

REINVENTING INTERNATIONALISM AGAINST CONSERVATIVE NATIONALISM

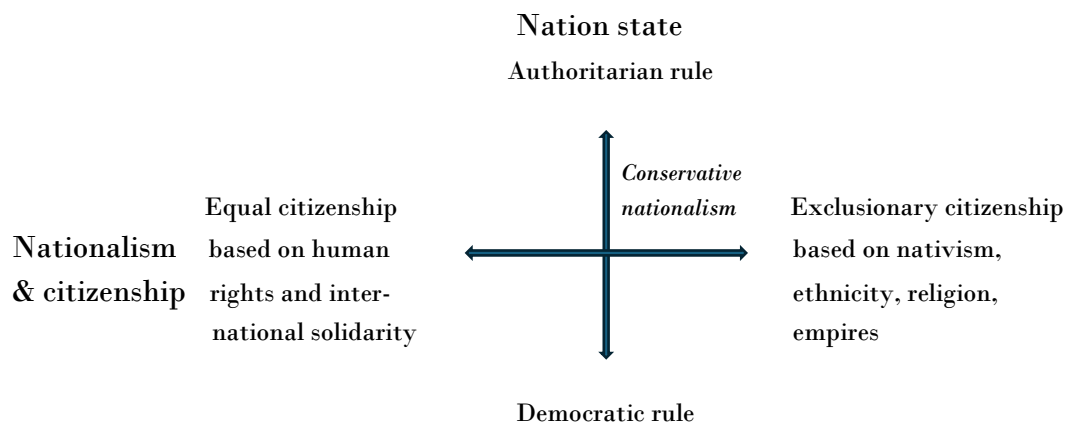
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The times they are a-changing

After World War II, the Allies agreed on a new world order through the United Nations and related institutions. It would be based on international law, human rights and other common rules of the world politics game. The aims were to prevent wars, rebuild and democratise Europe, dismantle centuries of colonialism, and foster global development. Much was certainly distorted by Washington's domination regarding the global economic order, including in the Bretton Woods conference. And there were additional twists during the Cold War and later neoliberalism. But today the framework as such has been abandoned throughout, in favour of conservative nationalism. Conservative nationalism, that is, characterised by the autocratic rule of nations and subjects, delineated by historical empires, race and culture. Led by strongmen like Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, along with counterparts in the global South such as Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi, tech-oligarchs in need of state-protection such as Elon Musk, and like-minded actors in 'civilized Europe' including Italy's Giorgia Meloni, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, *Front National* in France, Reform UK in Britain, and *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, to mention a few.

Figure 1: Nation state, nationalism/citizenship and conservative nationalism



The former social democratic strongholds in Scandinavia are no exception. In Sweden, the conservative nationalist party *Sverigedemokraterna* – with its undisputable roots in fascism and Nazism, and, moreover, supported by more than one-fifth of the electorate, provides indispensable support to the current rightist minority government. Moreover, as elsewhere, there are three major inconclusive responses to the rise of the nationalist reaction. The centre-leftist leaders have retreated from independent internationalist policies in favour of Nato priorities and adjustment to conservative nationalist policies on crime, migration and refugees, balancing this with some welfare measures for ‘proper citizens’. The marginalised Greens confine themselves to the issue of climate crisis and, like the few remaining principled liberals, the quest for human rights and international cooperation, but without a supportive socio-political agenda. Finally, several anti-imperial leftists and peace activists still claim that the current ‘strongmen’ and autocratisation is entirely because of the US economic, military and political hegemony after World War II, which has not changed much even if now spearheaded by Donald Trump, and therefore tend to deem the enemies of their worst enemy their friends – primarily Xi but to some extent also Putin and the likes. Are there no signs of more balanced and hopeful resistance?

Dissenting voices

There are! Let me report on a recent Scandinavian study that points to the contours of a possible counter movement. In a nutshell, the study argues that the new conservative nationalism is not confined to Vladimir Putin or Benjamin Netanyahu or Donald Trump, but rather that it is a global reaction against increasing insecurity and the lack of alternative politics. There is thus a potentially strong mutual interest in resisting this trend by offering compelling progressive alternatives in the North as well as in the South and the former East – alternatives that could redirect people away from far-right choices by addressing their underlying concerns about insecurity and providing them with viable political options moving forward. Therefore, perhaps, the study might be of interest among non-Scandinavian readers too.

The origin of this study by concerned scholars stems from several developments they observed. When ‘waves’ of immigrants reached Scandinavia in 2015, refugees from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and North Africa were blamed for the ‘waves’, rather than holding accountable those who had contributed to the conflicts and crises they were fleeing from, including Sweden.¹ Similarly, when Putin attacked Ukraine in 2022, this aggression was viewed only as a manifestation of Russian expansionism, not as a result of the neo-liberal

¹ Especially in Afghanistan, Libya and through Swedish business in Sudan.

chock therapy that created chaos and a kleptocracy, which Putin promised to handle by ‘making Russia great again’ – i.e. as part of a broader global conservative nationalist reaction that must be fought comprehensively. Meanwhile, international development cooperation, support for people's movements in the South, and education and research on politics and development were being reduced, most radically in Sweden. In response, concerned scholars came together to report that, based on their research and experiences in the South and East, and their understanding of North-South relations, such isolationist responses were utterly senseless.

To validate their point, and to contribute to the academic and public discourse, the scholars decided to work pro bono to summarise and publish their findings in a collection of regional reviews and case studies. Their first book, published in 2023, was in Norwegian and was followed in 2025 by an expanded and upgraded 600-page Swedish edition entitled (in English): *Actually, the world is full of hope: thirty-six analyses of solidarity in resistance to global conservative nationalism.*^{2 3 4}

² Törnquist, O., Sundström, A. and Carmesund, U. (eds) (2025) *Egentligen är världen full av hopp. Trettiosex röster om det solidariska motståndet mot den globala konservativa nationalismen*. Göteborg: Korpen.

³ Editorial group: Olle Törnquist, Anna Sundström and Ulf Carmesund with Ulf Bjereld, Eva Hansson, Lars Rudebeck, Pierre Schori, Anders Sjögren, supported by Vegard Bye.

⁴ Co-authors of the book, in order of first appearance: Sven-Eric Liedman (Prof emeritus History of Ideas), Olle Törnquist (Prof emeritus Political Science and Development Research), Lars Rudebeck (Prof. emeritus Political Science), Anders Sjögren (Assoc. Prof. Political Science), Vegard Bye (PhD Political Science and senior researcher), Inga Näslund (East Asia expert, Olof Palme International Center), Eva Hansson (Senior lecturer and researcher, Political Science), Kristian Stokke (Prof. Human Geography), Arild-Engelsen Ruud (Prof. Asian history), MeeNilankco Theiventhran (PhD Human Geography and researcher), Einar Braathen (Prof. Political Science), Andrés Rivarola Puntigliano (Prof. Latin American Studies), Martin Sandgren (Latin America expert Olof Palme International Center), Marianne Millstein (PhD Human Geography, senior researcher), Odd Karsten Tveit (senior Middle East correspondent Norwegian public service broadcasting), Nils Butenschön (Prof. emeritus International Politics), Selma Sofia Forfod Yssen (Human geographer, researcher), Mohammad Fazlhashemi (Prof, Islamic theology and Philosophy), Omar Sheikmous (political scientist and senior Middle East reporter), Helena Lindholm (Prof. Peace and Development Studies), Aase Mygind Madsen (PhD Political Science, senior researcher), Elinor Odeberg (Economic historian, Chief economist, Area Group), Staffan Laestadius (Prof. emeritus Industrial Development), Stefan de Vylder (Assoc. Prof. Development Economics) Per Wirtén (Author, senior editor and EU-expert), Benedicte Bull (Prof. Political Science), Anna Sundström (Political scientist, former head of the Olof Palme International Center), Oscar Ernerot (Former head of international unit of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation LO, new head of the Olof Palme International Center), Pierre Schori (former international secretary Swedish Social Democratic Party, senior international advisor with Olof Palme, former MP, minister of international development cooperation and migration, and ambassador to the UN), Mikael Leyi (Political scientist, formerly with the Olof Palme international Center, now head of SOLIDAR, Lina Stenberg (Political scientist, senior journalist, head of the Institute for Gender Equality), Ulf Bjereld (Prof. Political Science), Ruben Wågman (Economic historian, expert international trade union cooperation), Maria Nyberg (Head of international unit of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation LO), Ulf Carmesund (PhD theology, former international secretary of the Social Democratic Organisation for Faith and Solidarity, senior development cooperation officer) and Elfva Barrio (political scientist, head the Swedish Social Democratic Student Association).

What is the essence of the book?⁵

Premises

Based on the scholars' previous research and experiences there were two points of departure. Firstly, that unlike the quite uniform resistance against clear-cut European colonialism and US imperialism, conservative nationalism is a worldwide movement of contextual reactions in the South as well as the North. Reactions to the effects of market-driven globalisation and dysfunctional governance, and that some businessmen and oligarchs want state support against competition from especially China. Secondly, that this increasingly strong conservative nationalism has become the main enemy of modern society by undermining people's opportunities to address the existential crises of climate change and peace through enlightened insights and democratisation.

Consequently, it does not make sense to try to counter the conservative reaction in, for example, Sweden, by adjusting to inward-oriented priorities, only including some welfare provisions for 'proper citizens' behind border walls – given that the fundamental problems of conflicts, refugees, climate change and inequality are global. Neither does it help much to stress the primacy of the climate crisis, and to call for human rights and internationalism, without credible alternatives to the current political and economic dynamics. And it is a contradiction in terms to align on *strategic* matters with enemies of US imperialism and neoliberalism that also nourish conservative nationalism, like the regimes in Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates.

Rise and critique of conservative nationalism

To counter conservative nationalism one must instead, according to the dissenting scholars, start by analysing how it has gained overwhelming support. How is it that not just the post-World War II and post-colonial era of imperial rivalry and global neoliberalism, but also the dynamics of developmental states and efforts at liberal democratisation, have given way to oligarchs and autocrats with conservative nationalism as their populist ideological umbrella, in the South and East as well as the North? And how might emancipatory counter movements evolve, resurrect democratisation and converge internationally?

Given that *the rise* of conservative nationalism was not driven by Washington or Moscow or Beijing or Wall Street, but rather by national and local reactions to less uniform dynamics and outcomes, there was a need for comparative case studies in historical perspective, Comparisons that would be based on the common crucial questions of how and why the old socio-liberal and social-democratic oriented models and strategies of democratisation lost

⁵ The attempts in the below to synthesise the arguments and conclusions in the book are based on several seminars and lectures, some sections of which have been published elsewhere. I am indebted to editorial support by Teresa Birks.

ground, to be followed by conservative nationalism and, perhaps, resistance with renewed democratic means.

To answer these questions, it was useful to begin by delineating the mainly liberal and social democratic-oriented perspectives on development and democratisation that call for empirical scrutiny in analytical rather than party-political terms, just as we are used to for example distinguish between liberalism as a set of ideas and perspectives on the one hand, and more or less liberal actors on the other. (Törnquist).⁶

The first section of the book thus focuses on the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle in Asia (Törnquist), Africa (Rudebeck & Sjögren) and Latin America (Bye) – and its implications in the North, with Sweden cited as a special case (Törnquist).

This is followed by the major second section, which addresses the question of why the global emancipatory wave of democratisation – that commenced in the mid-1970's in Portugal and Spain and gained additional strength with the end of the Cold War – began to peter out in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and what new efforts are emerging. China was not included, given that the democratic wave was blocked by the communists' breakwaters even before reaching land. Similarly, international organisations were set aside as the conservative reaction mainly grew out of contextual national dynamics. Nineteen essays summarise the authors' major research conclusions on the fate of liberal democratisation in Eastern Europe (Näslund), South Korea, Vietnam and Thailand (Hansson), the Philippines, Indonesia and India, especially Kerala (Törnquist), Myanmar (Stokke), Bangladesh (Engelsen Ruud), Sri Lanka (Stokke & Theiventhran), Latin America generally (Bye) and especially Brazil (Braathen), Chile (Rivarola Puntigliano), Colombia (Sandgren), Nicaragua and Central America (Bye), Africa south of the Sahara (Sjögren & Rudebeck), South Africa (Millstein), the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring (Tveit & Butenschøn), Tunisia (Forfod Yssen), Iran (Fazlhashemi), Syria and Turkey (Sheikhmous), Israel vs. Palestine (Lindholm) – and the implications for northern countries like Sweden (Törnquist).

Finally, this paves the way for a summary (Törnquist) and assessments of the current situation under the hegemony of conservative nationalism (Mygind Madsen) and in a multipolar world order (Törnquist, Odeberg, Laestadius & de Vylder). Followed by an

⁶ The principal arguments of analytically defined social democracy are summarised in terms of (i) interest based popular movements and (ii) democracy and other human rights, in support of (iii) welfare based on solidarity and rights, and (iv) broad social pacts on (nowadays sustainable) economic growth. Politically this may be achieved by winning elections and altering capitalism 'from above', domesticating it, protesting it, avoiding it, and transforming it. The main strategies of liberal democratisation are (i) economic liberalisation, (ii) negotiating agreements among influential reformists on democracy-oriented rules of the game, (iii) nourishing strong state-institutions ahead of liberal democracy, (iv) backing up negotiations of democracy-oriented rules of the game with support for actors promoting the inclusion of vulnerable groups and movements and socio-economic reforms to nourish more balanced power relations. The book focuses primarily on the social-liberal and social democratic oriented second and fourth strategies.

assessment of the possible role of European cooperation (Wirtén), and the Latin American attempts at a new active policy of non-alignment (Bull, Braathen & Bye). Plus by concluding arguments (Sundström, Ernerot, Schori, Leyi, Stenberg, Bjereld, Wågman, Nyberg, Carmesund, Barrio & the editorial group).

First conclusion: insufficient alternatives and democratisation

The exercise has produced numerous analyses of problems and options in specific contexts but there are also two general conclusions. The first is that to counter global conservative nationalism it is essential to not adjust but support reinvented progressive alternatives, along with substantive liberal rights and democracy – in the South and East, and in the North, as well as internationally.

This is because it has proved insufficient to explain why conservative nationalism has gained worldwide with the fact that many people's economic, social and cultural insecurity has increased under imperial interventions and neoliberal globalisation.⁷ In the regions and country after country that we studied, the common pattern is instead that the popular support for conservative strongmen and exclusionary nationalism only gained significant strength when, firstly, the lack of progressive alternatives to foreign aggression, global neoliberalism and today's oligarchs became obvious, and, secondly, when democratic opportunities for ordinary people to resist and alter this were exhausted.

How did this happen?

These dynamics grew out of a series of historical processes and turning points. After World War II, the West succeeded in Keynesian reconstruction and democratisation in 'its own' part of the global North – but not in the South, after decades of even more devastating colonisation and imperial domination.

Initially there were some promising developments. The post-war global conflicts between conservative hawks and communist rebels receded somewhat into the background in the early 1950s. The old western empires disintegrated, even if the French and Portuguese tried to stay on. The new Chinese leaders consolidated their positions. A ceasefire was negotiated in Korea. The US and Soviet Union agreed informally on their respective northern spheres of interest. The new UN system of international rules and regulations made some difference. Countries like Sweden benefitted from continuous northern domination but shared the Latin American and new Asian and African countries' interest in international rules and regulations on national independence, popular emancipation and fair trade, thus supporting

⁷ Perhaps most comprehensive and best analysed in Bardhan, P. (2022). *A world of insecurity: Democratic disenchantment in rich and poor countries*, Cambridge, Mass. And London: Harvard University Press.

these through the UN and bilaterally. And a new ‘Third World’ did emerge. People stood up against centuries of foreign domination and colonialism. Not just by revolutionary means, but also through struggle for democratic emancipation and equal citizenship. For some time, both the West and the East adhered to the ideas of modernisation. Liberals who advocated capitalist expansion with middle classes, as well as Marxists who were in favour of national planning with land reforms and working-class aspirations, argued that social and economic development might generate democracy in the South too. The two major colonies of India and Indonesia gained independence in the late 1940s and built the largest and third largest democracies. There were three foundations for this. Firstly, nationalism with equal citizenship based on universal rights. Secondly, the largest emancipatory popular movements in the world – the Indian Congress Party and the Indonesian Nationalist Party, cooperating with reformist communists.⁸ Thirdly, the difference that the participation of new nations made to the UN. Their shared vision was to create economic and social conditions previously denied to the people of the ‘third world’ – through democratic means, leaders like Nehru and Sukarno, and a new non-aligned movement.

Within a few years, however, the Cold War came to dominate. Western support for South Korea and Taiwan against China was reminiscent of the Marshall Plan in Europe. But generally, the ‘third world’ was plagued by uneven development with weak links between investment and consumption. Hence, the preconditions for democratic development differed from the historical cases in the North.

Instead, attempts were initiated to implement shortcuts to development, in order to compensate for the lack of necessary conditions. Recommendations were based on the history of western Europe which emphasised strong nation-states, whilst overlooking the wars and colonialism that had nourished them. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, proposed its own authoritarian primitive accumulation of resources for rapid investments whilst neglecting its dependence on the old Russian colonies. China acted similarly. And from the mid-1950s onward, these authoritarian shortcuts to progress came to dominate the ‘third world’ too.

The western liberal and social democratic position was that the middle class in the ‘third world’ was not sufficiently strong to promote market-driven modernisation and benefit from liberal democracy. On the contrary, democratisation in countries such as India and Indonesia had instead benefitted the Left. For example, the first free and fair election of a communist-led government in the world took place in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala in 1957, the same year that the Indonesian Communist Party won free and fair local elections in large parts of Indonesia and was expected to win the next parliamentary election. In Brazil, there were increasing support for its minister of labour and vice president João Goulart. And the

⁸ The Indonesian Communist Party, with numerous branch organisations, was relatively democratic and the third largest after the Soviet and Chinese parties.

contenders did not trust the Left. Ahead of democracy, the non-leftists said, there must instead be more solid states with rule of law and strong institutions, so-called politics of order, soon theorised by Samuel Huntington. But in the absence of actors who could build and implement this political order, the proponents usually relied on the military, which came out on top.

Meanwhile the eastern block and their allies believed instead that the major problem was the weakness of the working and peasant classes, as well as nationally-oriented capitalists. The idea of how to compensate for this, however, was often reminiscent of the West's 'political order.' In other words, relying on the military, albeit with radical nationalist officers at the forefront in favour of state control and the nationalisation of foreign companies, and so-called non-capitalist development. The major exception was the leftists in Kerala who held on to democratisation to resist US-supported antagonists.

Both shortcuts proved disastrous. On the one hand, in the form of Western-backed "middle-class coups' and dictatorships, as, for example, in Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil and Chile. And on the other hand, Eastern-backed national autocracies, beginning with Egypt. Both paths were also characterised by repression and kleptocracy. The broad popular movements of reformist communists and radical social democrats were undermined or physically eliminated, the worst being the Indonesian genocide.

The city-state of Singapore remained an odd exception. Its socialist party managed to create a corruption-free judiciary and administration by authoritarian means that promoted export-based development and finance. The preconditions for this were the city's strategic location, imported cheap labour and the export of capital to Singapore from the plunder of neighbouring countries. Plus, the desire among the newly rich in these neighbouring countries for a service- and consumption-paradise next-door. Yet Singapore's good economy and administration did not lead to democracy. South Korea and Taiwan were also different, with their Japanese-influenced economies and historically stronger bureaucracies in comparison to other parts of the 'third world'. This allowed them to combine western-backed mobilisation against China with their own state-led land reforms and export-oriented development, in cooperation with domestic oligarchs and transnational corporations. Over the years, 'ordinary people' got better off too, except for human rights, until the democracy movement grew stronger in the 1980s.

These dynamics, along with the new technology and faster communications, laid the foundations for the then new international division of labour between North and South, which gained strength during the late-1960s – accompanied by the increased use of fossil fuels. And in the process, post-war currency regulations that had enabled social liberal and social democratic policies in the North were scrapped too.

Yet, it was not necessarily a disaster for the North that, for example, textile factories and shipyards were relocated to the global South – if the employees were protected and new investments were made in cooperation between the state, unions and entrepreneurs, as was the case in Scandinavia. However, there was then another shortcut to development in the form of autocratic OPEC-states to raise the world market price of oil. This led to speculation rather than inclusive development in the OPEC states that could have increased demand for products from the North. Thus, the outcome in countries like Sweden was both inflation and stagnation. In other words, producers and consumers had become so far apart that it was difficult to keep national Keynesianism and Fordism going (i.e. that the workers who produced the cars could afford to buy them).

By implication, the social democratic model in the North and similar ideas in the South had to be internationalised to survive. Leaders like Olof Palme, Willy Brandt and their like-minded friends in the ‘third world’ attempted to find a solution in the form of UN-based alternatives to global inequality and the unequal division of labour. The slogan of the 1970s was ‘a new economic world order’ through ‘partnership between North and South’. But the United States, its allies, and the financial and corporate world objected. Many within Palme’s and Brandt’s own parties were also hesitant, as were related unions that prioritised the export industry’s ability to pay good wages. Just as important, allies in the South had lost steam or opted out. The non-aligned movement and the ‘third world’ community was in decline. The liberation movements were economically weak. The oil states were happy. And the developmental states collaborated with transnational corporations for their own good.

Palme continued his efforts at peace until he was assassinated. Brandt stood tall but did not get anywhere. Norway’s Gro Harlem Brundtland addressed the conflict between growth and climate. And experiments with new development models continued within the UN system, including in the form of Agenda 2030. But no one could put their weight behind their words.

In the 1980s, Milton Friedman's Nobel Prize-winning neo-liberal economics was instead given free rein, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the forefront, subsequently backed by the digital revolution, unregulated information technology and social media. Privatisation and deregulation reduced the scope of democracy and the capacity of the state to facilitate fair structural transformation. In the early-1980s, for example, capital escaped Francois Mitterrand's socialist oriented reforms. Social democracy was short of countermeasures. ‘Structural adjustment’ was considered unavoidable. In Sweden, the idea of wage-earner-funds was blocked and in 1985 Palme was unable to prevent the deregulation of the credit market. His successor Ingvar Carlsson tried to adjust by joining the European Union, followed by Göran Persson who adopted Tony Blair's combination of a market-driven economy and reduced welfare system along a ‘third way’, on which the conservative prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt then turbocharged.

Structural adjustment affected the ‘third world’ worst. Even South Korea was weakened, most clearly during the Asian economic crisis of the late-1990s. We shall return to the Chinese and Vietnamese exceptions.

Autocratic reactions, with popular support

As the new international division of labour and neoliberalism thus undermined efforts aimed at building less unfair economic development and democratisation in the ‘third world’, as well as in the North, the frustration among those who did not benefit increased. Yet, social liberals and social democrats had little to say. The dream of a fair new world order somehow passed away with Palme, Brandt and their partners. The ‘third world’ disintegrated. In the context of neoliberal globalisation, it was instead called the Global South. While ‘strong leaders’ advanced by promising neo-nationalist protection.

The main successful southern cases in this respect were China and Vietnam, benefitting from being able to combine totalitarian rule and neoliberal global division of labour. In the Soviet Union, things were more complicated. The West did not support Gorbachev’s efforts to combine democratisation and economic reform, only neoliberal shock therapy. This slowed down democratisation and generated a neoliberal kleptocracy and oligarchy. The result was inequality, chaos and political disintegration, which enabled Vladimir Putin to gain broad support for harsh measures against disorder and injustice, at the expense of rights and democracy. And the promise of making Russia great again, including by opposing the decolonisation of the old Russian empire, as is now the case with Ukraine. By then, the premisses for the promises made by both East and West at the end of the Cold War were long undermined. In short, the story of the new reactionary world order did not begin with Nato’s support of the Baltic countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall, or with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but many years earlier with the reaction against the effects of West’s support for neoliberal shock therapy and elite-dominated democratisation.

Meanwhile, in the US and Europe, leaders such as Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerald Schröder and Sweden’s Göran Persson tried to mitigate the effects of neoliberalism in their own countries, as well as to integrate Eastern Europe in the EU. As already mentioned, this method is known as the “third way” of neoliberal economics along with ‘new public management’, including market-driven welfare. But both the scope of democracy and the capacity of the state had been reduced. So, while people with appropriate education and knowledge (about capital and property markets in particular) advanced quickly, entrepreneurs and wage earners with less opportunities suffered, including those badly affected by the attempts to mitigate climate change by reducing fossil-based growth. And when neither social-liberals, social-democrats or the environmental movement could provide fair alternatives, support increased instead for discontented politicians and brownshirts promoting conservative nationalist arguments. Corresponding reactions were nurtured in the

US, including by the ‘Tea Party movement’ and then by Donald Trump. Meanwhile, globalised tech billionaires sought state protection, including against China’s increasing competitiveness.

Promising yet incomplete democratisation, and its discontents

But it could have been different. Let us take a few steps back in history. For while the attempts to reinvent the ideas of liberal and social democracy by creating a partnership between North and South weakened, and global neoliberalism expanded, the global wave of human rights and democracy began in Portugal in 1975. The military junta fell in Greece. A peaceful transition to democracy was negotiated in Francisco Franco’s Spain. The USA was defeated in Vietnam and elected a president who promised to promote human rights, Jimmy Carter. The wave rolled on to Latin America, with Brazil at the forefront, and then on to the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan. As well as to Eastern Europe, with trade union movements such as *Solidarność* in Poland and civil society groups such as ‘Charter 77’ in Czechoslovakia. After the end of the Cold War, the wave gained more strength with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the spread of economic and political liberalisation in the East. Mandela’s South Africa was the great triumph in Africa. And in Asia, Indonesia became the world’s third largest democracy again. This was thus a wave of aspirations and movements that might have renewed the classic progressive alternatives. But it did not – why?

Since the late-1950s, as we know, liberal democratisation was generally considered unrealistic in the South and East due to uneven economic and social development. From the mid-1970s, it was however deemed feasible again, based on four arguments. Firstly, as the economy gradually become less state controlled, there would be demands for the rule of law and other freedoms. Secondly, the international community, together with powerful reform-minded groups inside the countries, would thus also be able to negotiate democratic institutions – from freedoms, rights and elections to the depoliticisation of the military and a powerful legal system and administration. In the process, even old landowners, oligarchs, clerics and generals were expected to adapt to the new rules of the game. The experts who believed that non-corrupt state institutions must precede freedoms and elections agreed that if these institutions could somehow be improved, the crucial actors would adjust and become impartial. Thirdly, the more equal distribution of power that left liberals and social democrats identified as a prerequisite for democratisation could now be pursued by civil society organisations and popular movements thanks to new freedoms and international support. Fourthly, on the contrary, the rightist argument that there should be “interventions against the enemies of democracy”. Unsurprisingly, none of these arguments were borne out in practice. But why did the democratic forces even fail to gain enough strength enough to foster better conditions?

Democratisation was weakened by the privatisation and deregulation of the economy. There was simply less to decide on in a democratic way. Equally important, the influential groups that negotiated democratisation could draw on their economic and other positions of power outside of politics to shape the new institutions and rules of the game to their own advantage. Elections and party systems thus discouraged new progressive movement-based parties as well as candidates without higher education, even at the local level. And anti-corruption agencies rarely gained an independent position that could be combined with popular support.

Furthermore, neoliberal reforms reinforced uneven economic development. This nourished differences in interests and organisational possibilities between permanent and temporary employees, freelancers and those working in the informal sector. It was difficult for trade unions and social movements to come together and agree on common demands and proposals. Meanwhile, the ILO's work and international trade union solidarity were often limited to formal sector unions.

Likewise, social movements and civil society groups focused on specific interests and issues, and on lobbying and attempts at exerting pressure rather than mobilising and organising members. They also tended to avoid even non-party-political engagement, at the request of international donors. Political decentralisation was rarely accompanied by opportunities for the rise and scaling up of new local parties with alternative perspectives.

Consequently, even though the new freedoms and rights were good for liberal and social democratic-oriented movements, shallow democratisation made it hard for them to organise people, enter mainstream politics and make a difference with alternative proposals. So, having tried and failed, many people rather came to support 'strong leaders', appreciate ethnic and religious solidarity, and turn against alleged 'competitors', such as immigrants.

For example, the centre-left Indian coalition that won elections in 2004 failed to modify liberal economic reforms by sufficiently comprehensive welfare reforms and popular participation. Instead, the coalition was mired in corruption scandals and lost in 2014 to the conservative national Hindu nationalists led by Narendra Modi.

Similarly, the liberal and social democratic Philippine coalition government that won the elections in 2010, lost to the "strongman" Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, who blamed all evil on criminals and drug addicts, (whom he said should be killed and then did kill.) In the next elections, former dictator Ferdinand Marcos's son Marcos Jr. won by rewriting the history of his fathers' reign in favourable terms. And Duterte's daughter may be the next president.

In Indonesia, from the mid-2000s, numerous civic organisations, trade unions and social movements united behind alternative reform proposals and facilitated the election in 2014 of the populist technocrat Joko "Jokowi" Widodo as president. Yet, the groups could not agree

on how to proceed. Instead, “Jokowi” built broad support for a grand coalition of the country’s political elite, oligarchs and religious leaders – after which he ensured that dictator Suharto’s former son-in-law, the authoritarian ex-general Prabowo Subianto, was elected as the next president, based on a similar grand coalition, with “Jokowi’s” son as vice president.

In Brazil, Lula da Silva’s policies were immensely popular when he handed over to Dilma Rousseff in 2011, but then everything changed. Corruption scandals at the country’s centre could not be prevented by the otherwise acclaimed local popular participation. And business as well as social policy had become dependent on income from the export of raw materials, which suffered from reduced world market prices. Then, the national conservative Michael Temer was able to gain power, and Jair Bolsonaro won the next election.

In South Africa, the trade union movement in particular criticised President Thabo Mbeki’s version of the ‘third way’ policy, and preferred Jacob Zuma, whose rule soon degenerated into an authoritarian kleptocracy with ethnic undertones. The democracy movement that had a previously strong base in social-movement unionism has been unable to offer significant resistance.

The examples could be multiplied. And the situation worsened as the fourth argument for why liberal democratisation would possibly come to the fore – the interventions against ‘enemies of democracy’. The ‘war on terror’ led least of all to democracy. The UN was undermined, as was international law. Great power politics gained the upper hand, conflicts multiplied, repression increased, autocrats remained in power, and the Arab Spring protests were crushed, worst in Syria – before things got even worse in Gaza.

In the absence of local alternatives, the negative results fuelled forced migration and refugee flows to Europe, which conservative nationalist objected, enabling them to expand rapidly through increasingly chauvinist and racist policies. The case of Sweden has already been examined.

Second conclusion: hope

Are there no signs of a counter movement? From a historical materialist point of view, the standard argument is that social democratic-oriented development is inconceivable in the South given the generally uneven development and industrialisation in particular, (with the major exception of the unfortunately dictatorial China).⁹ As already accounted for, most of the evidence from the attempts at change from below and by way of liberal democratisation is also negative. However, the fact that the conditions in the South differ from the industrial revolution in the North only substantiate the argument that progressive politics will not

⁹ C.f. e.g. Therborn, G. (2012). ‘Class in the 21st Century’, *New Left Review*, 78: 5-29; (2014) ‘New Masses?’, *New Left Review*, 85:7-16; (2022) ‘The World and the Left’, *New Left Review*, 137:23-74; and (2024) ‘The Future of the Left’, *New Left Review*, 145:27-41.

evolve in exactly the same way. Collective action based on trade unions and related movements is certainly more difficult in the South than it had previously been in the North. And it is true that the negative impact of neoliberal globalisation in the North as well as the South and East, together with US domination and interventions, are the root causes for the rise of conservative nationalist reactions. Yet, these structural factors do not prove that there could not have been and cannot be alternative reactions and counter movements.

In all the cases studied in the book, many people have continued to fight, to try collective action, to aim at justice and equality and more. Obviously, there are problems of diverse interests, visions and ideas, but the crucial challenge is ‘only’ that the challenges differ from the ‘old North’, which ‘only’ means that ‘old’ politics and strategies must be adapted and reinvented.¹⁰

Again, it is exactly when there have been no alternative models to hand, and precisely when limited democratisation has proved insufficient, that many people have been attracted to other options such as patronage and individual solutions – which opened the door to the proponents of conservative nationalism.

In other words, this is more an intellectual and political problem than a structural materialist one. There is hope. The studies in the book indicate that it is possible to renew and reinvent the politics of development and strategies of democratisation and thus develop alternatives to counter conservative nationalism.

Counter movements?

The most recent glimmer of hope are the Gen-Z revolts.¹¹ Of course, mass protests of this kind are not new. One may for example recall the Arab Spring of 2011, Hong Kong, Chile and the women in Sudan in 2019, as well as their sisters in Iran in 2022. The most recent cases include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Serbia, Kenya, Peru, Madagascar, Nepal, the Philippines and Indonesia. Yet the issues are not really about the youth against the elders. In Bangladesh, for example, the students championed 85-year-old Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus as chief advisor of the interim government. Many young people certainly feel that they have been ‘robbed of their future’, but there are also many elders that have been affected by unequal globalisation and neoconservatism. The fact that young people are at the frontlines is more about opportunities to meet on campus in a world of otherwise fragmented working conditions, and that they have a few years of relative economic independence and shared frustrations as well as the knowledge to understand what is going on in the world. Plus, they have the unique ability to communicate through the new social

¹⁰ For further analysis, see Törnquist 2022, op cit.

¹¹ The analysis of the Gen-Z protests after the collective books were published is based on <https://olle-tornquist.com/onewebmedia/Olle%20draft%20paper%20SE%20Asia%20dem%20conference.pdf>

media, build informal “rhizome-movements”, sustain their autonomy, and avoid some of the repression. No, what Gen-Z primarily address is not ageing leaders, but rather unemployment, corruption and abuse of power – as well as the lack of human rights and opportunities to make themselves heard through democratic means. Their criticism of rigid organisations and ideologies is also directed at powerful radicals, such as the Maoists in Nepal.

Gen-Z is certainly not progressive in its entirety, especially not in the North. Yet, those who do protest elsewhere rarely link up with conservative nationalism and “strong leaders” but mostly denounce local versions of Trump, Putin, Musk or Modi as much as neoliberalism. They want human rights, and they are sympathetic to refugees and migrant workers. Many protesters themselves, and their families, must migrate to get jobs.

However, one may ask how much support they have, and what politics and policies they want. It is one thing to form resilient networks instead of hierarchical organisations, as well as to protest and to put forward specific demands for jobs, housing, welfare and justice – but another to develop credible alternatives in terms of democratic organisation, governance and reform. In short, there are few signs that the Gen-Z activists address the problems that have undermined the ‘old’ progressive movements and the rise of new alternatives.

There may be widespread sympathy for the protests, but it is rarely tangible and certainly not organised. Furthermore, militant actions and riots often frighten ‘ordinary people,’ despite the new ability to reach out widely via social media. During the struggle against Indonesian dictator Suharto’s ‘floating mass politics’ aimed at preventing popular organisation, there was a common (self-critical) expression that the opposition consisted of equally poorly organised ‘floating democrats.’ In much of the global South, this remains true.

Similarly, there are few signs that Gen-Z activists take up the task of building broader alliances between fragmented civil society organisations, unions and people with different working conditions – other than including some gig workers and highlighting outrageous conditions and decisions to push through. Earlier insights about the importance of developing genuine democratic representation are also ignored, despite undisputable lessons such as from the initially successful negotiations between activists and those in power in Tunisia during the Arab Spring. And, of course, from the previous (now weakened) social partnership governance in Scandinavia. Finally, there are few attempts among Gen-Z activists to create common platforms and strategies to unite people behind reform proposals for better sustainable and welfare-based development, democratic representation and governance, never mind engaging in international cooperation to counter geopolitical interventions. The usual pattern is instead to produce long lists of often incoherent demands and populist mantras.

In short, the main dynamic of the Gen-Zen protests rather seems to be insurrectionary pressure politics. First, mobilising supporters online, plus on campuses and the streets, to compensate for the lack of a homogeneous working class with common workplaces. Then, intensifying the actions and convincing reform-minded officers to abandon the ruling politicians in favour of a transitional government of experts who are on speaking terms with key activists. And finally, hoping that the new government will initiate elections – and that the activists will then have chosen leaders and formed competitive genuinely progressive parties. But where, if ever, has this succeeded?

In the wake of Gen-Z revolts, there have often been terrifying dynamics, worst in civil war-torn Sudan, and more recently in Iran. And one fears that there will be more but hopefully less devastating cases of military-backed rule by political elites and oligarchs. Other worrying developments include the autocratisation of President Prabowo's Indonesia, while parts of the anti-corruption movement in the Philippines are being subordinated to competing dominant actors.

After 1974, when young Indonesian students staged a legendary Gen-Z-like uprising (*malari*) along with dissident officers against Suharto's dictatorship, but failed, it took about ten years before the opposition movement came up with an alternative analysis. An analysis in favour of struggle for dual democratisation against the autocracy. On the one hand against the monopoly of the military and oligarchs of public positions and resources, as in classical Athens, and on the other hand for impartial justice and public governance based on equal citizenship. Thus, what seemed to be Suharto's invincible dictatorship was finally overthrown in 1998, and the polity and society began to be transformed. Hopefully it will not take as long for the new movements to rediscover this perspective *and* address the challenges of dual democratisation. Obviously, support for this should be a priority.

Alternative entry points

What might then be the entry points for addressing the problems of dual democratisation? Much of the research that we brought together in our collective studies indicate that change is possible by building broad alliances *and* related democratic governance in favour of reform packages based on common interests beyond conventional employer-employee relations.

There seem to be four major entry points. The first is rooted in *the historical struggle for equality, equal rights and popular education* (later depicted as human rights) against colonial as well as local repression and exploitation. In south India today, for example, this is the basis for the resistance against conservative Hindu-nationalism. The socio-religious reform movements for equal rights had already grown particularly strong in Kerala in the late 19th century. Much like the Scandinavian free church, temperance and educational movements at around the same time, the Kerala reform movements were vital for the then growth of

associations of oppressed castes and Dalits, as well as their cooperation with labour and peasant organisations, along with library associations, in the early 20th century. Their combined strength nourished Kerala's celebrated human development. From the late-1980's, moreover, the emancipatory ethos of Kerala's educational People's Science Movement in resurrecting this broad historical work propelled much of the world-renowned reinvention of social democratic-oriented development in the context of political and administrative decentralisation.

Another example calls to mind the importance of similar ideas in Indonesia's struggle for freedom, in which cultural workers and journalists were crucial during the new efforts in to reinvent the democracy movement in the 1980s and 1990s, which then did away with decades of dictatorial rule and which now objects to autocratisation. Similarly, the reinvention of the left in Chile in the late-2010s was not only about fighting neoliberalism, but also the remnants of colonialism. Under harsher conditions, the movements in Myanmar that now fight the junta have certainly had to retreat to ethnic communal strongholds but aim at a democratic federal state. And the struggle for human and equal civil rights is certainly as fundamental in the Palestine-Israeli conflict as it was during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

The second entry point for broad alliances and democratic politics lies in *the quest for rights-based welfare and educational reform*. One critical example is again from Indonesia, where the labour and other interest-based movements were scattered and where the pro-democracy movement was on the retreat after having done away with thirty-three years of dictatorship in 1998. Yet, ten years later, progressive actors proved that it was possible to develop a policy proposal and form a broad alliance for universal public health reform. Unions as well as urban poor, professionals and politicians from several political parties, together with like-minded international advisors,¹² came together in 2010 to improve a public health proposal that had been shelved, to mobilise even broader support, and to successfully persuade the parliament to accept the reforms. The progressives could have continued their work, but they were short of follow-up policies and politics and disintegrated. Yet, that failure was far from inevitable. Rather, it points to the importance of having a series of thus transformative reform proposals, and to also include ideas and demands for the institutionalisation of democratic partnership governance.

The third more advanced opening for progressive alternatives is the *combination of broad alliances for welfare reform and inclusive development*. Kerala stands out in this regard too. The challenge of relating the impressive local alternatives to wider society and the economy were addressed in 2018 when the effects of climate change and poor physical planning in the hill tracts of the state resulted in huge floods, followed by the pandemic. Decentralised

¹² With support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

government in cooperation with civil society proved crucial in handling the floods as well as Covid-19, but it did not generate a new wave of progressive popular engagement. The left-front state government did counter conservatives (who nourished religious loyalties) by adding resources for universal welfare schemes *and* investing in a new alternative, high-tech, knowledge-based development that would be inclusive of unemployed people in the villages too. But the local popular action during the natural disaster and Covid, was not sustained. The innovative financing of these initiatives (by attracting private financiers while maintaining public decision-making on investment) was blocked by the conservative nationalist government in New Delhi. It remains unclear if and how the new knowledge-based economics shall be governed by way of democratic partnerships and participation. And even though there are new attempts to move ahead, not only by inviting direct private investments but also by improving the skills and organisational capacity of professionals and workers, and by nourishing cooperatives, it is open to question where there will be sufficient popular engagement in the face of the upcoming elections.

A similar positive example is the National People's Power (NPP) alliance of parties and movements in Sri Lanka that was formed by reformist leftists after the popular Gen-Z-like protests of 2022. The NPP built an inclusive platform with a comprehensive reform programme. This paved the way for the landslide victories in the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections. It was even possible to bridge the ethnic conflicts in the Tamil north. Of course there are additional problems, including handling the previously accumulated foreign debts to China and the IMF. Yet the formation of the NPP as well as the broad alliances behind democratic reforms point to the most crucial missing links that need to be addressed if new protests such as those by Gen-Z are to contribute to the creation of democratic alternatives to conservative nationalism.

Meanwhile, *Partido dos Trabalhadores* and Lula da Silva in Brazil managed to counter conservative nationalism with an even broader coalition in favour of pragmatic economic policies and welfarism, supplemented by a new emphasis on environmental sustainability and the scaling up participatory practices from local to regional and national levels. In South Africa it remains to be seen whether the much weaker, renewal-oriented progressives will be able to move ahead and overcome the corruption scandals of the ANC and narrow-minded trade unionism. A vital aim is clearly to reinvent the social unionism that combined workplace and local society organising during the liberation struggle. Finally, recent experiences in Colombia demonstrate that it is possible, in spite of remaining problems of implementation, to build broad alliances behind reform (in this case designed by reform-minded activists and engaged scholars¹³) that combine welfare-based sustainable development, democratisation, and peacebuilding.

¹³ With support of the Olof Palme International Center.

The North and reinvented global cooperation

The primary strength of these efforts at new alternatives is that they are rooted in the ideas of modern enlightenment, critical reflection and emancipation, while also growing from within their own contexts and cultures, not from imperial policies or universal doctrines. As during the anti-colonial struggle, however, it is also necessary to converge with like-minded governments and movements around the world, including on issues like climate change, international law and human rights, fair agreements on trade, taxation, working conditions and access to advanced knowledge and technology. Internationally, Lula da Silva and other progressive leaders are making remarkable attempts at building a movement for new active politics of non-alignment with like-minded governments and movements. This is both in support of the UN principles, but also to manage their own countries' inevitable relations with the dominant world powers without becoming dependent on any of them.

But is there any interest in the North in renewed international alliances and development cooperation with genuinely progressive actors in the South? Is it possible to alter the conservative nationalist-led reaction in countries like Sweden. And of amending the centre-left parties' compromises with this line of thinking while they are afraid of losing elections?

As in the South, the efforts to resurrect democracy and welfare in countries like Sweden must be grounded within the national context. Yet, they will reach a dead end if even the current leadership in the 'actually existing' social democratic party assumes that all misery can be combated through nationalist complicity in the matter of refugees and migrants, combined with some provision of welfare measures for 'proper citizens', and gigantic defence investments without becoming significantly less dependent on the US. Collective action and solidarity certainly presuppose trust in a common project – yet narrow-minded politics and policies undermine this trust by neglecting the global dynamics and political economy behind the 'waves' of refugees, forced migration, wars and conflicts, threats to the climate and the erosion of the welfare model.

Consequently, the Scandinavian scholars conclude their book with a short list of the international priorities that, according to their analysis, their countries should focus on to build a movement against conservative nationalism.

Firstly, to pinpoint the common principles that are both necessary and morally right to defend: fossil-free growth, human rights and democracy, and the non-exploitation of others. Secondly, to coordinate domestic priorities and international priorities. The issues of domestic welfare and national security in Scandinavia have been separated from international solidarity for decades. To prove wrong the idea that conservative nationalism is necessary for fighting the negative effects of globalisation, it is crucial to identify the international cooperation and reforms that are indispensable for achieving progressive

domestic aims. Progressive aims such as the integration of refugees as well as better welfare and investments, and to contain the threats against the climate and national security. Ideally, this should be studied in co-operation with the major parties concerned, from unions to employers, and be implemented through mission-driven politics based on broad alliances of relevant actors behind democratically decided aims.¹⁴

Third, to explore how to foster the indispensable international cooperation thus identified by reinvigorating international law, human rights, equal rules of the game and fair trade. This includes coordination with new approach by Lula and others of active politics of non-alignment.

Fourth, to support the like-minded pro-democratic actors around the world who are essential for sustaining such efforts. Based on the scholars' research and insights, current initiatives that support democracy must maintain their focus on human rights while being fundamentally reinvented. There is a need to favour actors that foster broad alliances for progressive social, economic and political policy packages. And to promote the drafting of such reforms. Similarly, to prioritise support for inclusive political representation in mainstream politics, as well as of the parties concerned in policy development and their implementation. Finally, to nurture free and accurate information, independent culture and academia. Realising these priorities requires the involvement of those groups and experts who are most knowledgeable and have the best networks, such as unions and professional organisations, journalists, cultural workers and academics, in both the North and the South – all of whom have become primary targets of the conservative nationalist onslaught on international development cooperation.

Moving forward

This shortlist of priorities is clearly rooted in the Scandinavian and especially Swedish context. However, as I have tried to show, the proposals are also grounded in studies on the global rise of conservative nationalism and the conditions necessary for a coordinated international counter movement. To some extent, the priorities may therefore also serve as inspiration for similar exercises in other context. Similarly, they suggest what like-minded actors from different countries and localities might wish to discuss in essential joint forums. For example, some of us who worked with the books have initiated an open Nordic network to carry on – hopefully with our colleagues in the global South and elsewhere – by way of interdisciplinary studies and public seminars on new forms of democracy and solidarity.

¹⁴ C.f. Mazzucato, M. (2022) *Rethinking the social contract between the state and business: A new approach to industrial strategy with conditionalities*, och Mazzucato, M., Doyle, S. & von Burgsdorff, L.K. (2024) *Mission-oriented Industrial Strategy: Global Insights*. Both published by the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose.