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Development studies and the rise of conservative nationalism

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Once upon a time development studies were relevant, not least in the Nordic countries. This began after World War II when Keynesian economic policies were supposed to nourish democratic reconstruction in the North but also to contribute to modernisation and democracy in the South. This was part of the process of decolonisation in Asia and Africa, and reduced dependency in Latin America, facilitated by the UN system. Much of these ambitions did not materialise, even decolonisation proved tricky. The old empires were reluctant and the new built spheres of interest. But in northern Europe there was an interest in retaining national independence during the cold war, and to combine liberal and social democratic welfare-oriented development with international cooperation, along with likeminded actors in the emerging 'third world'. So, there was not just a pursuit for area studies but also development studies. Daily news bulletins still focused on decisions in Washington, London or Moscow, but also on developments in Vietnam, Brazil or South Africa. And amid the military coup in Chile, it was a matter of course for Olof Palme to take a telephone call in his kitchen from Sweden's ambassador in Santiago and tell him to immediately open the gates for the many people outside the embassy who were being hunted by Augusto Pinochet.

But the times they are a-changing. It is fifty years since fascism in Portugal was crushed by a wave of emancipation for democratic rule by citizens with human rights. The wave emanated from the resistance in African colonies. It spread around the world, until it was undermined by unequal globalisation. And now it has been replaced by a conservative tsunami of autocratic rule of citizens defined by historical empires, race, suitable cultures and opinions. A tsunami led by mercantile autocrats and oligarchs like Putin, Trump and Musk on the one hand, and party bosses like Xi with state-led capitalism in sweet union with free trade on the other, together with pro-business ethnic and religious nationalists, like Israel's Netanyahu, India's Narendra Modi, and similar European leaders.

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Sweden is a good illustration of the turning point. From 2014, a coalition government of social democrats and the greens tried to reinvent the "Nordic model', along with non-alignment, international cooperation, solidarity and struggle against climate change. But after just one year it began to crumble. First the doors were closed when increasing numbers of refugees from the Middle East and northern Africa reached Scandinavia. Then, the conservative nationalist party, *Sverigedemokraterna,* made rapid advances, and the social democrats responded by adjusting their policies. In early 2022, moreover, admirable support to the resistance against the Russian invasion of Ukraine was provided at the expense of cooperation with the Global South. And Sweden's decades-old policy of non-alignment and cooperation with likeminded partners, was scrapped within a few months, without qualified studies and democratic discussion, in favour of an application for membership of Nato. This prevented the conservative parties from turning Nato-membership into the major issue in the late-2022 national elections. But they were victorious anyway, claiming to have been right on Nato all along. So, the field was open for the new government, along with *Sverigedemokraterna*, to follow up with an additional reduction of global development cooperation in favour of partners "in our immediate vicinity'. The promotion of human rights and democracy via civil society organisations suffered worst. The issue of climate change was ignored. Support for development research was dumped. Refugee and migration policy was further tightened. There was almost no critique of Israel's invasion of Gaza. Support for UNRWA was trashed. Opposition to Donald Trump's imperial conservative nationalism was limited, except on the issue of Greenland. And the social democratic leadership had little to offer in response.

This is of course untenable, in view of our insights within development studies. Who shares the responsibility for the conflicts and devastation that the refugees flee from? How could Putin gain power with popular support for authoritarian policies to "make Russia great again'? And how could Trump follow suit by "making America great again'? Or Modi turning India into a Hindu-nationalist state? What made *Alternative für Deutschland* expand quickly, alongside with so many similar leaders and movements? And what is the difference between Putin's aggression and Netanyahu's aggression against neighbouring countries and people? Or between the slaughtering of ordinary people in Gaza and about a million in Indonesia between 1965-1966 – in both cases without any responsibility for some activists' deplorable terror? How was it possible to avoid critical

studies of whether and how it would be possible to combine Nato membership with the hitherto successful efforts at internal and external security through international cooperation on human rights, democracy and welfare-oriented sustainable development? And what is the argument for compromising liberal and social democratic principles by concessions to Trump and conservative nationalism?

In short, I think that it is now a professional obligation for scholars of development studies and senior practitioners, to ask how this could happen and if there are any dynamics that might alter this situation.

It is not an easy task. Given that the global rise of conservative nationalism has not been shaped by a major empire, like US-imperialism, but by local reactions to non-inclusive economic, social, cultural governance and politics, there should be many books on different contextual dynamics. Yet, the political tsunami is here and now. So, to contribute to the academic and public discussion in our own countries, concerned scholars decided in 2023 to pool and summarise the results in regional and local case studies in two books, first one in Norway and then an extended edition in Sweden, in cooperation with colleagues in Denmark.[2] Our main question addressed by the studies is why and how conservative nationalism has gained ground in not just Putin's Russia, Trump's US and our own Europe, but also in the Global South. And if there were any counter-movements.

But there was another challenge too – the issues are delicate. The problems are not limited to 'bad guys'' like Putin and Trump. They are also rooted in the negative effects of the old liberal world order, which must thus be separated from the positive aspects that in fact require strengthening. And in addition, the weakening of the "classical' progressive alternatives, which must thus also be renewed. So, some potential allies hesitated, especially in Sweden. Yet, the books have been written and published.

So, what are the major results? How did we get here? What happened in-between the positive post-war ambitions and today's tsunami of conservative nationalism?

From democratic development to political shortcuts and neoliberalism

[2] The updated and expanded book is 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. A summary in English is available at www.olle-tornquist.com

There were three foundations for the initial success of, for example, the two major colonies of India and Indonesia gaining independence in the late 1940s and building the largest and third largest democracies. 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 Pary, cooperating with reformist communists.[3] Thirdly, the difference the participation of new nations made to the UN. The 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 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, which their opponents did not trust.[4] Ahead of democracy, they said, there must instead be more solid states with rule of law and strong

[3] The Indonesian Communist Party, with numerous branch organisations, was relatively democratic and the third largest after the Soviet and Chinese parties.
[4] For example, the first major free and fair election of a communist-led government in the world took place in Kerala in 1957. Simultaneously, the Indonesian Communist Party won free and fair local elections in large parts of Indonesia and was expected to win the next parliamentary election.

institutions, the so-called politics of order, soon to be theorised by Samuel Huntington.[5] But in the absence of actors who could build and implement this political order, its advocates usually relied on the military, that 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 the Indian state of 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, with the exception of human rights, until the democracy movement grew stronger in the 1980s.

[5] One of the world's most celebrated political scientists and the mentor of Francis Fukuyama.

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. 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. Thereafter, social democratic party leader Göran Persson 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 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 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.

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 even the democratic forces 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, on lobbying and attempts at exerting pressure rather than mobilising and organising members, and avoiding 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 partiers 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.

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 Temar 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.

These examples could be multiplied. The situation deteriorated further with the fourth argument for liberal democratisation – the interventions against the "enemies of democracy'. The "war on terror' did the least to advance 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, most brutally 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 expanded rapidly through increasingly chauvinist and racist policies. The case of Sweden has already been examined.

Counter movements?

What if any are the signs of resistance? 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 limited industrialisation (with the major exception of the unfortunately dictatorial China).[6] But the fact that the conditions in the South differ from the industrial revolution in the North only substantiates the argument that progressive politics will not evolve in the same way. It is certainly an irony that so many people around the world suffering from the negative effects of unequal globalisation support conservative nationalism and 'strong leaders' rather than leftists. Yet, this does not prove that there have not been and cannot be alternative resistance and counter movements with promising potential.[7] In all the cases published in our books, many people continued to fight for justice, equality and more. Most importantly, as indicated in the above examples, many people only became attracted to the proponents of conservative nationalism when the 'old' radical ideas had been undermined and proved inadequate, especially when the combination of neoliberal policies and limited democratisation did nothing to improve matters. In other words, there is a need for alternative progressive politics and policies. And this is more an intellectual and political problem than a structural materialist one. So, there is hope. But are there any real signs of alternatives?

The most recent glimmer of hope are the Gen-Z revolts.[8] 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, Indonesia and India. 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

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[6] C.f. 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.

[7] C.f. Törnquist, O. (2021) *In Search of New Social Democracy. Insights from the South – Implications for the North*. London: Zed-Bloomsbury.

[8] 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

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 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 entirely, especially not in in the North. Yet, those who elsewhere do protest 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. A common pattern is instead to produce long lists of often incoherent demands and populist mantras.In short, a major dynamic of the Gen-Z protests rather seems to be insurrectionary pressure politics. First, mobilising supporters online, as well as on campuses and the streets, to compensate for the lack of a homogeneous working class with common workplaces. Then, intensifying actions and convincing reform-minded officials, politicians and often most crucially military officers too to abandon the ruling politicians in favour of a transitional government including experts who are on speaking terms with key activists. And finally, hoping that the new government will later initiate elections – and that the activists will then have chosen leaders and formed competitive parties. But wherehas this succeeded? Rather, 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 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. There are some promising signs to which we shall return.

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[9], 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 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 government in cooperation with civil society proved crucial in handling the floods as well as Covid-19, but it did not generate and sustain a new wave of progressive popular engagement. While conservatives nourished religious loyalties, the left-front state government added resources on the state-level 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. However, the innovative financing of these initiatives (by attracting private financiers while maintaining public decision-making on

[9] With support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

investment) was blocked by the conservative nationalist government in New Delhi. There were 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. Yet, much of the efforts have been short of grounded popular participation and mobilisation as well as of coordinating partnership governance. The broad trust in the ruling Left Front dwindled and it lost out in the 2026 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. Hopefully, for example, the present 'cockroach' youth protests in India are moving in this direction with a new party and wider agenda.

Meanwhile, *Partido dos Trabalhadorers* 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. This proves what is possible to initiate and gain support for – even if problems of governance and trustworthy new economic policies were then a major reason for the serious losses in the 2026 elections. In South Africa, moreover, 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 to build broad alliances behind reform (in this case designed by reform-minded

activists and engaged scholars[10]) that combine welfare-based sustainable development, democratisation, and peacebuilding. Even if then additional problems of governance, especially in the violence ridden areas, contributed to the electoral losses in 2026.

Alternatives from below and inevitable international 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 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.

But is there any interest in the North in renewed cooperation with progressive actors in the South? Efforts to counter conservative nationalism in the North must of course also be grounded within our national contexts. However, as stressed at the beginning of this essay, this will reach a dead end if even the current leadership in the 'actually existing' social democratic parties 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.

The positive aspects of the world order that was created after World War II, including the UN-system, has been put out of action. Neoliberal financiers and oligarchs seek support and protection from nationalist strongmen. In an uncertain world, trust is falling below zero and everyone must be able to defend themselves and find partners, with or between the great powers. The risk is so acute that politics, debate, culture and research in the peaceful Nordic countries will also be polarised and subjected to the same thinking in terms of friends, enemies, defeat and victory. That these ideas of power will penetrate domestic politics, social policy, school policy, cultural policy, migration policy and foreign aid policy. That the nuances, alternatives and ideas about solidarity, democracy, justice and sustainable development will be suppressed and marginalised.

[10] With support of the Olof Palme International Center.

It is often argued that solidarity beyond our 'immediate vicinity' is an outlay. Politicians use military terms such as 'front reduction' to avoid difficult issues such as solidarity within and outside the country and focus instead on what they believe will garner the most votes, such as security, restricted migration and the welfare economy. But cooperation on human rights, democracy and sustainable development between the global South and North is also necessary for our own security, to reduce the climate threat, to prevent conflicts so that less people are forced to flee their countries, and to promote fair taxes, trade and welfare. Besides, migrants are needed to keep our own welfare systems going. Reduced cooperation and solidarity will lead to further conflicts and reduced dialogue.

We must not allow that. This is an equally urgent issue for researchers as it is for cultural workers, teachers, politicians and other citizens. Not least the younger generation whose future is at stake. We must show how international cooperation based on solidarity is a prerequisite for saving the climate, democracy, jobs and welfare even here at home. We must maintain and sustain the possibility of imagining ourselves in others, and work for a peaceful, democratic and solidary, inclusive and sustainable world.

In this respect, I would argue that there is a particular obligation for us who engage in development studies and for related experts to stand tall.[11]

[11] To that end, some of us who worked with the books have initiated an open Nordic network to carry on our activities by way of interdisciplinary studies and public seminars on new forms of democracy and solidarity. You are welcome to join! See www https://www.gerlesborgskulturhus.se/info/nordiska-f%C3%B6reningen-f%C3%B6r-studier-av-demokrati-och-solidaritet