

REINVENTING INTERNATIONALISM AGAINST CONSERVATIVE NATIONALISM

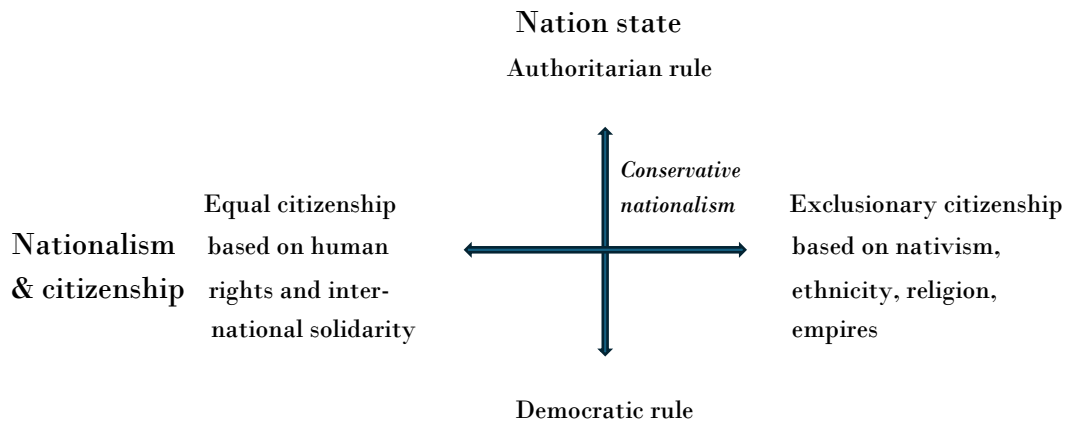
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The times they are a-changing

After World War II, the Allies agreed on a new world order through the United Nations. 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 during the Cold War and then later with neoliberalism. Today, however, the framework as such has simply 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 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* as well as *Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht* 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 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. And several anti-imperial leftists and peFace activists still deem the enemies of their worst enemy their friends (i.e. Putin, Xi and the likes vs. the US and neoliberals). Are there no signs of more 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 evil Russian imperialism, not as part of a broader global conservative nationalist movement that needed to 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

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

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 has recently been followed 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} What is the essence of the book?

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 to the effects of market-driven globalisation and

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 Sheikhmous (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).

dysfunctional governance. 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 – based on the common crucial questions of how and why the old socio-liberal and social-democratic oriented models and strategies of democratisation lost ground, to be followed by conservative nationalism and 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 (Törnquist).⁵

⁵ 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 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 its breakwaters even before reaching land. Similarly, international organisations were set aside as anti-colonial as the liberal waves of democratisation 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 (Sheikmous), 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) in a multipolar world order (Törnquist, Odeberg, Laestadius & de Vylder), the possible role of Europe (Wirtén), and the Latin American attempts at a new active policy of non-alignment (Bull, Braathen & Bye) – together with concluding arguments (Sundström, Ernerot, Schori, Leyi, Stenberg, Bjereld, Wågman, Nyberg, Carmesund, Barrio & the editorial group).

First conclusion: insufficient alternatives and democratisation

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

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.

It is certainly true that conservative nationalism has gained worldwide support among people whose economic, social and cultural insecurity has increased under imperial interventions and neoliberal globalisation.⁶ Yet, in the regions and country after country that we studied, the common pattern is that the popular support for conservative strongmen and exclusionary nationalism only gained significant strength when, firstly, the lack of 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 the North – but not in the South, after decades of even more devastating colonisation and imperial domination. Countries like Sweden benefitted from continuous northern domination but shared the new third world's interest in international rules and regulations on national independence, popular emancipation and fair trade, thus supporting these through the UN and bilaterally.

During the Cold War, however, rights-based democracy was often set aside in the third world to fight imperial enemies or promote growth, even though exceptions like India, and especially its southwestern state of Kerala, proved that it was not always necessary. Soon, the dominant actors were instead authoritarian regimes – supported militarily and economically by both the West and the East – as well as authoritarian oil states, and authoritarian developmental states in cooperation with transnational companies.

This did not only exacerbate the socio-economic and cultural injustices in the South. In the 1970s, increasing oil prices (that rarely came with investment in inclusive development and thus similarly increasing demand for products from non-oil producing countries), as well as the new international division of labour, also began to weaken the hitherto successful Keynesianism in the nation-states of the North. For both reasons – the underdevelopment in the South and the undercutting of social democracy in the North – Olof Palme, Willy Brandt and like-minded leaders suggested a new *international* Keynesian world order. Yet, this neither received sufficient support from the strongest southern actors, who preferred speculation in oil incomes and authoritarian export-led growth, nor from the northern financial capital, transnational companies and their contractors and employees.

⁶ 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.

Simultaneously, rapid technological development facilitated the further expansion of international trade, production and finance. So, from the 1980s, instead of a fairer world order, neoliberal globalisation was free to proceed, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the forefront. Moreover, not only the disparaged Soviet Union and its empire collapsed. Reformist Michail Gorbachyov was also disposed of. And François Mitterrand's socialist reforms as well as the celebrated 'Nordic model' of nationally-negotiated welfare and economic growth were undermined.

Hence, Swedish governments, among others, from the right to the centre-left, accepted the ideas of 'structural adjustment' and 'rationalised' welfare policies. Thanks to economic reconstruction and active labour market policies, some of the tensions were reduced. And the 'third way' of trying to reconcile neoliberalism and welfare in the 1990s – spearheaded by Britain's Tony Blair, Germany's Gerhard Schröder, the US's Bill Clinton, and Sweden's Göran Persson – gained support among those who benefitted, including owners of mobile capital and professionals and workers with suitable knowledge and skills. But others faced more social, economic and cultural insecurity, and began to lose trust in mainstream politics.

In spite of this, there were also signs of renewal and counter movements. The liberal wave of democracy grew from the fall of fascism in Portugal and Spain in the mid-1970s, and it was further enhanced by the end of the Cold War. Centre-leftists in the South and in the East could *try* similar 'third way' models, and broadly defined radical social democrats could *try* more emancipatory politics. Lots of optimism was in the air, but over the years the outcome was as depressing as in the North, or worse. Why?

Stumbling blocks

There were three main reasons.⁷ Firstly, in spite of emerging industrialisation, the class basis for liberal and social democratic-oriented politics was much more fragmented in the South than historically in the North, as well as under its present wave of more precarious work conditions. In addition, investors and managers in the South benefitted more rarely than in the North from decent labour relations. Even in cases like South Africa and its relatively strong unions, the huge numbers of informal sector labourers were not included in the social contract and the new democratic system. Thinking out of the box, Lula da Silva in Brazil, for one, tried broader alliances for better work conditions and general welfare reforms. But he remained unable to negotiate alternative growth pacts with capital and labour, becoming dependent on shady deals in the capital and unreliable income from the export of primary commodities to China in particular.

⁷ For further analysis, see my 'concluding book', Törnquist, O. (2022) *In Search of New Social Democracy: Insights from the South – Implications for the North*, London, NY, Dublin: Zed-Bloomsbury.

Secondly, the efforts to compensate for the fragmentation of class relations between employers, employees and informal labour, were often impressive but insufficient. One strategy was to encourage unity in the context of decentralised politics. Another was to nourish a multitude of movements and civil society organisations based on specific interests, issues and ideas. The challenge was, however, how to scale up from ‘the local’ and overcome the shortage of common priorities, agendas and organisation. Unified action was rarely possible beyond specific demands, and in opposition to common enemies, such as during the Arab Spring or when getting rid of dictators like Marcos in the Philippines or Suharto in Indonesia. Participatory budgeting in Brazil did not help to counter corruption in the capital. Even the most successful case of the Indian state of Kerala’s People’s Planning in conjunction with democratic decentralisation suffered from problems of coordination and limited connections to the wider economic and political framework.

Thirdly, the very processes of democratisation and institution-building were biased. This includes the political priorities in support of rights and freedoms, impartial and independent judiciary as well as formally free and fair election and party systems. In particular, participatory practices in policy development and implementation were neglected. Typically, the ‘compromises’ were negotiated between the ‘international community’ and national economic, political and military elites, neglecting the aspirations and inclusion of the democracy movements. As a result, the very activists and organisations that fought for democratisation were rarely able gain meaningful entry to the new democratic systems and make a difference from within, except when subordinating themselves to elitist parties and populist politics – including in the cases celebrated in mainstream research such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

Meanwhile, the trust in more inclusive development by democratic means was of course further undermined by the fact that most successful economic development in the South was due to authoritarian developmental state-interventions, in cooperation with transnational companies, with the Chinese party-state at the centre stage.

Turning point

Usually, however, it was only when the three major factors converged, that strongmen and oligarchs gained ground, with populist conservative nationalist slogans at the forefront. Blaming liberal globalisation, along with ‘foreigners’, criminals, ‘deviant’ religions, sexual preferences and more. And offering firm leadership and protection.

The timing varied within the different contexts. Examples include the rise of Vladimir Putin in Russia in the late 1990s, Narendra Modi in India 2014, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines 2016, authoritarian revivalism in Indonesia from 2015 onwards, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil

in 2019. Accompanied by the rapid advances of the conservative nationalist movements and parties in Europe, and Donald Trump in the US.

By now neo-nationalism has gained global hegemony, serving as an umbrella for multipolar autocrats and state-backed oligarchs in the South, East and North, along with global tech-oligarchs – all in need of popular support, state-backing and protection.

Accordingly, they also alter international relations and spur conflict and war – and rearmament. Firstly, by rejecting the common rules of the game and multilateral governance in favour of bilateral autocratic transactions and the principle of ‘might makes right’. Secondly, by neglecting international law in favour of even wars to ‘renegotiate’ territorial borders based on race, religion, culture and old empires.

Second conclusion: hope

Are there no signs of a counter movement? From a historical materialist point of view, the standard argument is of course 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).⁸ 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 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 they differ from the ‘old North’, which ‘only’ means that ‘old’ politics and strategies must be adapted and reinvented.⁹

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

⁸ 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.

⁹ For further analysis, see Törnquist 2022, op cit.

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.

The challenges

Before turning to the signs of hope, let us summarise the challenges. Obviously, overcoming the dynamics of uneven global and local development in the South with only the standard models of workplace mobilisation and organisation from the North is unfeasible. Most people simply do not have permanent jobs in large workplaces, but must work in the informal sector. Similarly, the decisive contribution by the organised working class in the North to substantial democratisation is unlikely to be repeated to the same extent in the South. Hence, while workplace organisation certainly remains important, the balance of power and priorities must be redressed through broader politics, alliances and international cooperation. Globally, moreover, the threat of climate change means that in addition to fighting plunder and unbalanced profit-driven growth (separating production and consumption), the old social-democratic strategies of welfare-based economic growth relying on fossil fuels must also be made sustainable. Finally, as we know, even the best attempts so far to compensate for these challenges by building alternatives ‘from below’ through decentralisation and a multitude of movements and organisations have suffered from insufficient coordination and the shortage of joint agendas and organisation. This in turn has added to the final cluster of challenges to entering the mainstream, elite-dominated political systems, and to thus advance through democratisation.

Broad alliances for comprehensive reforms and related democratisation

Yet, there *are* opportunities. In several cases, even conservatives and employers realise, for example, that if they themselves are not to lose out, the increasing social and economic insecurity under global neoliberalism (exacerbated during the pandemic) must be mitigated by some social security. Conservative nationalists too say that they protect ordinary people. In India, for example, election campaigns are increasingly characterised by ‘competitive welfarism’. Rightists are of course in favour of targeted measures and favours in return for votes – often via related socio-religious organisations. Their political rivals too tend to offer paternalistic public benefits and handouts. Similar patterns are common in several other national and local contexts. But even though the negative aspects of populist paternalistic welfarism must be criticised, the very focus on social security in the political discourse is an open window for campaigns in favour of alternatives based on solidarity and equal rights.

In this context there are also signs of increasing awareness among centre-leftist actors of the need for a concatenation of more comprehensive reforms, to attract followers with diverse specific interests, and to convince them that there is a credible agenda that will pay off in the long run.

The same applies to formats for democratic consultations, negotiations and partnership governance between the various parties regarding, for example, economic and labour market issues and how to fight corruption. This is to enable labour leaders, managers, activists and other concerned parties to trust and respect agreements on broader related topics than wages, short term returns and specific issues only. In fact, it was even very flawed institutionalised consultations of this kind that made Tunisia a short-lived exception during the Arab Spring.

Most importantly, the book shows that change is possible primarily by building broad alliances *and* related democratic governance for reform packages based on common interests beyond the conventional employer-employee relations.

Entry points

Irrespective of the different contexts outlined in the book, 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, racism and more. The struggle against colonial and caste oppression in south India, for example, is the root cause of the current resistance in the area 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 about 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-renown reinvention of social democratic-oriented development in the context of political and administrative decentralisation.

About the same time in Indonesia, cultural workers and journalists called to mind the importance of similar ideas in their country's freedom struggle. This became crucial in the rise of the new pro-democracy movement, which in 1998 did away with decades of dictatorial rule – and which now objects to autocratisation. Similarly, much later, the reinvention of the left in Chile in the late-2010s was not only about fighting neoliberalism but also opposition against authoritarianism in general and the remnants of colonialism in particular. Under harsher conditions, the movements in Myanmar that now fight the junta have certainly had

to retreat to ethnic communal strongholds but mostly struggle for a democratic federal state with equal rights for all rather than ethnic nativism. Likewise, while the pro-democracy movements in Syria during the ‘Arab Spring’ were brutally repressed, their revival is now crucial if the fall of Assad’s dictatorship is not to be followed by new disasters. And the young women who not so long ago stood up against religious conservative nationalism in Iran proved the importance of the resistance of the weak. Just as the struggle for human and equal civil rights is 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 reforms. 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 years of dictatorship. In spite of this, progressive actors proved ten years later 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 advisors¹⁰, came together around 2010 in an effort to improve a public health proposal that had been shelved, to mobilise even broader support and to successfully persuade the parliament to accept their reforms. The progressives could have continued their joint work, but they were short of follow-up policies and politics, so they disintegrated. Yet, that failure was far from inevitable. Rather, it pointed to the importance of having a series of reform proposals, and to also include ideas and demands for the institution of democratic partnership governance.

The third more advanced opening for progressive alternatives is the combination of broad alliances for welfare reforms and inclusive development. Kerala stands out in this regard too. The problems of relating the impressive attempts at local alternatives to the wider society and 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. To handle the floods as well as Covid 19, decentralised government in cooperation with civil society proved crucial. Would this in turn generate a new wave of progressive popular engagement? While conservatives nourished religious loyalties, the left-front state government added resources for universal welfare schemes *and* invested in a new alternative, high-tech knowledge-based development that would be inclusive of unemployed people in the villages too. The innovative financing of these initiatives (by attracting financiers while holding on to public decisions on what their capital should invest in) was subsequently blocked by the conservative nationalist government in New Delhi. But there are new attempts to move ahead, not only by inviting direct private investments, but also by

¹⁰ Including with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

improving the skills and organisational capacity of professionals and workers. This will of course improve people's opportunities to get decent jobs, but it might also spur self-management of production and services, the establishment of new cooperatives and partnership governance involving employees, managers, investors and the government. The open question is whether popular engagement for these opportunities is already strong enough in face of the upcoming local and state assembly elections.

Equally instructive, the new emancipatory leftist alliance in Chile, *Frente Amplio*, and its young leader and president of the country since 2022, Gabriel Boric, also advanced by combining a critique of neoliberal policies, alternative welfare proposals and new economic priorities, in addition to the already mentioned human rights agenda. One source of inspiration was the similar ambitions in Uruguay. The subsequent failure in Chile of the many groups that sought to write a coherent constitution in this spirit was a serious setback, demonstrating that the feasibility of broad democratic alliances for alternative reforms provides no guarantee against poor policy implementation. But with lessons learnt there may be new, more successful attempts.

Meanwhile, *Partido dos Trabalhadores* and Lula da Silva in Brazil managed to counter conservative nationalism with an even broader coalition. The combination of pragmatic economic policies and welfarism is supplemented by a new emphasis on environmental sustainability and the scaling up participatory practices from local to regional and national levels.

Whether the much weaker renewal-oriented progressives in South Africa will also be able to move ahead and overcome the corruption scandals of the ANC and the narrow-minded trade unionism remains to be seen. A vital aim is clearly to reinvent the social unionism that combined workplace and local society organising during the liberation struggle.

Finally, the perhaps even more remarkable yet similarly vulnerable experiences in Colombia and most recently Sri Lanka demonstrate the options of alliances favouring reforms that combine concepts of welfare-based sustainable development, democratisation, and peacebuilding—reforms developed through cooperation between reform-minded activists and engaged scholars.¹¹ The new liberal leftist alliance in Sri Lanka even managed to win the 2024 presidential as well as parliamentary elections with significant margins against the long dominant neoliberal-oriented and corrupt political families, and to thus overcome the ethnic conflicts in the Tamil north too. But that it is feasible to advance against conservative nationalism by building broad alliances and developing democratic alternatives is of course no guarantee against additional challenges, such as the huge foreign debts of Sri Lanka, that President Gustavo Petro in Colombia (like Boric in Chile) is not eligible to run for another

¹¹ Including with the support of the Olof Palme International Center.

term, that the conservatives in Brazil are boosted by Washington, and that there might be electoral setbacks.

Alternatives from below but inevitable convergence

The primary strength of all 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, and not from imperial policies or universal doctrines. Yet, to gain ground in their respective settings and scale up, they also need to converge with like-minded governments and movements around the world, including in the North around issues such as international law and human rights, fair rules of trade, investments, taxation, work conditions, and more. And not forgetting the need to counter climate change and foster access to advanced knowledge and technology, and further, to facilitate cooperation on research and education on convincing new transformative reforms that may serve as rallying points for broad alliances.

The new government in Sri Lanka, for one, will not survive if squeezed by the IMF and Chinese lenders. Kerala's local knowledge-based development policies will suffer if left to the mercy of Trump's punitive tariffs, external investors' own priorities and the conservatives in New Delhi, or to strongman leaders trying (in vain) to copy developmental party-states. Pro-democrats in Turkey do need consistent support from Europe (including Sweden) instead of concessions to Tayyip Erdogan in exchange for preventing refugees from reaching the EU. And so on and so forth.

Generally, there must be international alliances among like-minded progressive actors for fair rules of global governance and development cooperation – if they are to avoid having to bow to the conservative nationalist actors within BRICS, or the US, or the global oligarchs.

The North and reinvented global cooperation

Internationally, Lula da Silva and other progressive Latin American 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 combatted 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 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.¹² It may be initiated, however, by umbrella organisations within the labour movement for international solidarity, such as the Olof Palme International Center.

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 the new Latin American approach of active politics of non-alignment in matters beyond basic NATO membership duties. 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 in four ways. First, to favour actors that foster broad alliances for progressive social, economic and political policy packages. Second, to promote the drafting of such reforms. Third, to prioritise support for inclusive political representation in mainstream politics, as well as of the parties

¹² 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.

concerned in policy development and their implementation. Fourth, to nurture free and accurate information, independent culture and academia.

Finally, 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 Swedish context in particular. However, as I have tried to show, the policy 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, including the South. Similarly, they suggest what like-minded actors from different countries and localities might wish to discuss in essential joint forums.
