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Hope is not naïve optimism

It is a political choice

It was late in the evening. A cavalry escort brought President Wilson to the Capitol through a light rain, and the crowd outside cheered as he entered. When he appeared in the chamber, the whole room rose in applause. An eyewitness, waiting in an adjoining room, happened to glimpse Wilson in a mirror just before he stepped inside. He described the president standing alone, with a trembling jaw and flushed face, as clearly shaken.

Woodrow Wilson's address to the US Congress in April 1917, calling for war against the German Empire, might not be remembered by many today, but the justification - based on democracy and freedom - was inspiring, echoing across the world, all the way to my native Sweden. His famous claim, that the world must be made safe for democracy, was, above all, an appeal to liberty. Authoritarianism, in any form, will never give people real freedom.

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More than a century later, democracy and freedom face new but familiar challenges. Across Europe and beyond, right-wing populists and authoritarian movements - from Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Marine Le Pen in France, from Italy's Fratelli d'Italia to Donald Trump in the United States - attack freedom by deploying a politics of fear. Migrants are cast as existential threats. Cultural diversity is portrayed as decay. Democratic institutions are framed as conspiracies against 'the real people.'

The defining feature of populism is not only its critique of elites but its claim to a monopoly on representation. Orbán does not merely argue that Brussels bureaucrats are misguided; he insists that only he embodies the will of the Hungarian nation. Trump does not simply criticize opponents; he declares that any election he does not win is illegitimate. Le Pen's project is not political competition but national closure: a France purified of dissent and diversity. Throughout Europe, we find

national versions of these demagogues.

Builders of a common future

Fear is central to their politics — and it is the very opposite of freedom. Fear narrows our imagination. It frames the future not as a space of possibility but as a repetition of threat. Citizens are told to rally around the strong leader, for only the leader can protect them from looming danger. In this worldview, pluralism is not a strength but a weakness; disagreement is not legitimate but treasonous.

But democracy can do the opposite: it can open the future. Other paths can be taken. In the 1930s and 1940s, in Sweden, inspired by Wilson's call for the safeguarding of democracy, Social Democrats, together with trade unions, faced a working class shaken by depression and unemployment. Fascism was on the rise across Europe. But instead of mobilising resentment, an optimistic project of social solidarity was built: the *Folkhemmet*, or 'People's Home.'

Folkhemmet was more than a welfare program. It was a moral and political vision: society as a home where everyone belonged and no one was excluded. Leaders like Per Albin Hansson offered not only material improvements - housing, pensions, universal education and healthcare - but also a language of dignity and belonging. The working class was invited to see themselves not as victims of decline, but as builders of a common future.

Institutions and daily practices reinforced this vision. Public housing was not just shelter but a monument to collective progress. Schools became ladders of mobility. Welfare reforms offered proof that democracy could deliver security without humiliation. Above all, the labour movement projected optimism: a conviction that through solidarity and compromise, society could become fairer, freer and more secure. This was politics of hope in its most concrete form. Anchored in institutions, sustained by imagination, and carried by the belief that tomorrow could be better than today.

In fighting back against today's right-wing populists, we must remember: hope is not naïve optimism. It is a political choice.

The contrast with today's populists could not be clearer. Where Orbán and Trump preach decline, the Swedish labour movement insisted on possibility. Where Le Pen paints diversity as weakness, *Folkhemmet* wove differences into a narrative of belonging. Where populists foreclose the future by declaring it a site of endless threat, the Swedish project deliberately

opened it, insisting it could be shaped collectively and positively.

In fighting back against today's right-wing populists, we must remember: hope is not naïve optimism. It is a political choice. It is the recognition that democracy's strength lies in its openness — its ability to accommodate disagreement, to generate new beginnings, and to keep the horizon of possibility unclaimed by any one leader.

Politics must be more than fear. Democracy is worth defending not only because it protects rights but because it keeps the future open. The example of *Folkhemmet* shows that hope must be more than rhetoric — it was a strategy of real actions that worked, creating stability, loyalty and progress in dark times.

For today's centre-left, there are lessons. Defending institutions against right-wing populists is necessary but not sufficient. People need reasons to believe in democracy, rooted in their daily lives. That means coupling material reforms, on jobs, housing, climate, and healthcare, with a narrative of dignity, solidarity and belonging. It means speaking of the future not as something to fear but as something we can shape together.

Democracy, hope and freedom are not just values to be cherished. They are the most effective weapons against populism and fascism. Right-wing populists thrive on despair; they win when people believe tomorrow will be worse than today. But when democracy can be tied to a hopeful vision of freedom and shared progress, it becomes not only resilient but inspiring.

Now, more than a century later, Woodrow Wilson's appeal to make the world safe for democracy still resonates. But today's democracy does not primarily face threats from distant battlefields — it faces them from within our own societies and ourselves.

Against the fear-mongering of today's right-wing populists, our task as progressives must be to sustain hope: to clearly state that the future belongs to all citizens, not only to those who claim exclusive authority to define 'the people.'

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We progressives must ensure that politics once again becomes about choices. The neoliberal motto, *TINA (There Is No Alternative),* must come to an end. We must not continue as victims of natural forces, telling ourselves what we cannot do. We must return to politics as

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opportunity and change, which also includes winning elections.

Democracy, as understood by President Wilson and later by the prime minister Per-Albin Hansson, was never a promise that conflicts of interest would disappear. Rather, it was the recognition that such conflicts are permanent and that the task of democracy is to contain them within a shared and common framework. What democracy offers is a *modus vivendi*: a way for opponents to coexist, to disagree without destroying one another, and to find compromises that keep the common project alive. This is not a weakness of democracy, but its strength. The future of democracy will not be secured by abolishing division, but by ensuring that disagreement remains the engine of renewal rather than the pretext for authoritarian closure. Sadly, these days, each news report coming out the US, the long standing beacon of democracy, seems to be offering more authoritarianism, yet another step into the dark valley.

Democracy must not be a politics of closure but of continual renewal. Fear closes the future. Our role must be to open the future through democracy and hope. Any dreams about freedom can only be fulfilled through democracy. Or, in the words of Wilson: Let's make the world safe for democracy.



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