potential

similarities in other salient protest movements. France, Chile, and Sudan all experienced mass social movements in 2019 due to economic concerns. The GDP per capita (a key indicator living standards) was increasing in these locations when their governments increased tax on fuel, subway fares, and bread, respectively. An application of the *Infinity Theory* to explain why people protest in localized contexts during periods of economic growth needs to be sensitive to the temporal unfolding of feelings of unfairness and relative deprivation that are informed by people's understandings and recollections of the past and their expectations for, and imaginings of, the future. In each of these countries, economic indicators suggested an increased rising floor of wealth and prosperity, yet people were not focusing on increased living standards, but on unfair gains, and growing inequality, in relation to salient others.

Conclusion: Predicting, and Mitigating, Violent Protest in a Globalized World

The world is simultaneously becoming wealthier and more economically unequal (Atkinson, 2015; Chin & Culotta, 2014; Dorling, 2014; Moghaddam, 2018; Oxfam, 2016, 2017; Piketty, 2014; Piketty & Saez, 2014; Pinker, 2018; Roser, 2016; Rosling et al., 2018). People do not require, or want, even distribution of economic resources (Norton & Ariely, 2011; Power, 2018c; Starmans et al., 2017; Tyler, 2011). They want equity, not parity (Davidai, 2018; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). However, the ways in which people understand and experience dual narratives of unequal economic growth—rather than the material benefits bestowed, or not, by these economic trends—is fundamental to understand whether people tolerate unequal gains or whether this tolerance gives way to civic discontent. This is because cultural and psychological processes underlie economic trends (Banfield, 1958; Harrison, 1985; Harrison & Huntington, 2000; Jindra, 2014; Landes, 1999; Power, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Power & Nussbaum, 2014, 2016; Shweder, 2000, 2017; Weber, 1905/2009).

The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* overcomes limitations of previous theories of protest movements and offers a temporal account of processes of civic discontent, steeped in social and cultural psychological theorizing, to understand under what conditions people tolerate economic inequality and economic hardship and under what conditions tolerance gives way to civic discontent. The theory predicts as the global floor of wealth and access to goods and services increases, people's expectations increase, and an inability to meet these expectations violates feelings of fairness. Expectations and imaginings of what life should, or will be, like in the future are informed and curtailed by the culturally specific ways in which people remember the past. The theory also predicts continuous waxing and waning of social movements as the world gets

richer, but expectations of unfairness regarding the distributing of these economic goods, is violated. People do not, and will not, simply respond to objective economic conditions. They respond to their subjective experiences—informed by remembering, relating, and imagining—and what they think those mean. Despite aggregate increases illustrated in the hockey stick graph in Figure 4, people will always protest to modulate unfairness. This might be particularly visible in non-Western parts of the world, as economic and technological changes shift expectations for how life is, and ought to be.

Democracies and dictatorships will experience rallies, riots, and revolutions, to mitigate injustices, hardships, and feelings of unfairness. The direction of social movements—whether peaceful or violent—is controlled by how governments, and their agents, respond to their citizens' complaints about feeling frustration, discontent, and unfairly treated (Cornish, 2012; Moghaddam, 2013, 2016). Voting, lobbying, and peaceful assembly in democracies act as a safety valve to release pressure felt by citizens and is a manifestation of an effort to modulate unfairness caused by economic growth that is experienced unequally. Protests turn violent when too much pressure builds up and the safety valve that maintains a sense of equilibrium bursts (Drury & Reicher, 2018; Lewis et al., 2011; Power, 2017, 2018c; Reicher, 1984; Reicher & Stott, 2011; E. P. Thompson, 1971; Warren & Power, 2015).

Remembering, imagining, and feeling deprived have long histories in the social sciences (Bartlett, 1932; Czaika & de Haas, 2012; Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Hirst & Manier, 2008; Pettigrew, 2015, 2016; Power, 2015, 2016, 2017; Runciman, 1966; Vygotsky, 1931; Wagoner, 2017; Wagoner et al., 2017; Walker & Pettigrew, 1984; Wertsch, 1997, 2008; Wertsch & Roediger, 2008; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015, 2018). The combination of these processes, and their application to how people understand two broad narratives of economic development, is a novel application, aimed at understanding the ways in which people experience and comprehend the economic systems in which they live. Experimental social psychological findings illustrate some conditions under which people tolerate economic inequality. The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* moves beyond this, to create a framework to further examine, using multiple methodologies across the social sciences that are capable of capturing unfolding and dynamic psychological processes, the ways in which people tolerate economic inequality and hardship, and when a tipping point is reached, and tolerance gives way to civic discontent and mass demonstrations.

Some believe we live in the most peaceful and prosperous time in human history (Pinker, 2011, 2018; Rosling et al., 2018). Simultaneously, we live in an age of socioeconomic inequalities and multitiered and prolonged social movements. Sociocultural and developmental

psychological accounts are needed to comprehend how people orientate in, and toward, the economic systems in which they are embedded. The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* outlines a blueprint that is simultaneously negative and positive. It is negative because it predicts a continuation of unfairness. The theoretical ideas (in contrast to the personal beliefs of the author) might be used by powerful political or corporate elites to manage expectations and frustrations to tamp down social unrest. However, the theory is also optimistic because it offers a pathway to understand social movements to achieve more fairness and greater levels of democracy in future societies by people engaging in effective collective action. The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* is intended to highlight an important global problem and offers an expansive psychological model to work toward mitigating this problem.

The psychological processes involved with globalization, economic growth, and the accumulation of wealth necessitate greater attention from social psychologists. The reviewed economic literature, and its conceptualization as two opposing narratives, coupled with the review of social psychological research on perceptions of economic inequality, illustrate the connections between these disciplines. A cultural psychological approach allows for an examination of contextual and temporal factors that orientate people's expectations, appraisals of fairness, and perceptions of deprivation within the economic systems in which they are embedded. Recent economic protests, and prolonged anti-government social movements, in Brazil, Chile, France, India, Ireland, Nicaragua, North Africa, Sudan, Venezuela, and other global regions, highlight the real need for such an elaborated comprehension of the psychological processes underpinning culturally specific social movements. Increased globalization and the proliferation of free-market capitalism throughout the world will generate increased economic growth. The world will become richer. Left unchecked, this economic growth will lead to increased economic inequality. Psychologists need to pay closer attention to the broader global dynamics in which social movements and protests develop to modulate this unfair economic development. The *Infinity Theory of Social Movements* offers a framework to begin thinking through these global issues and how they manifest at individual and group levels.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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