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Editorial Note

The COVID-19 pandemic shows no signs of slowing down at the time of release of the most recent issue of *LAPSS Politikon*. In fact, considerable research on the pandemic itself is now available, and we can also observe the first submissions addressing phenomena related to the pandemic among the manuscripts received by *LAPSS Politikon*. This fact reflects the interest of a range of prospective authors in the current developments. If it continues, it is likely to result in an array of articles and other forms of publication in the journal pertaining to the pandemic.

Another consequence of the need to adapt to the pandemic is that a range of activities, including research and education, have been moved into the ‘online world’. The full consequences of this transformation cannot be anticipated. Nevertheless, it is worth listening to and interacting with experts who have specialised in online education and research (particularly data collection) using online tools long before the COVID-19 outbreak. This is why, as part of *LAPSS Politikon*’s initiatives, the journal organized a webinar on 12 June 2020 titled ‘Research and Education in Times of Pandemic’ (see IPSA 2020). The webinar, convened by Andressa Costa and Dana Rice, featured presentations by Ruth Kerr (Federica Weblearning, University of Naples Federico II) and Dr Bojana Lobe (University of Ljubljana).

Highly relevant for conducting research that might result, among others, in journal manuscript submissions, was Lobe’s presentation on ‘online qualitative data collection’ (see also Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman 2020). A few insights from this presentation can be summarised as follows:

- Online data collection can be synchronous or asynchronous. The former resembles ‘real time data collection’, resulting in a high degree of responsiveness and interactivity, but also carrying the risk of quicker, more superficial answers and blurred lines between responding to the message and sending the message in text-based formats. The latter is characterised by a time lag between the researcher(s) posing a question and the respondent’s reply. Represented by mailing lists, social networking, blogs and fora, among others, it can facilitate more exhaustive and reflective answers but is more time-consuming than synchronous methods.
- Online focus groups can gather respondents from different locations that would be very difficult to bring together in person. When conducted online, the groups must be smaller than in-person. It is not advised to create groups larger than ten, groups of four to six are generally preferable for low engagement and two to four for high engagement. For synchronous text-based groups, the preferred size range is between three to five participants.
It is essential, same as with physical focus groups, that an atmosphere conducive to open responses is established, in which everyone is entitled and encouraged to share their views.

- Online ethnography involves, same as its offline variant, learning the vocabulary and glossary, observation, participation in the daily discussions of community, informal and in-depth interviewing online and offline, collection of blogs and screen shots and other methods in lieu of studying the production of meaning in online contexts through interaction and communication.

- Both these and other online data collection methods pose ethical questions that need to be addressed. For instance, in focus groups, it has to be ensured that none of the participants record the meeting without all participants’ consent. Informed consent by the respondents remains required, and it is highly advisable to take particular care to ensure that the data are stored securely in forms that were agreed upon between the researcher(s) and the participants (see Association for Internet Research 2019).

With the right preparations and understanding, online data collection can be particularly empowering for those who might not have the opportunity to collect the data offline for the subject of their choice given limited resources.

The presentation by Ruth Kerr looked at the other arm of academia, that of education, via examining the sharp increase in popularity of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) during the early stages of the pandemic. At this time, the combination of the absence of a range of opportunities combined with the greater (though far from absolute) accessibility of the internet made the MOOCs particularly attractive for those wishing to broaden their horizons or increase their qualifications and skills during the challenging times. Kerr identified additional reasons for the popularity of the MOOCs, such as quality (in many MOOCs learners benefit from some of the most renowned and knowledgeable scholars in the world), flexibility (quality MOOCs are designed such that individual modules can be used separately, enabling targeted learning) as well as accessibility (MOOCs are available on online platforms, meaning they can be integrated into existing courses, thus providing valuable materials at a time when in-person education cannot take place). These trends are not new but they have been accelerated by the pandemic. The ‘tale of the MOOCs’ promises to be an important one to follow for those interested in advanced in education and using modern technologies.

Turning to the content of the present issue, although most of the manuscripts published in this issue result from research conducted before the outbreak of the pandemic, they, as usual for *IAPSS Politikon*, speak to contemporary puzzles that will hardly become insignificant in a post-COVID world. The first half of the issue consists of two articles employing interpretive methods.
(Ceren Çetinkaya) and critical theory (Ander Arredondo Chopitea). Çetinkaya studies one domain of the Turkish government’s efforts to reconstruct ‘a neo-Ottoman identity’, that of Ottoman-themed soap operas, juxtaposing this reconstruction to Turkey’s European identity that seeks affinity between Turkey and the European Union. She finds soap operas as an influential platform to present the Ottoman Empire in a generally positive light, as distinguished from the rest of Europe. To the extent the soap operas she analyses are exported to other countries, they may also contribute to perception changes beyond Turkey. According to Çetinkaya, this identity reconstruction might further decrease the domestic demand for Turkey’s EU membership.

Arredondo Chopitea contributes with an article asking whether development policies, in fact, can meet their intended aims to contribute to equality and global justice. Using a Marxist approach, he finds these policies to be linked both to capitalism and to Western dominance, leaving sparse room to accommodate local demands. Although surrounded by a discourse of justice conceptualised via progress, sustainability or gender equality, their day-to-day operation, Arredondo Chopitea argues, furthers capitalism via a web of capitalist institutions, which he, referring to recent scholarship, calls the ‘non-profit industrial complex’. The idea of progress through development is fostered via a ‘charity discourse’ as the ideological underpinning of the operation of development policies. Rather than offering concrete solutions, the article invites further critical scrutiny that fosters more in-depth understandings of seemingly self-evident processes and may be the starting point for rethinking them.

Subsequently, Volume 46 features Hakan Sönmez’s analysis of how various democracy indices (Freedom House, Polity, V-Dem, and Economist Intelligence Unit) examine and capture democratic backsliding. Sönmez argues for approaching democracy indices with caution since they are based on complex measurements entailing a range of conceptual and methodological choices. Creating rankings of countries based on democratic quality merely based on a difference of very few units is therefore not advisable. At the same time, the indices are broadly consistent in displaying that the present is not the best time for democracy’s thriving, even though it is also not the time to declare the coming demise of this regime type. Hence, we should take democratic backsliding seriously based on the combination of the established indices, and use the indices as motivation for understanding the causes behind these tendencies.

The issue closes with Chetan Rana’s book review of an edited volume analysing the status quo and prospects for the ‘Indo-Pacific axis’. The review finds the volume valuable in its definitional clarity and contribution to better understanding of the economic and security challenges in the region and India’s role in particular. However, Rana sees the volume falling short of covering some
key policy areas with dynamic developments before the date of publishing of the book, and sidelining the role of regional institutions, ASEAN in particular.

Let us close with three final announcements. First, the editorial team has seen a few changes. We welcome Andrea Bregoli and Tobias Scholz as Editorial Assistants, and Jesslene Lee as Editor. We bid farewell to Bruna Veríssimo who contributed significantly over more than two years, and wish her success in further career. Second, as of the present issue, *IAPSS Politikon* is indexed in ERIH Plus which will further increase the impact of the published manuscripts. Third, our readers might look forward to the next issue which is scheduled to feature a special section focusing on climate justice.

Max Steuer Andressa Liegi Vieira Costa
Editor-in-Chief Editorial Assistant

**References**


Rising Ottoman Nostalgia in Turkish Popular Culture: An Analysis of Turkey’s Europeanization Process and Ottoman-Themed Soap Operas

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Abstract

This article contributes to the study of the relationship between popular culture and politics by analysing the reversal of Turkey’s Europeanization process after 2010. It explores how domestic dynamics can change social perceptions into foreign policy positions. Therefore, this article examines domestic dimensions and the current Turkish government’s identity reconstruction process by considering popular culture as an important dynamic in the relations between the EU and Turkey. The current reconstruction process from a European to a neo-Ottoman identity of Turkey is analysed via Gramsci’s cultural hegemony concept to understand the changes in Turkish politicians’ discourses and popular culture products more efficiently. Two famous Ottoman-themed soap operas are compared in terms of their content and government’s attitudes towards them. Moreover, discourse analysis and critical visual analysis are used to examine the representations of Turkish and European identities in the soap operas.

Keywords

Cultural Hegemony; Europeanization; Identity; Nostalgia; Ottoman; Popular Culture; Turkey
Introduction

Turkey, as the dominant Other of Europe (Neumann 1999, 39), has been experiencing contradictions in its relations with the rest of Europe throughout history, especially after the beginning of the new millennium. Walking in the streets beneath both the EU and Turkish flags waving together and visiting Europe one day without a visa has been a dream for most of the Turkish citizens for more than twenty years. However, alongside this fading dream, a governmental narrative aiming to create a society encultured by neo-Ottoman elements rather than contemporary European ones is starkly on the rise. A day in the life of an average student who takes additional religion classes besides the Ottoman language courses instructed at school is likely to end with them going home to watch their favourite soap opera about the wars between the glorious Muslim Turks and infidel Europeans. This scenario describes the ordinary day of a Turkish student for the last eight years. However, for policy makers and international relations researchers, this daily routine reveals much about the re-culturing of Turkish society itself.

This article aims to answer the question of how popular culture matters for both as a domestic policy means in national identity construction and as an instrument of soft power in Turkey’s current international position. Therefore, it analyses the shift in Turkey’s collective identity from European to a neo-Ottoman in the hegemonic project of the current government and through the lenses of soft power and cultural campaigns. From this perspective, national identity reconstruction intentions of the government can be recognised in one of the most famous aspects of Turkish popular culture: soap operas. After elucidating the concept of hegemony and describing a brief history of Turkey’s Europeanization, the following analysis will scrutinise two soap operas, The Magnificent Century (2011) and Resurrection: Ertuğrul (2014), paying close attention to their content, the stylized image of the Turks and Europeans they depict, and responses from Turkish government officials to the series. This analysis can also shed light on why The Magnificent Century is highly criticized, while Resurrection: Ertuğrul is supported despite their thematic similarities: the underlying reason is the different interpretations of the two series of Turkish history and identity. Moreover, when exported, the soap operas may be used as an instrument of Turkish soft power because they reconstruct the image of Turks for an international audience. While the former finding reflects the importance of soap operas as a tool for reframing the national identity, the latter highlights the possibility of reconstructing an image of a nation in the international area by applying othering techniques of Turks against Westerners as an inversion of Said’s Orientalism rhetoric (1979). The first section of the article examines Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony and its’ focus on media and elite class by studying the concept for Turkey’s Europeanisation case in the last nine years while the second part elaborates on literature review
and the roots of Turkey’s Europeanization process. The third section highlights the methods as discourses analysis and critical visual analysis that will be used in this article. In the fourth section, the analysis of the series and the discourses will be made and in the fifth part, the results of the analysis and researches based on Turkish public’s opinions are compared to see the relation between them. In the Conclusion, the results of this research are discussed.

Gramsci and the Concept of Hegemony

The concept of changing cultural norms in International Relations has been analysed for decades by different approaches, namely because these deep shifts precede other major shifts in both domestic and foreign policy. While some traditional theories such as realism or liberalism rarely take the driving factors behind changing cultural norms into consideration, critical theories have examined them through discourses or shifts in domestic policy. This article seeks to highlight the connection between the turn in Turkish foreign policy priorities and the rise of neo-Ottomanist discourses in Turkish domestic sphere. Did this begin from the top-down, and if so, could it be indicative of a more focused agenda seeking to reconstruct Turkish identity? If indeed this is true to any extent, such shifts in the prevailing domestic ideologies would fundamentally change Turkey’s international position as well. The link between attaining hegemony in culture and the media as a method for identity construction is captured by Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, which helps us understand the relevance of culture and the media for identity construction in the international system.

Although Gramsci, in his original works, did not specifically focus on the international dynamics of states, Robert Cox extends Gramsci’s thoughts to understand the meaning of international system (Cox 1983, 162). According to Stuart Hall, what makes Gramsci so important as a Marxist is that he was one of the first modern Marxists who recognized that “interests are not given, but politically and ideologically constructed” (Hall 1988, 167). Gramsci defined the state as a combination of political society and civil society where these two levels correspond through hegemony or direct domination (Gramsci 1971, 12), and result in a need for the analysis of civil society and culture.

Gramsci sees the concept of cultural hegemony as a way of domination which is one of the key factors framing culture as an important tool to gain power. Essentially, the concept of cultural hegemony refers to the creeping domination of one group over another by appealing to the vulnerabilities of the ruled group. This subtle but powerful form of consent targets the culture and worldview of the citizenry itself rather than enlisting the use of military force. Acknowledging the dimensions of soft power at play helps researchers to understand how ideas can reinforce or
undermine existing social structures via their imposition in culture. Gramsci (1971, 12) defines hegemony as:

“[T]he ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”

When hegemony is achieved within the civil society by using consensual means aimed at the elite class, it spreads and universalizes the norms and values of that class. In doing so it thereby establishes a perception of political and ethical harmony between the dominant and subordinate groups (Germain and Kenny 1998, 17). Gramsci’s (1971, 26) emphasis on the role of education and media in shaping the intellectuals, and using these tools as means of creating and sustaining hegemony to structure the consent of society created a new perspective in political studies with its focus on the significance of culture in dominating a society.

Neo-Gramscianism, which is inspired by Cox, in its original sense does not offer a direct contribution to the concept of identity in political science and international relations. However, according to Langman, collective identity can be considered as the primary locus of hegemony particularly given that Gramsci’s notion of the ‘historical bloc’ and self-conceptions, or expressions of identity are not just cognitively built but motivated, and religion and nationalism generally serve hegemonic functions (Langman 2011, 2). Gramsci considers both the state and society ‘complexes’ or frameworks comprising constituent entities that ultimately outline the world orders. The intellectual’s role in any given state then would be to bind the members of a class and of an historic bloc together into a common identity (Cox 1983, 168). Therefore, the link between hegemony and collective identity is far too significant to ignore when addressing these elements as they play out in the domestic realm of Turkish politics.

The clear presence of ‘big government’ amongst nationwide media can be considered a contributing factor in the reversal of Turkey’s identity. The revival and reconstruction of neo-Ottomanization after the period of Europeanization presents an anomaly which literature has sought to explore. According to Yavuz, higher education, mass media and communications have played a very critical role in the reconstruction of collective identity in Turkey. This is particularly poignant given the rising role of media and public education as instruments of the in sustaining the hegemony of governments in domestic politics (Yavuz 1998, 19). Additionally, Saatcioglu (2014, 87) emphasises that the transformation of the society is not related to the EU’s transformative power at all, it rather relates to urge of the government of the Justice and Development party (below: AKP government) for power consolidation. He examines the
ideological change occurring between Erdoğan’s first term and his last term. Such attitudes on the part of the current government’s administration correlate with actions that Gramsci or Marx would otherwise consider hegemonic consolidation.

The collective identity reconstruction process from Europeanization to neo-Ottomanization is usually explained with a focus on Turkey’s foreign policy objectives and its relation to identity. According to Günay and Renda (2014, 49), Turkish elites used the concept and process of “Europeanization” to legitimize Turkey’s foreign policy towards the Middle East. Therefore, a redefinition of Turkey’s identity on religious terms (Sunni Muslim) rather than secular and aspiring politico-economic terms (a want-to-be member of the European Union) will directly affect Turkey’s position in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In other words, as Turkey re-orientates its own identity, it shifts the whole dynamics of power politics in the international area. Additionally, as Alpan and Diez (2014, 2) argue, Europe’s transformative power on countries creates repercussion in Turkish politics, especially after the conservative government’s policies, and it makes Turks seek other advantages. Yet, if we look at the answer of “how” this change takes part in the society, especially in the Turkish case, the changed discourse of the political elite can lead to a change in public discourses (Aydın-Düzgit 2017, 14). Popular culture is neglected as an instrument of de-Europeanization in the literature. To fill this gap, this article uses the concept of hegemony (that generates a common sense mainly connected to religion) to analyse the dynamics behind the transformation of Turkish identity by taking the media, popular culture products in TV into consideration as the main avenues for the transformation.

The Roots of Turkey’s Europeanization

The clash of different identities has always affected Turkish society since its conception, and its ricochet into foreign policy as it has affected Turkey’s position in international system. Turkey is caught between two identities; the West and the East. To the bulk of society, these are equated with “The European” and “the Muslim” respectively. Such has been the dynamic since the founding of the modern Turkish Republic. The secular republic project which seeks to achieve the level of contemporary Western civilizations was initiated in 1923 by the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The society and the state transformed through several revolutions like switching to the Latin alphabet from the Arabic alphabet, clothe reforms abolishing the rule of wearing a headscarf in public for women, closing Islamic monasteries in the country and founding the new state on a secular system. After the end of the Ottoman era, Turkey adopted a new foreign policy approach which turned away from Middle Eastern countries and focused on building positive relations with Western states. Students were sent to European countries such as
France and England, to be educated and come back in order to assist in the progressive transformation of the country. However, it was not easy to erase the traces of Ottoman history which were based on Islamic leadership. Throughout much of this time, and the past was still seen through ‘a rosy lens’ and many perceived it to embody the glory of victories against its infidel enemies all around the world. After the 1950s, policy makers tried to mobilize a neo-Ottoman discourse to restructure the national identity. Such attempts failed because of the military coups which occurred when threats to the secular state mounted. Later, during the Cold War, Turkey’s self-assertion of its identity as European despite being the historical Other of Europe (Neumann 1999, 39) was strengthened by the country’s membership applications to NATO and to European Economic Community. The terms “bridge” and “window that opens from the West to the East” identified Turkey’s position in world politics, and became a prime example of Turkey’s ambiguous identity during the Cold War (Arkan and Kınacıoğlu 2016, 386). Despite Turkey’s aim to become a full member of the European Union after the Cold War, prolonged negotiation between the EU and Turkey, paired with a number of sceptical voices echoing within the Union about Turkey’s accession, have distanced Turkey’s chances of integrating into the EU. A number of reasons were cited by the European Union, some of them, including those emphasizing cultural differences, played a role in the change of Turkey’s Westward-leaning direction in the international arena to an Eastward one.

In 2002, Turkey’s domestic politics went down a path which has altered Turkey’s position in the international arena to the present day (Tüysüzoğlu 2013, 305). The victory of AKP would come to change Turkey’s formerly Europe-oriented identity in time. The party’s self-identification as a liberal (or progressive) Muslim party was a novelty. Never before had these two, stereotypically opposing attributes, surfaced in politics as successfully as they did with AKP. Turkish society was further instilled with hope. Alongside their economic platform, AKP’s commitment to the European Union full accession process was one of the most important factors leading to their victory. Even though the “bridge” concept continues to define Turkey’s geopolitical and strategic location, the meaning of the “bridge” gained a new understanding with the rise of the AKP government, particularly with the new foreign policy doctrine of Davutoğlu, who articulated his views in the book, Strategic Depth (Davutoğlu 2001). The new foreign policy objectives announced in this book was one of the factors which led to the reconstruction of the national identity of Turkish national identity. This reconstruction process started with the effect of Neo-Ottomanism¹

¹ Neo Ottomanism is a political project that aims reviving the Ottoman past in a variety of domains, including foreign policy, popular culture products and urban fabric. (Ergin and Karakaya 2017, 34).
in Turkish politics paired with a strong emphasis on religion as well as the aim of being a leader in the region with equal external relations with all neighbours.

The cumulative effect of discourse and narrative projected by Turkish politicians began to spread to popular culture. Once the active reframing of the Turkish and European identities in the eyes of the Turkish society was supported from the top, it became a hegemonic project. In addition to the rhetoric propagated by Turkish politicians, a new populist and xenophobic stream also appeared in Europe, largely in reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis. With the upsurge of populism, a strong emphasis on European civilization and Christian dominance in the Union increased the tension in Turkey-EU relations. Turkey’s transformation of its identity from European to neo-Ottoman has accelerated, as both the EU and Turkey succumbed to othering. The influence of neo-Ottomanism in the media and popular culture changed society’s identity and the image of Europe and turned Turkey’s head away from being a member of the EU. The beginning of neo-Ottomanist discourse effectively became the beginning of a de-Europeanization process for Turkish society despite the initial aim of neo-Ottomanism was to develop good relations with the East as well as with the West (Tüysüzoglu 2013, 305). These developments in society had led to a change in Turkey’s role in the international area. Notably, contemporary developments in Turkish foreign policy such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (below SCO\(^2\) membership process show that Turkey has officially turned its face to the East and, with Erdoğan’s hegemonic project, a new way of Said’s orientalism which targets the West instead of the East has emerged in Turkish politics. Even so, Turkey is still ‘waiting in the backyard’ of the EU. A significant proportion of the Turkish population still ardently desires to become a member of the European Union. In spite of waning possibility, its negotiations with the Union continue. Lately, its exclusion from the EU has been highlighted by politicians a key feature of its non-European identity to bolster closer relations with other Muslim countries.

Neo-Ottomanism has been the leading instrument in shaping the new hegemonic project of the AKP government. This project started with the new foreign policy doctrine of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Davutoğlu, and turned into an identity reconstruction process in time challenging the EU’s domination both in Turkish domestic and foreign policy. Contributing to Turkey’s de-Europeanization, this process is carried out through the discourses of Turkey’s and EU’s about Turkey’s everlasting accession process and the cultural differences between the two actors. These discourses have echoed in the domestic realm and started an othering process for

\(^2\) SCO is a Eurasian intergovernmental organization which was established on 15 June 2001. Currently it has eight member states, namely the Republic of India, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People’s Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan (SCO 2020).
Europe in the eyes of Turkish society via different ways such as the change in the content of popular culture. The change in Turkey’s domestic attitude towards Europe is traceable in one of the Turkey’s biggest exportations to the Middle East, Turkish TV series, and has contributed to a reimagining of Europe against ‘modern Ottomans’ (contemporary Turks) and Muslim unity in the Middle East.

**Discourse and Critical Visual Analysis: Methods to Study Identity Reconstruction Through Popular Culture**

Due to its reflectiveness and interaction with the society, popular culture in 21st century should not be seen only as an entertainment tool, but also as a mirror for social processes. Therefore, in this research, two examples of popular culture products as a part of Turkish media are analysed to illuminate the link between the shift in the popular culture and collective identity reconstruction as the hegemonic project of the government. The reason why the products of popular culture are considered as data is that the way a large audience interprets or responds to a text or a movie should provide good evidence about collective beliefs in a state, society or political movement (Neumann and Hexon 2006, 14-15). Also, popular culture does not only reflect the cultural values, but it can also give a clue about an ongoing political process (ibid., 14). Therefore, considering popular culture not only as means of entertainment but also as a concept which should be taken seriously would be beneficial. As Duncombe and Bleiker (2015, 42) argue, popular culture unites “Us” through narratives that shape who we are and what separates “Us” from “the Other”; television and film can offer different messages contributing to identity constructions via emotions and visuality.

Soap operas are important products of popular culture. Generally, they reflect the social facts and politics of the given time. Their effect on Turkish society is too important to ignore due to Turkish society’s interest in TV shows which is larger than in any other social activity. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute report in 2015, 94.6 % of Turks say that watching television is their favourite activity (BBC Türkçe 2015). Moreover, the Radio and Television Supreme Council announced that Turkish citizens watch TV for 5.5 hours a day on average, which makes Turkish society the world’s biggest consumers of television shows (CNN Türk 2017). Given the length of soap operas in Turkey, which are not less than two hours per episode, watching a series in the evening is more than an entertainment, it is a family ceremony. Therefore, themes and changes in TV series can be presumed to influence society.

Furthermore, Turkish TV series have been highly popular outside Turkey as well. Through exportation, they can be seen as instruments of soft power exercised by Turkey on other countries, especially in the Middle East (AlJazeera Turk 2014). According to the Ministry of Culture and
Tourism, Turkish soap operas rank second after the US in global TV series sales and hit higher than $350 million in foreign syndication (Daily Sabah 2018), while being the most glamorous export of Turkey since 2002. The representation of values and role models of the East differentiates Turkish soap operas from Western ones and covers the existing gap in the markets of the Middle East. While the TV series are an effective tool for the international promotion of Turkey, the values they sell abroad are shaping the profile of the country.

Narratives and images in soap operas are mostly representations of social life. They interact with one another in a variety of important ways. The shift in the content of soap operas is illustrated by the two most famous Ottoman-themed soap operas in terms of (1) how their content reframes the image of what constitutes the “Turk” and “European;” and (2) how the Turkish government responded to them which is an important element to understand the government’s attention to and aim with soap operas when the Ottoman history is the subject. Due to the research focus on the discourse of politicians and popular culture products, the methodology of this article is qualitative. Two specific soap operas, Magnificent Century and Resurrection: Ertuğrul, are chosen as the primary “datasets” of this research due to their success in rating figures; they both have taken the first place in rating lists as well as in exportation rates (Dizisi 2019a; Dizisi 2019b).

Due to the focus on representations of different identities and their effects in the international arena, contemporary discourse is viewed as a dominant representation of how these identities are shifting over a relatively short period of time. Recognizing these shifts helps understand the situation where power is maintained and moulded via the aid of culture (Neumann 2011, 70). Therefore, this article relies upon both a discourse analysis of statements on Turkish politicians’ attitudes towards two soap operas as well as the narratives implemented in the soap operas themselves, which create the image of “Europe”. As Arkan and Kınacıoğlu (2016, 285) argue, discursive practices and representation relocate Turkey in the world and led to a mutual construction of identities between the EU and Turkey. In addition to the discourse analysis, critical visual analysis is used as a supporting method to analyse scenes from two soap operas. Selected images from the series show their representative power on identities, since the images have the potential to shape what can and cannot be seen in politics (Bleiker 2015, 884), and they have become increasingly central to the cultural construction of social life. For this reason, they can be considered as affected from social conditions, and therefore as much an influencer as well as a reflection of changing perceptions (Rose 2001, 6).
The Shift Towards Neo-Ottomanism in the Media and the Popular Culture of Turkey

Although the processes of identity construction started at the international level with the discourses and new foreign policy doctrines of the government, it did not take long to observe a similar shift in the collective social identity. This discourse reverberated into daily life and found a place in the popular culture, ultimately facilitating the government’s hegemonic project of Neo-Ottoman identity construction led to a shift in Turkey’s Europeanization process. As can be seen in the Gramscian concept, exercising hard power might not always be the best possible way to gain power, but power can be gained by winning consent; different platforms such as education or media may become constitutive elements of civil society (Gramsci 1971). Both the education system and media can be tools which the dominant class develops to uphold its hegemony in civil society, not by being reflective on societal consensus but by manipulating (Hall 1982, 57). Once this level is reached, they then wield the power to shape an entire generation. The reason for the changed attitude of the government through a new identity construction process found a place in the society can be observed as the effect of changed media (Yavuz 1998, 19) and regulation in school curricula with more focus on religious classes and Ottoman language.

Since 2010, Turkey’s new generation of history-themed series have been centering on Ottoman history, and more than 15 TV series and several movies with the Ottoman theme have been produced. Two of them were successful enough to get the attention of the government, even to create polemics in politics, and showed how popular culture can be utilized as an effective tool in world politics for nation building purposes. Moreover, as it becomes clear from the following analysis, the export of Turkish soap operas changed from love-themed TV series to Ottoman-themed soap operas, where we can clearly see the growing interest in Ottoman idea in the 21st century throughout the Middle Eastern countries. The vice General Manager of TRT, the national TV channel of Turkey which televises the series, declared that Resurrection: Ertuğrul has been exported to more than 60 countries, mostly to the Gulf region (TRT Haber 2017). In addition to this, The Magnificent Century has reached more than 500 million viewers all around the world (Hürriyet 2019). The conqueror role of Turkish soap opera continues particularly with the theme of Ottoman Empire as “The conqueror of the world,” and the valiance presented by this image has a major influence on the region in that it reshapes societal perspective.

The Magnificent Century (IMDb 2011) and Resurrection: Ertuğrul (IMDb 2014) are the two Turkish soap operas in which the two different “glory” periods of the Ottoman Empire are presented. Despite their similar historical themes, the former has been criticized strongly by the AKP government while the latter has been explicitly supported by the government. Nevertheless,
the reason for both supports and critiques of the government is the faithfulness of the series to the original “glory” and “tradition” of the Empire. The government’s way of glorifying the past to create a new national identity is an example of inventing tradition by means of referencing a collective Muslim-Turk past and formalizing, even ritualizing, this concept via media to serve government interests (see Hobsbawm 1983, 1-14). Moreover, the common point of the two series is the presentation of “Europe” in a very different way than the society used to see it. Representations of Western and Eastern characters and their relations with each other indicate the effects of the currently ongoing de-Europeanization process on the society.

The soap operas are riddled with othering elements where Europe is reframed. The presentation of European characters and countries in such a way is dismantling the idea of Europe which had been constructed by the former governments of Turkey since the foundation of Turkish Republic. The divisions between “Us” and “the Other” are generally based on religious differences, such as presenting a war and its participating parties as Muslims versus Christians rather than focusing on two states’ or nations’ rivalries. Additionally, both projects present “The European” as the infidel, arrogant, reveller and coward; while presenting “The Ottoman” as the sultans, the believers, decisive, hard-working, and fair. Likewise, the emphasis on jihad and martyrdom are at the centre of every war scene.

The Magnificent Century: The Glory of the Past

The Ottoman concept trend in TV series started with “The Magnificent Century”, which sparked both a debate among historians and a discussion in politics. The theme of the series is based on the life of Sultan Süleyman, who is known as the Magnificent or Lawmaker Süleyman, and victories of the Ottoman Empire in the reign of Sultan Süleyman, which lasted for 46 years. Alongside victories, stories about fights for the throne and plots among Hürrrem Sultan and other women drew the attention of society. This soap opera also focuses on the relationships between the members of the imperial household, particularly romantic entanglements, and rivalries. Throughout the four seasons of the series, the great achievements of the Ottoman Empire, both domestically and internationally and the idea of being the leader of all the Muslims were presented constantly.

Wars with the Crusaders and the presentation of Christian enemies as cruel, unfair and lazy was one of the main concepts of the soap opera. For instance, the 26th episode of the series is centred around the Battle of Mohacs, which was fought between the forces of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, and resulted in the victory of the latter. During the 4th episode, while the king of Hungary, II. Lajos (Louis) was portrayed in his fancy palace and having fun with different women, Sultan Süleyman was shown as working hard on the strategies just before the
battle between the parties (See Figure 1). However, despite the weak image of the European powers and focus on the wars among Muslims and Christians, the emphasis on domestic peace in the Empire was strong. The way of framing the Empire as a multicultural environment where people of different nationalities lived in peace aims to show how fair the Islamic rule and the reign of Sultan Süleyman was.

![Figure 1: Two different scenes from the fourth episode of “The Magnificent Century” where we see the representations of Sultan Süleyman (left) and the Hungarian King, II. Lajos (right). Source: Muhteşem Yüzyıl (2014).](image)

Besides the heroic narratives in the soap opera, the emphasis on harem and the sexual life of the Sultan (who may have a girl from the harem anytime he wants) annoyed the government and led to interjections from Erdoğan (such as: “We do not have such ancestors!”) made while criticizing the inappropriate focus of the soap opera. He added that the Ottoman Empire was not made up of fights for the throne and harem (Arslan 2012). Echoing Erdoğan, the Minister of Family and Social Policies, Sema Aliye Kavaf, argued that it was shameful to present the glorious empire, which governed three continents for 600 years, in such a way. Meanwhile the deputy prime minister at the time, Bülent Arınç, indicated that Ottoman Sultans are also representative of historically Turkic values and that they should be protected by the law as Atatürk is protected (Milliyet 2011a). Negative responses to the soap opera about its incorrect presentation of the Ottoman past went beyond verbal backlash; legal steps were also taken to vindicate the magnificence of the Empire. Although the producer’s explanation on the series is clear in that it is a historical fiction soap opera, the critiques from the conservative government did not disappear. In 2012, AKP even submitted a bill of law to the parliament where they asked for a sanction to be
imposed on *The Magnificent Century*. Still, the soap opera continued until 2014 with a big rating success.

No matter what the government officials said, the flashiness of the series and the presentation of the past in such a glorious way had an illusory effect upon its viewership and hooked a large audience. Moreover, the theme of “conquering the world”, and the idea of “being more powerful than any other country” emboldened prevailing nationalistic urges existing within the society. The series was the most expensive Turkish television drama ever made (Tüzün and Şen 2014, 64) and it was exported to 52 countries, including the USA, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and various Middle Eastern and Balkan countries, reaching about 350-400 million viewers (AlJazeera Turk 2014). Also, according to the data from Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2015, the series had reached 400 million people in nearly 60 countries, despite the fact that the length of each episode exceeded two hours. In spite of the critiques from the government claiming that the serial does not reflect the real glory of the Empire and that it is just an object for superficial tabloids, the series was unprecedentedly successful at presenting its conception of history by re-imposing the ideas of palace culture and empire, political Islam, and martyrdom both to Turkish society and other parts of the world.

**Resurrection: Ertuğrul: Where the Glory Starts**

The other soap opera featuring the theme of the Ottoman Empire is entitled *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*. It is a historical adventure series which is based on the history of Muslim Oghuz Turks. It takes place in the 13th century and narrates the foundation of the Ottoman Empire with a strong emphasis on the harmony between Turkishness and Islam. The series centers around the life of Ertuğrul Bey, the father of Osman I, who was the founder of the Ottoman Empire. The series was in its 5th season in 2019. Each season describes different periods of the foundation of the Ottoman Empire, but it predominantly narrates the medieval campaigns waged by Turks against the Christian enemies. Despite the similarity of the themes between *The Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, the latter has received the support of the conservative government with its emphasis on the harmony between Turkish identity and Islam.

The very first episode of the series starts with Süleyman Shah’s tribe and their difficult living conditions. The tribe’s need to move somewhere else was the beginning of the foundation and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, in the first episode, the process of othering Europeans by drawing Süleyman Shah’s tribe as “Us” and the Crusaders as “the Other” starts with the scene where Ertuğrul Bey rescues some prisoners from the Crusaders. The prisoners are welcomed in Süleyman Shah’s tribe and “Turkish hospitality” is emphasised many times by different characters treating the guests with a great respect. In the following three episodes the
emphasis on Turkish hospitality continues by including all guests regardless of their identity, even the ones that could easily become a trouble for the tribe.

Figure 2: Turkish Muslim (Kayı tribe) warriors are praying before a conquest. Source: TRT İzle (2019).

This soap opera is a mix of strong themes related to the establishment of an expansionist state that will rule with justice, as well as the Islamic concepts of unity, jihad, martyrdom, patience and hope, all combined with a hatred for the Crusaders and their spies from within the tribe. The quote from the 97th episode of the series makes the idea of jihad and faith as well as the idea of glory and the leader of the world: “We do not fight for treasures or plunder, we fight for God’s sake and for the order of the world.” The given message to the domestic audience is very clear and effective in the soap opera. The representations of Muslim Turk warriors in the series while they are praying before the war (see Figure 2) promote the justification of jihad: Islam should be the leader in the world order. The show captures the Muslim nationalism expressed by President Erdogan who, during a referendum period, spoke of a bitter “struggle between the crescent and the cross” (Armstrong 2017).

Contrary to The Magnificent Century, Resurrection: Ertuğrul has had the support of the AKP government from the very first episode. The visit of erstwhile Prime Minister Davutoğlu to the movie set (see Figure 3), or the channel that the series has been televised, TRT, the national Turkish public broadcaster,3 for four years highlights the link between the soap opera and the government. The explanation of İbrahim Eren, deputy director general of TRT, demonstrates that the series is planned as a nation structuring process: “The series aims to strengthen the nationhood sentiment of Turkish people by teaching the audience how the Turkish state came into existence, through a

3 In contrast, the Magnificent Century is broadcasted at Show TV and Star TV which are two private TV channels.
combination of history and quality entertainment” (Daily Sabah 2017). Between the screen credits and the episode, the statement of “the source of inspiration of the story and characters in the series is our history” and its loaded tagline “A Nation’s Awakening” are apparent signs of the aim of the series. Despite the different comments on the soap operas by the government, the aim of the discourse has been the same; to sanctify the Ottoman past and to impose it on the society. In the cases of these two series we see the usage of media to impose an ideology on the society and the development of hegemony. Resurrection: Ertuğrul is directly related to the idea of the invention of tradition, given the way of self-assertion (see Hobsbawm 1983, 14) of Turkish identity both in the soap opera and in the supportive discourses of policy makers. Magnificent Century is indirectly linked to the same idea since the reaction of the government still has the aim to aggrandize the idea of Ottoman culture and impose it on the society. Despite the difference between the presentations of the past, in each of the cases the usage of Ottoman Empire both in the stories in the soap operas and in the discourses of officials serve the same purpose: the reconstruction of Turkish identity with an emphasis on religion.

Figure 3: Davutoğlu’s (left) visit to the set of Resurrection: Ertuğrul and shaking hands with one of the main characters of the series, the father of Ertuğrul (right). Source: Sabah (2015).

Trust of the Turkish Public in the EU Accession Process Before and After 2010

The Neo-Ottomanism project and its reflections on Turkish popular culture (which gained traction after 2010) had an important effect on shaping the Turkish public’s conception of the “Self” as “Turk” and the “Other” as Europe. This change in the Turkish public opinion on EU accession is clear in the results of public polls. If we compare the results of public polls before and after 2010, we see a change in Turkey’s trust in the EU accession process.
After receiving a candidate member status at Helsinki Summit in 1999, Turkey expected to begin accession negotiations with the EU as soon as possible. From 1999 until the 2004 Brussels Summit (where negotiations of Turkey’s full membership were to start) Turkey initiated its reforms for financial and political adaptation into the European Union and received the full support of the EU during this process (Akdemir 2018). This period would become the period where Turkey’s support for EU accession was at its optimum level due to the sympathetic attitude of policy makers and media channels towards the EU. According to research conducted by Boğaziçi University in 2001, 74 % of the Turkish public maintained a positive opinion about the EU accession process while only 18 % of the public expressed their negative attitude towards it. Moreover, Perception of Foreign Policy research of TESEV (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation) in 2010 shows that 69 % of respondents declared that they wanted Turkey to become a member of the EU. The 10 % who were pessimistic about full EU membership declared that their biggest reason for objection was the cultural and moral difference (TESEV 2011).

In 2018, we see a notable change. The Economic Development Agency of Turkey (IKV henceforth), a non-governmental research organization that works on Turkey-EU relations, published the result of their public opinion survey about Turkey’s perception of the EU. According to the data of IKV, while Turkish society’s support for EU membership is increasing year by year, hope that it will actually happen is decreasing. The support of Turkish society for EU membership increased to 78.9 % in three years (from 2015 to 2017). However, 62.1 % of the respondents said that their belief in the possibility of full EU membership is decreasing (İKV 2018). The most important part of the IKV research, for this article, is the elaboration of the reasons that respondents gave for not supporting EU membership. The most common reason for the participants of the survey is the fear that EU membership will harm Turkish culture and identity (25.2 %), while the second (24.6 %) and the third (23.5 %) most common reasons are the beliefs that there is no future for the EU in general anymore, and that the EU’s approach to Turkey has double standards.

Hence, cultural differences are perceived as the biggest obstacle for Turkey’s EU membership by the Turkish public. This result is parallel to what is reflected in popular culture products as a difference between Turks and Europeans between 2011-2019. Moreover, these figures indicate the importance of the discourses of political elites as much as the effect of media and popular culture products in shaping public opinion.

**Conclusion: Reframing Europe: Another Dimension of Orientalism?**

The rising presence of neo-Ottomanism both in domestic and international politics through the discourse of Turkish policymakers and popular culture products continues to support
the reversal of Turkey’s former Europeanization process. The efforts of the government seem bent on changing the negative image of the Ottoman Empire, and reminding the public of a forgotten and nostalgic identity of Turkey. Moreover, they are not limited to policy-makers. Reframing Turkish identity is quite visible in popular culture, especially in popular soap operas. Presentation of Turkish identity in a neo-Ottoman sense facilitates the indirect reframing of European identity in popular culture and contributes to the process of othering Europe in Turkish society.

The process of othering and framing “Us” is not new in world politics. Throughout history this process is used to serve political interests of communities. In the case of Turkey, we see the opposite way of othering than we used to see in famous studies, such as Said’s *Orientalism* (1979). In these soap operas, rather than observing a perception of the East by the West, we watch the West in the eyes of Muslim Turks. We find something quite different than Europe in the majority of Turkish society’s dreams, where the EU is always introduced as highly civilized and the defender of the oppressed. While people from outside the Ottoman territory are represented either as unfair infidels or as weak servants of the Empire, the rulers of the Ottoman Empire are framed as believers, strong and fair enough to keep the territories as peaceful homes for the multicultural society. This strong emphasis on cultural differences in soap operas is reflected in changing views on EU accession in public opinion polls, that indicate a decline in the belief that Turkey will join the EU.

The explicit responses from policy makers to the soap operas demonstrate that popular culture products can be used as a hegemonic project and an identity construction tool by the states. In addition to the domestic effect of soap operas on national identity construction, soap operas might be used as an instrument of soft power. The Arab world has been the biggest market for Turkish TV series (Tokyay 2017) despite the sharp change in the themes of Turkish soap opera as discussed in the previous sections. The reason for the huge demand of the new Ottoman themed soap operas from the Middle Eastern countries is not clear. Further research could show whether it originates, for example, in the feeling of having the glory of the past back from a TV screen, or Turkey’s cultural evolution in terms of the content of soap opera before and after 2010. Ultimately, it seems Turkey’s ambition to be the leader in the Middle East and its neo-Ottoman call already influenced the Middle Eastern countries. The common way of framing Europe in the recent Turkish soap operas is more than a coincidence; it is a way of imposing a new identity on the society while creating an Eastern style of Orientalism/Counter-Orientalism for the West. It seems like Turkey is strengthening its Muslim and Ottoman image in the world differently from how it used to, bringing new challenges to its EU accession prospects for the upcoming years.
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Development Policies: Do They Really Fight Against Global Inequalities and Injustice? An Alternative and Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines development policies in the fight against inequalities and global justice using alternative and critical theories, establishing connections between the capitalist system and development policies as a social phenomenon inherent to it and analyzing if these policies can address their abstract motivations and goals of justice and equality. The general findings of the article suggest that development policies contribute to the intensive and extensive expansion of capitalism as an instrument to impose and never confront Western economic interests. Moreover, the concepts of charity discourse and development imperative are introduced as the ideological foundations of development policies, which serve both to extend the idea that the struggle against inequalities and injustice generated by the capitalist system can and must be resolved within the framework of this system and as a device of social control and hegemony production from Western societies to the rest of the world.

Keywords

Capitalism; Critical Studies; Development; Development Policies; Ideology; Inequalities; Justice
**Introduction**

This article examines development policies in the fight against inequalities and global justice from an alternative and critical perspective. If there is one area of policy that talks about global justice most prominently, it is development cooperation, a field which aims at diverse objectives such as ending hunger, achieving gender equality, and ending economic and social inequalities: in short, achieving “development”. Historically, through these policies it has been claimed that these goals would be achieved in a relatively short period of time and, as argued in this article, without changing the economic structure.

In contrast to many studies focused on the quantitative measurement of the impact of these policies and those that place development policies as an isolated social phenomenon, barely related to capitalism and its economic and ideological interests, this article aims to establish connections between the capitalist system and development policies as a social phenomenon inherent in it.

Therefore, the article briefly examines whether the objectives and means of development policies are really based on abstract motivations such as “development” itself, fighting economic and social inequalities, discriminations and injustice at the global level, or are more influenced by clear and precise economic and ideological interests that clash with those motivations.

To this end, the article structures the analysis in three sections: the first one is devoted to a brief review of the literature regarding international aid, identifying the main problems and gaps. The second and principal section seeks to reposition the debate on development policies as a social phenomenon inherent to the capitalist system, with the aim of determining whether development policies really fight against global inequalities and injustice through examining the economic and ideological dimensions of these policies. The third section will focus on analysing alternative paths with respect to development policies under the idea of global justice. Finally, conclusions and paths for future research will be offered.

Critical and alternative theoretical perspectives, specifically Marxism and decolonial theories, will guide this article. As this is a conceptual and explanatory analysis of development policies, Marxism will help to frame the discussion, offering theoretical and methodological tools to examine the economic components on which these policies are based and their function in global capitalism as well as to analyse the dominant ideology behind the development discourse. Decolonial theories will provide valuable insights on the role of Western development policies through the notions of coloniality of power, knowledge and being, through the imposition of ideas, institutions and practices absolutely unconnected to the reality and the background of
impoverished countries, with the objective of maintaining a (neo)colonial control through these policies.

In this sense, the methodology used for this article relies on the use of the Marxist approach on dialectic, which, together with the theoretical framework provided by Marxism and decolonial studies, will enable the alternative and critical analysis of development policies. The use of Marxist dialectic as a methodological guide is particularly useful for the conceptual analysis of these policies as it provides methodological tools to frame the subject of study within the framework of a specific social totality by identifying and tracking the connections with other economic, political and ideological phenomena that influence development policies, and, at the same time, are also influenced by them (Kosík 1967). These links are set as a result of the analysis, which means that any apriorism must be avoided (Marx 1975a, 19-20) when it comes to determining other causes for why development policies exist and how they function in the framework of the capitalist system.

For this purpose, primary and secondary sources are used. As for primary sources, original mainstream literature on development policies and studies of the key theoreticians of Marxism and of the decolonial studies are employed to provide the theoretical grounds for the analysis as well as for the identification of the links between these policies and the functioning logic of the capitalist system. As for secondary sources, studies in the field of development and statistical sources of the main organisations related to development policies are analysed.

The general conclusions of the article suggest that development policies are not so much about the urgent need to fight against injustice and inequalities. On the economic level, they contribute to the expansion of capitalism by complementing - and never confronting - the economic policies of Western countries. Meanwhile, on the ideological level, development policies in general act as a device for social control and hegemony production by which Western societies seek to dominate the rest of the world.

**Current debate: Abstractions, lack of analysis, hackneyed roads and sterile evidence**

*Abstractions and lack of analysis of the causes that generate global inequalities and injustice*

Nearly every decade since the Second World War, a new paradigm on development has been established (Escobar 2005, 18). Each change has blamed the previous paradigm for the ineffectiveness of these policies, for the unsolved vices and abiding problems, and consequently new instruments have been suggested and some sectors have been strengthened at the expense
of others. These policy changes are always accompanied by a modulation in the official discourse of development, in accordance with continuous variations in the dominant ideology.

These policy reversals have been made through two channels: academic discussion and empirical evidence about the results of development policies. The idea of development has been theorised and then modified by Western scholars from the stages of development established by Millikan and Rostow (2015) during the 1950s to the Human Development and Capabilities Approach and ‘Sustainable Development’ promulgated by Amartya Sen (PNUD 2011) since the late 1980s. These changes have been made not only because of the evidence that development policies had poor results but also due to the socio-economic and political world transformations, such as the (political) decolonisation of the impoverished countries, the demise of the socialist bloc, the so-called ‘globalisation’, the securitisation of foreign aid or the increase of migratory flows.

A reading of the most relevant texts on development since 1945 suggests that a lack of analysis exists on the root causes of poverty and inequalities and that the analysis that does exist is full of abstract definitions. This article takes the definition of development set out by the Agenda for Development of the United Nations as a starting point to enable the construction of an alternative and critical analysis of what development policies are. The Agenda defines ‘development’ as a “multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people”, with references to the economic and social development and environmental protection made through “sustained economic growth”, “democracy, respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms” as well as “the empowerment of women” (UN 1997, 1-2). Similarly, in the Resolution of the General Assembly of the UN in 2015 about the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we find proclamations of justice, prosperity, peace, ethics and vague references to what development means as well as great declarations such as “leaving no one left behind” (UN 2015b).

In these texts, the Western idea of “global justice” emerges. Dubois (2000, 8-14) notes that the ‘ethical element’ of development cooperation turns out to be eventually subordinate or subject to the economic interests of donors; the most obvious consequence is that what is called ‘solidarity’ ends up being ‘a modern charity’.

Most of these analyses, in short, are incomplete or undetailed, carried out from the Western point of view, full of abstractions and deeply normative pseudo-definitions. Some of the reasons will be presented throughout this article.

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5 In addition to these texts, it is worth reading Truman (2015), Nussbaum (2015), and in general the OECD and UN Declarations on development over the last decades. Especially relevant to understanding the terminological evolution of development studies is Absell’s work (2014) on the lexicon of development.
**Hackneyed roads and sterile evidence**

Most development studies focus on a number of issues of some relevance, but they are constantly repeated. These debates generate some change but above all show evidence about the problems that have affected development policies for decades.

Among the main points of the current debate that serve the objectives of the article is firstly the impact of foreign aid, a central aspect for evaluating development policies and the relevance (or irrelevance) of these policies. The main studies carried out so far (Alonso et al. 2011, Clemens et al. 2012, Minoiu and Reddy 2010, Arndt et al. 2015) present contradictory evidence: some studies highlight a positive relationship between development policies and the growth of impoverished countries, mainly with regard to the increase of capacities, investment and government resources. These studies disagree on whether there is a positive impact in the short or long term and on whether this relative impact has the same effect on countries with a greater or lesser dependence on aid. A second group of studies, such as those by Dalgaard et al. (2004), Rajan and Subramanian (2008) have not been able to establish reliable relationships between development policies and economic growth (Alonso 2014, 174). Finally, there is a group of authors, such as Djankov et al. (2008) and Moss et al. (2006), who have shown the direct negative result of development policies. Doucouliagos and Paldam (2010) perform a meta-analysis of more than 105 studies in this regard and find that the aid has negative effects on saving and investment and a positive but almost neutral effect on growth. Of all these studies, it cannot be affirmed that development policies have a clear, large, long-term and sustainable positive impact on the “development” of impoverished countries, even less in the most deprived ones.

A longstanding discussion in development studies is about aid effectiveness. There are some authors (Easterly 2015, Moyo 2011) who base their analysis on the consequences and not on the causes of social and economic inequalities, who defend that aid should be more limited and focus on capability-building actions in ‘developing countries’ instead of providing them with solutions.

Other hegemonic studies (e.g. Sachs 2015) as well as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, claim that more aid flows are needed, based both on the needs of the impoverished countries and on a better division of labour among donors (harmonisation). There are also studies that call for greater involvement of the impoverished “partners”, in alignment with the needs of these countries to improve the effectiveness of aid (Freres and Novales 2016).

Finally, there are authors who think that aid should be “ditched”, arguing that it is the market and trade that will make development possible (Engel 2014), while Acemoglu and
Robinson (2012) continue grounding their analysis on the consequences and not on the causes, blaming the underdevelopment of the vast majority of countries and people in the world to factors such as the existence of weak institutions, the harassment of free competition, the lack of technologies or incentives for investment as if the institutions or technology were the inventors of the economic system and not the expression of its needs and functioning.

Although these discussions have generated some changes in the development policies, as indicated by Alonso et. al (2011), these studies could be characterised as self-referential, lacking a transdisciplinary approach that would explain the roots, causes and effects of these policies, and promoting capitalism “as the only path out of poverty” (Engel 2014, 1375).

*Some conclusions about the current discussion on development policies*

The fact is that the same issues have been discussed for decades, with very little theoretical ground or tangible and *sustainable* results. Some inequalities are temporarily reduced, others grow while many others are not taken into account. The ever-present impression that all advances can be lost if the economic situation changes should be considered a warning sign that lead us to think that these studies are missing the point. The problems on which development policies are intended to address are not solved in the current economic framework while the real factors that generate inequality and injustices in the world are overlooked. In this line, Sogge (2004, 63) states that these discussions are in fact “a theatre of shadows”, which serves to simplify the causes of global inequalities or to hide them.

The following sections will attempt to point out new insights of research in this regard, concisely offering a new framework of analysis of development policies from the point of view of Marxism and decolonial studies and introducing concepts such as charity discourse and development imperative as the ideological foundations of development policies.

**Repositioning the debate: Development policies as an inherent phenomenon of the capitalist system**

*The economic dimension of development policies: Contribution to the extensive and intensive expansion of capitalism*

To understand the *relative* importance of development policies and international aid in the economic scope, both must be characterised as social processes inherent to the capitalist system. This topic has not been sufficiently addressed by development studies, and in general it has been superficially covered, mainly by some authors related to Marxism and decolonial studies. In this way, Maestro and Martínez (2012, 814) place development cooperation “as an integral part of the global economic structure, and therefore inseparable from the structure and domination
dynamics of the global capitalist mode of production, distribution, circulation and consumption, over any other forms of production and reproduction in the world”.

Development should be intended in this sense as *the development of the capitalist system*. In economic terms, this means that development policies respond to the necessity of the capitalist system to consolidate extensively and intensively “the integration of territories, individuals and activities in the sphere of global capitalism” (Maestro and Martínez 2012, 816); and, on a secondary level, to the alleviation of the inequalities that the system generates by its own dynamics.

Without going into too much detail on the mechanisms of operation of the capitalist mode of production (which far exceeds the objectives of this article), when it comes to studying development policies, it is worth mentioning several concepts on which global capitalism is founded and which may help to explain the extensive and intensive growth of this system, in which development plays a relatively relevant role.

The first notion is the general law of capitalist accumulation. Marx, in his work *Capital*, demonstrated that capitalism bases its function on the appropriation of surplus value generated by workers, due to the private ownership of the means of production. This surplus value, that is the generation of capital from the activity of workers, is used for capital accumulation either through the purchase of labour power or means of production, which will be used to reproduce not only goods but also to ensure social order under a network of institutions and practices (Marx 1975a). Under this law, the accumulation does not cease, which partly explains, on the one hand, the interminable expansion of capital on an international scale, thanks to the generated surplus value and the need to place the generated stock in the market, and on the other hand, the growing proletarianisation of the world population, which has been gradually introduced into the capitalist mode of production for centuries.

Another critical concept refers to ‘primitive’ accumulation or accumulation by dispossession. The genesis and subsequent development of the capitalist system is characterised by a process of appropriation and usurpation of lands, monopolisation and concentration of capital, transformation of non-capitalist property into capitalist, and in general, the process by which the means of production have passed to private hands (Marx 1975a, 894-896). This process began in Europe in the 14th century and has spread ever since throughout the world, regardless of any other mode of production and social structure that has ever existed. It is important to mention that this process has not concluded and that it is never peaceful (among other factors, because of the class struggle of the people who are affected by this process, and who sometimes manage to reverse it).
This process of accumulation means, on the one hand, an extensive expansion of the capitalist system geographically, which means destroying other modes of production and social structures; and, on the other hand, an intensive expansion, which means reaching all possible productive sectors or using low-wage workforce. It is, therefore, an essential process for the reproduction of the capitalist system and what explains its international dimension since the beginning of the 16th century.

The international division of labour between centres, peripheries and semi-peripheries, which makes up what has been called the world-system approach (Wallerstein 2012), are crucial phenomena related to development policies, as it expresses the social structures formed from the early times of the capitalist system and it is intimately linked to the process of economic and cultural colonisation (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007, 13).

This world-system approach, directly derived from black Marxism schemes, and further theorised by Western authors like Wallerstein (2000), is useful to analyse and explain several current trends in the system: 1) the accumulation of capital on a global scale; 2) the generation of a growing (extensive) proletarianisation and a sexual (Federici 2016) and racial (Quijano 2001) division of labour, with consequently different remunerations based on gender and race; and 3) the creation of extended global commodity chains, where most of the exchanges take place. This determines what the centres of the system are, that is, where the end of the production chains, controlled by transnational companies, is located; the semi-peripheries, which are increasingly controlling the intermediate processes and some initial chains; and the peripheries, where production chains originate (Wallerstein 2012, 18-25).

On this basis, one of the main proposals of this article is that development policies and international aid should be framed in the logics and changes of the capitalist system. In this sense, some of the main characteristics of development policies and development cooperation at a global level can be briefly noted. Firstly, development policies in general and development cooperation in particular contribute to the continuous process of global capital accumulation. In order to ensure its intensive and extensive expansion, the capitalist system has to continue with the process of opening markets that were not incorporated into the global production chains and thus try to reduce the effects of the tendency of the profit rate to fall which thereby increases the proletarianisation of social strata (Wallerstein 2012, 17-18).

The contributions of development policies to this process are several, mainly: 1) through the application of financial instruments such as microcredits, business development services, the promotion of industrial and mining policies, the introduction of new agricultural techniques and the extension of agribusiness; or 2) by keeping the control of technologies to implement certain
basic services, such as water supply and sanitation, infrastructures, energy and renewal sources, health, among many others.

Secondly, populations that had non-capitalist modes of production have been introduced to the system through —among others means— development policies in recent decades. This process has been far from peaceful and consensual; on the contrary, it has been the consequence of the imposition of structural adjustment policies since the late 1980s, driven by major development funders, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and even the UN (Federici 2016, 73).

Moreover, development policies are carried out mainly by the central countries of the capitalist world-economy and by some of the semi-peripheral countries but based on different dynamics. This is particularly true for development aid, in which the DAC countries define what official development aid (ODA) is, which sectors to promote and which approach should be given to ODA. Development policies are, therefore, developed by Western countries almost exclusively.

It is important to underline that development policies are subject to the economic policies of the core countries and their priorities, despite the search for a ‘policy harmonisation’ that is never achieved. As Sogge indicates (2017, 32), the fact that “many donor policies imposed in the name of equitable development have generated unimpressive and even counter-productive effects (such as weakening public management and services)” has had, on the other hand, benefits for those that have taken control of those sectors, namely transnational companies but also NGOs, social enterprises and foundations.

Ultimately, development policies seek to reverse the inequalities generated by the expansion of the capitalist system on a global scale, but in no case do they achieve this. Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek to literally put an end to poverty and hunger in the world by 2030, the latest study on inequality by Oxfam (2019) draws attention to the unbridled increase in inequality in terms of income since 1980, at the beginning of the neoliberal era of capitalism. Nowadays only 26 people in the world have the same wealth as 50% of the population (Oxfam 2019, 28), and the vast majority of people who have been lifted from poverty in the recent decades come from China, India and Southeast Asia, while poverty has increased in sub-Saharan Africa since 2013. It seems clear, therefore, that if development policies are subordinated to the economic trends of the capitalist system, their declared aim of reducing poverty and inequalities is unlikely to be reached.

All that has been mentioned so far allows us to point out, on the one hand, that the capitalist system generates asymmetries on a global scale due to its own dynamics, causing
inhuman economic, political, social, gender and ethno-racial inequalities; and, on the other hand, that development policies, as a specific process framed in the capitalist system, contribute to these trends rather than reverse them. Capitalism is indeed always developing. However, it is an ‘unequal development’, which, as indicated by Maestro and Martínez (2012, 820), generates structural asymmetries between centres and peripheries in terms of extraversion (the export of the capital gains of the global commodities chain towards the Western countries) in obvious contradiction with the idea of generating self-sufficient economies in the peripheries of the world-system, one of the acknowledged objectives of development policies. To detract from this fact is one of the main tasks of the ideological component of development.

**The non-profit industrial complex - Current economic trends in development**

Development policies are not materialised only through international aid. In fact, this is one of the smallest flows, moving around 99,000 million dollars in 2017 by the member countries of the DAC (OECD 2019a). Since the so-called cooperation crisis of the 1990s, other private flows, such as foreign direct investment and trade in general, are the prioritised funding sources for ‘development’, while aid would be requested only in case of market or government ‘failures’.

Development policies are being increasingly privatised. The presence of mechanisms, such as the Aid for Trade or the creation of Global Funds, draw attention to the increasing participation of the large corporations in development aid (Sogge 2017, 30). In fact, both in the 2030 Agenda (UN 2015b) and the last Financing for Development Conference, held in 2015 (UN 2015a), the reference to the need for private funds is almost seen as a requirement, within a context in which the aid given by the DAC member countries is practically stagnant around 0.3% of their GDP (OECD 2019a), far from the 0.7% that is considered an appropriate level.

As development policies contribute to the economic expansion of the system, large corporations want to participate. This fact should not be surprising. One of the current dynamics of capitalism in its neoliberal phase is the process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, by which there is an increasing privatisation and commodification of goods and properties (Harvey 2005, 167), expressed in the return to private hands of sectors and goods that once were in the hands of the States, or under any another mode of production different from the capitalistic one. This process is led by the main economic complexes, that is, the transnational private sector.

However, this accumulation by dispossession is not only directed by private companies. In recent years the concept of non-profit industrial complex has been coined (Rodríguez 2017),

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6 The crisis refers to the significant decline in proportion of official development assistance (ODA) by the OECD states, as well as the beginning of the debate on the effectiveness of ODA. All this occurred in a context of strong neo-liberalisation of the economy (Washington Consensus) and the subsequent brutal increase in inequalities worldwide (see Perroulaz et. al 2010 and Sotillo 2011, 141-177).
constituted by those who execute the development policies, that is, the large international financial institutions (World Bank, regional development banks, International Monetary Fund), development aid actors (UN, EU, richest countries), private funds for development (mainly through foundations created by the largest transnationals) and NGOs. As Gürcan (2016) argues, this complex is an integral part of the contemporary global capitalist system and is closely linked with the processes of accumulation by dispossession that has intensified since the 1970s, resulting in the privatisation of social services, now managed by so-called non-profit organisations. These services provided by non-profit organisations are more exclusive, volatile and less comprehensive than those previously provided by the State, since they are dependent on external (private) funding (Petras 1998, 13).

In this sense, according to data from OECD (2019b), the NGOs passed from managing 49 million dollars of ODA in 1977 to over $15 billion in 2018, which highlights their increasingly relevant role in this sector. This statement is reinforced by the fact that, by 2010, more than 600 million people in the world had been assisted by an NGO (Barry-Shaw and Jay 2012, 16). Furthermore, the philanthropic foundations born out of the biggest transnational companies “provided USD 23.9 billion for development in 2013-15, or USD 7.96 billion per year on average” to development actions (OECD 2018, 5). Not surprisingly, the majority of foundations and large NGOs are American or European. A brief example that can synthesise the role of development policies in the production and reproduction of the capitalist system is the use of one of the tools fostered by development policies in a country: microcredits in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh in the early 1980s was a poor and dependent country, which was becoming increasingly integrated into the global production chains of the capitalist system. At the beginning of the 1980s, struggles and debates arose among a large part of Bangladeshi society, still mainly dedicated to agriculture, which demanded an agrarian reform, that is, a greater distribution of land and thus an improvement in the living conditions of the peasantry, since it was understood that rural poverty originates from an unequal distribution of land. On the other side, the main development actors (development banks and agencies, OECD, NGOs), defended that peasants’ poverty was due rather to their very limited access to the credit market (Gürcan 2016, 126). This last view was the dominant one.

As a consequence, populations that did not work under capitalist production relations entered the (micro) credit market. This supposed, firstly, that from that moment a good part of their means of production (seeds, instruments) had to be acquired with credits. Secondly, there

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7 LGBTIQ organisations, human rights associations, indigenous groups or other protest movements are not considered here as part of the non-profit complex, for one reason: their main political objectives would have a negative impact on the system, while non-profit organisations actually contribute to its expansion.
was a process of proletarianisation as these peasants became borrowers, since until then they had not integrated into the capitalist system. This proletarianisation meant a migration from the countryside to the city and its industries, which is a factor that contributed to making Bangladesh one of the main nodes in the production of commodities for the world consumption (and therefore, contributed to the continuous process of global capital accumulation).

Remarkably, every year the main development actors support microcredits as a development tool. It is better to finance microcredits than to enact an agrarian reform, which would be accompanied by non-desirable political changes. In this sense, it is estimated that the vast majority of the 2,000 NGOs present in Bangladesh are dedicated to microcredit (Gürcan 2016, 126).

**The ideological dimension: Social control and global hegemony**

If development policies and the non-profit industrial complex are fundamental factors for the expansion of the capitalist system at a global level and the impact of these policies is very low, null or negative in terms of putting an end to inequalities, the question of why there is a generalised assumption that development policies help to combat injustices and inequalities arises. Moreover, why are development policies criticised but at the same time maintained? Studying the ideological factor of development will offer new research ways to respond to these and other issues.

**Ideology and the charity discourse**

Marxist theories argue that ideologies are the expression of a certain historical mode of production in a system of ideas which materialise in laws, politics, social practices, policies and institutions and which are a fundamental element for the reproduction of the system (Gramsci 2017, 222-233). The so-called dominant ideology is the expression of the ideas and interests of the ruling classes and their fractions (Gramsci 2017, 201-203), and takes shape in political, religious, and educational institutions, but also in charity institutions and discourse, an aspect that is an open field in development policies and one that will attract our attention in this article.

As Žižek (2003, 15) points out, through ideology what matters is not so much its specified content as such but how it is functional with respect to relations of social domination, that is, the logic that legitimates the relationship of domination, which always appears hidden in the discourse. This does not mean that there is a discourse outside the discourse, but that there is no neutral descriptive content, since all discourse is at the same time descriptive and argumentative. However, what ideology does is precisely to represent the hegemonic discourse as something neutral, even as something natural. This is one of the distinctive features of the liberal-capitalist ideology and the Modernity project initiated in the sixteenth century (Lander 2000, 6-7). Aspects
such as private ownership and private control over the means of production, Western morality as a universal value or the claim of an objective and neutral science are critical assumptions upon the dominant ideology and hegemonic discourse are built but are at the same time absent or presented implicitly, precisely to hide those parts of the discourse that would be problematic for justifying the domination.

Just as there is a number of institutions dedicated to shaping and implementing development policies (encompassed in the non-profit industrial complex), there is also a specific type of discourse that is channelled through these institutions, which in this article will be referred to as charity discourse. This concept allows us, firstly, to identify the main features on which capitalism constructs a domination device under the pretext of charity (not solidarity, which would result in and as a result of more equitable relations). Secondly, it enables us to make an analysis with a historical perspective, comparing how the discourse of charity has been modulated throughout the historical development of capitalism. Since the economic and ideologic dimensions are imbricated, development policies as well as the non-profit industrial complex are the instrumental channels for the central countries to exercise hegemony and impose the dominant ideology through the charity discourse and thereby ensure the reproduction of the system.

Charity discourse, consequently, should not be misled with ideas of development. This discourse precedes the concept of development and includes more social and cultural dimensions than those covered by development policies, which respond to the current logic of the capitalist system. It is very likely that some ideas and practices of development will disappear in the future as they will be substituted by others. But charity discourse, as an ideological device of the capitalist relations of production, is a historical necessity, since these relations produce several harmful effects (poverty, inequality) that must be hidden to ensure the reproduction of the system.

**The development imperative as an expression of the charity discourse**

Development and its variations over the last decades are the ideological imperative that unites all the actors that constitute the non-profit industrial complex. But is there any satisfactory characterisation of what development is? Rist (2002, 21) draws attention to the lack of an unequivocal definition of development. Elaborated mainly by the UN or Western think tanks, these aspirational definitions share a normative character and do not express any concrete reality. However, they promote an ideal state that must be reached, since development is a ‘universal’ ambition that all cultures should share.

This imperative is one of the principal current expressions of the charity discourse and it is not entirely new, since it is aligned with the Western idea of progress, very relevant for the
development of the bourgeois-capitalist ideology as well as with Modernity (Mignolo 2007, 26). Development would be a transfiguration of the Western myth of progress, coupled with the idea of charity; overlapping concepts that have been expressed in different ways throughout the development of the capitalist system.

However, reality differs from what is defined as an ideal state that may be reached in the near future, which is the general assumption of what ‘development’ is. In this sense, ideology “does not represent the existing relations of production (or the other relationships that derive therefrom) but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals with the relations of production and the other relationships that result from it” (Althusser 2003, 141). Rist’s definition of development points precisely to that direction:

*Development consists of a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require —for the reproduction of society— the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand* (Rist 2002, 24-29).

This is the definition that we consider most appropriate when it comes to defining development; therefore, it is the one that is adopted in this article. It is important to pause briefly on several aspects of this definition.

Firstly, the definition highlights that development policies’ tools ensure social reproduction. Development can therefore be seen as part of the charity discourse which helps reproduce the capitalist system.

Secondly, anti-capitalist or non-Western social relations are destroyed as a result of these practices, which allows for the extensive and intensive development of capitalism. Similarly, the consequences of the historical development of capitalism and the colonisation of America, Africa and Asia are buried in the official discourse on development.

Lastly, these practices are destructive for the environment, as they are imbricated in the logic of a capitalism which is based on the axiom of interest and profit and not on the management of sustainable resources and production. According to WWF (2018, 22), all the resources that the Earth produces for a year are actually consumed around mid-year which shows the inconsistency of the development imperative with the reality of the system. Despite this contradiction (or because of that), the current general speech has switched to ‘sustainable development’.

Rist sustains that development is a belief which leads us to inscribe it within the current hegemonic capitalist ideology and the charity discourse that catalyses it. A belief is different from ideology because it is a collective certainty beyond all rejoinder, very effective for the reason that
it may be doubted in private but it must be affirmed in public, because it represents a hope (faith) of something better to come although everything points to the opposite. Likewise, belief is also different from ideology because it is not easily refutable, absorbs contradictions more easily, and ultimately because contradictory assumptions can be assumed without questioning the core of the belief (Rist 2002, 32-35).

This belief in development, operating as an ideological imperative, is intimately linked to the ideas of Modernity and progress, present in much of Western thought, which has accompanied the development of the capitalist system over the past centuries. According to Lander (2000, 10), the European capitalist Modernity classifies societies in many ways including the concept of developed and undeveloped societies. This belief naturalises the specific social relations derived from the capitalist system, it does not discuss the origin or conditions of its development, whether capitalist relations are just or unjust or if they generate inequalities.

These ideological processes are imbricated in what decolonial studies termed 'coloniality'. This is very relevant for the charity discourse, development and aid, given that the world-system was constituted not only under the need for global capital accumulation, but also mixed “with the racist, homophobic and sexist discourses of European patriarchy. The international division of labour linked a series of hierarchies of power: ethno-racial, spiritual, epistemic, and gender-based” (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007, 19). The decolonial studies claim that these colonialities, expressed in the spheres of power, knowledge and being, have not ended. On the contrary, they remain fully in force and are directly related to development practices (Mignolo 2007, 27).

Characterising the non-Western world as not sufficiently developed, with archaic, premodern societies, and therefore in need of support, justifies the domination of the central States and imperialist logic (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007, 14). Development policies cannot be dissociated from this discourse. In this way, the ideology of Modernity and the consequences of the capitalist economy will never be questioned in the current reference texts on development (Mignolo 2007, 25), such as the Sustainable Development Goals. In these documents is favoured to talk about the harmful effects of the system, which development policies are supposed to alleviate. In this sense, progress and development are something natural, applicable to all, universal, inexorable, ineluctable.

**The non-profit industrial complex: the catalyst of the dominant ideology**

As explained above, development policies are aligned and subordinated to the needs of the capitalist system. In the ideological realm, the non-profit industrial complex, constituted by numerous actors, such as the UN, the OECD, the EU, economic fora such as the G20,
foundations and NGOs, acts as the catalyst for charity discourse, an ideological device that operates globally, channelling the dominant ideology into concrete actions through these actors. Its aim is to convey the idea that it is an *ethical imperative* of the West to help the neediest countries, without questioning why they are poor, and hiding several facts. These facts include the following: 1) the capitalist mode of production is the one which generates those inequalities; 2) the institutions that finance development policies and actions ensure, in the first place, the global economic interests of the system; 3) Western countries, as the central States in the world-system, are actually responsible for the impoverishment of the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries; 4) development policies use the pretext of aid, and even solidarity, as abstract defences to extend the economic, political and cultural domination of the West; and 5) development policies will not succeed in ending inequalities.

In this way, Rodríguez (2017, 22) argues that this complex is “the set of symbiotic relationships that link together political and financial technologies of the state and owning-class proctorship and surveillance over public political intercourse”, mainly against leftist social movements.

In this non-profit industrial complex, there is a symbiotic relationship between foundations, NGOs, companies and the State. This is particularly clear in the case of NGOs, mainly financed by the State and companies in exchange for implementing social services previously carried out by the State – at a major cost (in the case of the central countries) - or not implemented at all (in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries). The work of NGOs is carried out under the conditions established by the donors in the sectors and countries that establish the calls, implicitly or explicitly accepting the conditions, approaches, principles and values of those who finance the services or projects.

In the neoliberal era, the system rewards foundations and NGOs above other organisations with a more explicit anti-system purpose, with the political objective of taking control of the state to make structural changes. In this scenario, NGOs have come to manage dissent, dissidence or desire for social change (Choudry and Shragge 2011, 507). Therefore, injustices and political issues are managed through organisations with no intention of fighting against established powers – because they are funded by them. As a result, their actions are far from endangering the economic or social relations of the capitalist system. On the contrary, they contribute to maintaining and spreading the hegemonic discourse and ideology, while increasing professionalisation and depoliticisation of the NGOs (Choudry and Shragge 2011, 506).

Although historically the first NGOs had a social base rooted in the idea of a global “social justice”, today they are disconnected from their original social base and connected instead
with the structures of power. This fact has, in short, clear consequences. Firstly, the fight against injustices is channelled through the same system that generates them. Secondly, there is a “recolonisation” (in the opinion of Choudry and Shragge) and an exacerbation of neo-colonialist viewpoints in the impoverished countries, where local organisations assume the neoliberal discourse if they want to raise or attract funds from Western organisations, leaving aside any questioning about the logic of the economic, political, sexual and social powers that affect them. Thirdly, there is a fragmentation process of social movements at all levels. As a result, local contestation struggles are not connected with each other, nor with the main global struggles, while the non-profit industrial complex operates globally. In this line, some causes considered fair are defended, while others, more radical, are denied. Therefore, some fragments of the discourses that fight against inequalities and injustices are assumed by the dominant ideology and discourse, while the other parts that may put the system at risk are discarded.

Accordingly, the majority of the civil society actors are embracing the so-called “ideology of pragmatism” (Choudry and Shragge 2011), which, in the end, is a functional attitude where the dominant ideology is not explicitly confronted.

This same pragmatism calls for “social change” in most mainstream documents about development, giving at the same time a static view of social relations, ignoring conflicts or redirecting them to “changes” that do not pose a structural threat. Reports from NGOs or United Nations agencies thus commonly affirm that, if current social trends continue like nowadays, for example, “It will take 104 years for Chad to reduce under-five mortality rate by two-thirds with current tax evasion rates” (Oxfam Intermón 2015, 10). Such an assertion seems to condemn impoverished countries to resignation, unless there is a very unlikely change in the system. A global taxation is claimed by Oxfam as a feasible decision, but we argue it would go against the logic of capital accumulation as would provoke a significant reduction in the rate of profit that would be unbearable for transnational corporations and would never be supported by core states.

The contradictions of development discourse are revealed in the example of eradicating world hunger. It is revealing that the 1974 FAO World Food Conference proclaimed that in ten years no child would starve. The 1996 World Food Summit delayed this goal until 2010 (FAO 1996). And now the SDGs claim there will be “zero hunger” in 2030 (UN 2015b). The reality is that today more than 1.7 billion people suffer from hunger in the world. After all, as Fukuda-Parr (2012, 2) emphasises when talking about the Millennium Development Goals, those should be “understood as a narrative -rather than as a development strategy”.

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Alternative and critical paths to development: Global justice and capitalism

The main proposition in this article is that development policies are not really fighting against global inequalities and against injustice. Instead, they are an inherent element of the global capitalist system which generates the inequalities they are supposed to alleviate. Through ideology and charity discourse, development policies and institutions impose an idea of justice in which these inequalities and violations of the rights of millions of human beings are not linked with the general functioning of the capitalist system.

Therefore, the question of whether there is any way that development policies may avoid reproducing global poverty and inequalities arises. Given that the research routes exposed in this article have not been exhaustively touched on other studies, there are only a few authors who have ventured to offer answers or alternative research methods.

Post-development studies perhaps offer a more structured critique to development, incorporating a hybrid proposal between Western capitalist Modernity and local knowledge, but is mainly focused on rising above the Modernity paradigm and what it entails, such as economic and cultural colonialism, in search of preserving diverse societies with different discourses and representations, and therefore with different knowledge production centres (Escobar 2005). In practical terms, the concept of “counterwork” is advocated, that is, the resistances posed by a diversity of peoples throughout the world against development, without there being a universal response to development.

Despite incorporating interesting elements, such as the proposal to focus on the struggles of the people and local knowledge to overcome the effects of Western modernity, post-development studies do not offer a clear path of how to do it, how these changes will be achieved at a political or economic level, probably because it is not considered the most important path to take.

Among anti-capitalist positions, Llistar (2009) proposes several measures to try to ensure that development cooperation responds to global problems and the interests of the social majority. In the first place, development aid should be “redefined”, based on a peer-to-peer relations and not donor-recipient, which is the current prevailing logic. Instead, aid would be more effective in financing campaigns of political advocacy and pressure on the causes of poverty, war or ecological damage, always under the excuse of “global justice”. The main actors would be NGOs from the North, which would be at the service of NGOs of the Global South.

As a criticism, it seems obvious to claim that no actor in the non-profit industrial complex would finance political movements whose purpose is to end the capitalist economic and political
regime. Thus, anti-system organisations are unlikely to obtain funds from governments, private foundations, banks or any other actor to explicitly short-circuit the system.

A more structured proposal is made by Maestro and Martínez (2012), who coined the term “anti-system aid”, consisting in the subordination of external needs (production and reproduction of capitalism) to the internal needs of each country. For this to be possible, these authors argue that it would be necessary to generate changes in two areas: in the world-system, in order to abandon the extractive logic of resources from the peripheries to the centre, by “confronting” capitalism and fostering a “solidarity globalisation”; and at the internal level of the countries, advancing towards a social democracy at the service of the working class and keeping the sovereign of their own resources. This ‘anti-system aid’ would have “the same practices”, “as well as necessarily new ones”, to “cut the noose and generate riot conditions” (Maestro and Martínez 2012, 817).

Despite the suggestive idea of “anti-system aid”, this analysis falls into idealism, because if development cooperation is embedded in the capitalist system, this means that there is not an anti-system option. Under the conditions of the capitalist system, another type of cooperation that is more horizontal and based on internal, non-external needs seems unlikely, although the possibility of cooperation among non-capitalist countries would be possible. However, this would not be called “development cooperation”.

In view of what is stated throughout the article, it is not evident that the solutions presented above are realistic, nor that they succeed in attacking the pillars on which global capitalism is based. Most of these alternative proposals are also based on abstractions such as global justice, solidarity globalisation, and the same language is used as in the development studies. In addition, they do not present feasible proposals or concrete actions, which makes difficult to consider these proposals as true alternatives to development and international aid.

There is probably no alternative within the system to the discourse and practices of development because it is an internal characteristic of the capitalist system of Western Modernity. In this sense, neither development cooperation nor its hypothetical alternative alone will put an end to global inequalities. The alternative would probably go through a profound systemic change, that is, an anti-capitalist political proposal (or several proposals, mainly from peripheric states or by subaltern groups), aimed at subverting the current capitalist regime in order to generate real alternatives that overcome the current situation.

Conclusions

Faced with the exhaustion of traditional discussions on development and international aid, this article studied development policies from an alternative and critical point of view, trying
to determine other causes for why development policies exist and how they function. In order to do so, this article conducted a historical, economic and ideological analysis of development policies and aid and situated them as an inherently capitalist and Western phenomenon. The section about the economic dimension of development policies highlighted the role of these policies within the development of the capitalist economic system and situated the non-profit industrial complex as the executing arm of these policies. Public-private alliances, micro-credits, institutional strengthening, aid for trade, gender equality policies (that do not suppose eroding patriarchy), reduction of polluting gases and aid for entrepreneurship are the face of the development coin. The discourse of (sustainable) development, progress, the ethical imperative of help, the fight against injustice without changing the economic base that generates inequalities represent the reverse side.

The charity discourse and the imperative of development, identified as a belief linked to Western Modernity and the idea of progress, are ideological mechanisms that allow the capitalist system to continue accumulating capital on a global scale and generating inequalities while simultaneously selling the idea that actions are being taken against inequalities and injustice. To ensure this process, the executing arm of the charity discourse, the non-profit industrial complex, is indispensable, even in those organisations that seem to do everything possible to put an end to these inequalities.

The current discussions in development studies continue with the eternal debate, the theatre of shadows in which the crucial points that generate inequality and injustices on a global scale are not touched and in which the true interests of these policies are hidden. In this sense, the insights provided in this article are an invitation for future studies and critical actions to examine in greater depth what the general economic trends of development policies are and how to best characterise the charity discourse on which development policies are constructed.

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Democratic Backsliding or Stabilization? The Role of Democracy Indices in Differing Interpretations

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Abstract

There is a great deal of disagreement about the nature and extent of the alleged democratic backsliding. In order to understand the connection between the conflicting assessments of the democratization process and democracy indices (Freedom House, Polity, V-Dem, and Economist Intelligence Unit), this article investigates the various methods of measuring democracy. The question arises whether the studies outlining a process of democratic backsliding are backed by adequate data. The comparison of indices shows that the pessimistic authors are in minority. Although the conceptualization, coding and aggregation rules in the indices are not always applied perfectly, they determine the level of democracy accurately. This article also reveals that there is only a consensus on a first reverse wave of democratization. The second and third reverse waves cannot be distinguished based on the latest democracy data, so it is also possible to call these trends ‘periods of stabilization.’

Keywords

Autocratization; backsliding; breakdown; democracy indices; democratization; hybrid regimes; regression; quality of democracy
Introduction

During the “third wave of democratization” (Huntington 1991), the research agenda was strongly dominated by research on the democratization processes of political regimes (Vanhanen 1990; Arat 1991; Hadenius 1992; Alvarez et al. 1996; Zakaria 1997; Diamond 1999). One of the most important findings in this research field is that the number of democracies worldwide—especially after the fall of the Soviet Union—has substantially increased. During this cyclical upturn—and the blind optimism that goes with it—little attention has been paid to the processes of democratic backsliding (Erdmann 2011).

Yet, since the turn of the millennium, we have experienced a rise in research on democratic backsliding. There is a turning point in the evolution of the quality of democracy, both in newly formed democracies as well as in established democracies (see data from Freedom House 2019; Coppedge et al. 2019; Polity IV 2016; EIU 2019). Numerous works have been published with titles such as The Rise of Illiberal Democracy (Zakaria 1997), How Democracies Die (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), Is Democracy in Decline? (Plattner 2016), The People vs. Democracy (Haynes 2018), and Authoritarianism Goes Global (Diamond, Plattner and Walker 2016). Although these titles suggest that democracy as an idea and as a political system is under pressure all over the world, there is no consensus in the literature about the nature and extent of this shift.

The debate is still open. On the one hand, there are political scientists who state that there is a period of stabilization. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2015), for example, find no evidence for democratic backsliding, and Philippe C. Schmitter (2015) claims that the evidence of the recent “democracy crisis” is based on selective inferences from qualitative case studies. On the other hand, there are political scientists who claim that democracy is actually on the decline. Authors such as Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg (2017) are representatives of this camp. In addition, Thomas Carothers (2004) attributes a major role to the US in promoting democracy considering the insufficient support for the democratic credo in various authoritarian countries.

The question therefore arises as to which of the two camps can present the strongest cards, and why the disagreement between the ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ camp exists. One of the research avenues that has been neglected so far is that the different interpretations may be due to the different conceptualizations and measurements of democracy reflected by the use democracy.

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1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Didier Caluwaerts, Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Free University of Brussels, for his comments on an earlier version of this manuscript, although any errors are my own and should not tarnish the reputation of this esteemed person. I am also immensely grateful to three anonymous reviewers for their insights that greatly improved the manuscript.
indices. A small difference in the conceptualization of what a democracy is supposed to be can entail large variations for mapping the democratization process.

A scrutiny of the literature makes it clear that measuring democracy is not always done clearly. The greatest uncertainty arises from the issue that there is no consensus about how democracy should be empirically measured. However, before researchers define democracy empirically, they must make clear how they define it theoretically. The term democracy is one of the most controversial terms in political science. Shortly after the mid-1950s, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss and his co-authors found no less than 311 different definitions of democracy (Næss et al. 1956).

In order to understand the connection between the democracy indices and the conflicting assessments of the democratization process, this article investigates the various methods of measuring democracy and the different sources of data of the democracy indices. Hence, this article examines whether the research studies outlining a process of democratic backsliding are backed by adequate data. To put it differently, to what extent have the conflicting findings about the alleged democratic backsliding resulted from the use of differing democracy indices?

Theory of democratic backsliding

This article is not going to deal with the process of democratic consolidation or the transition to a democracy, but rather with the reverse evolution. Bermeo (2016, 2) defines democratic backsliding as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy,” and Lust and Waldner (2015, 3) call it a “change that negatively affects competitive elections, liberties, and accountability” (Tomini and Wagemann, 2017).

Tomini and Wagemann (ibid.) found the literature to be empirically, theoretically and methodologically too fragmented, so they opted for a pluralistic understanding of democracy in a Dahlian perspective as a starting point for the conceptualizations of this downward evolution. According to Tomini and Wagemann (ibid.) the process of democratic backsliding comprises two separate conceptual phenomena. On the one hand, there is the ‘democratic breakdown.’ By this we mean the transition from a democratic regime to a nondemocratic regime, being either a hybrid2 or an authoritarian regime. On the other hand, there is ‘democratic regression,’ which indicates the transition within a political regime due to the loss of quality (see Tomini and Wagemann 2017 who have built on the work of Erdmann (2011)). Terms such as ‘rollback,’ ‘revert,’ ‘crisis,’ ‘recession,’

2 Leonardo Morlino (2009, 276) proposes that “an adequate conceptualization of the ‘hybrid regime’ must start with a definition of both the noun and the adjective ‘trapped’ between a nondemocratic (above all, traditional, authoritarian, and post-totalitarian) and a democratic set-up.”
‘erosion,’ ‘deficit,’ and ‘deconsolidation’ are still used interchangeably, so it becomes confusing what political scientists actually mean. Larry Diamond (2015), for example, indicates that there has been a “democratic recession” in recent decades, but he goes on to say that we are not experiencing a “third reverse wave.” These types of propositions make the author’s exact meaning unclear. In this article—following in the footsteps of Tomini and Wagemann—the terms ‘breakdown’ and ‘regression’ will clearly frame these phenomena.

**Dichotomous model vs. continuum model**

A number of researchers, including Huntington (1991), Alvarez et al. (1996), Przeworski et al. (1996), and Cheibub et al. (2010), view democracy as a dichotomous phenomenon, whereas others such as Arat (1991), Bollen (1990), Hadenius (1992), and Vanhanen (1990) view democracy as a continuum (Högström 2013). Both groups have legitimate arguments to justify their choice. Högström (2013) believes that we can deal with that choice in a pragmatic way: studies investigating the transition from autocracy to democracy (and vice versa) can work with dichotomous categorization; and if the level of democracy is used as a dependent variable, it is recommended to make use of a continuum categorization. However, there is a lot of information lost in the dichotomous model due to the lack of nuance (Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Elkins 2000). It can even provide us with a biased view, creating great expectations for the future of democracies, as it was in the 1980s and 90s. In a continuum model, contrarily, the variations can be unambiguously presented through the use of polychotomous measurement and a gradual scale of democracy. The indices in this study are presenting the democracy in a continuum model: Freedom House/Polity IV with a trichotomous categorization, and V-Dem/EIU with a four-degree measure.

**Democratic breakdown**

The first conceptual phenomenon is ‘democratic breakdown’ (Erdmann 2011; Tomini and Wagemann 2017). Erdmann outlined the transition from a democracy to a hybrid regime as ‘hybridization,’ and the transition from a democratic regime or a hybrid regime to an authoritarian regime as ‘democratic breakdown’.

Hungary is an illustrative example of hybridization. Hungary was classified as a ‘free country’ by Freedom House until 2018. Since then, democracy in the country has been under pressure for some time. In 2018 the status of Hungary was changed to a ‘partly free country.’ A direct breakdown from a ‘free country’ to a ‘not free country’ is rare. The latter happens mainly through rapid military interventions or autogolpes, steady encroachment of present elites, external interventions or mass mobilizations (Lust and Waldner 2015). The study by Erdmann (2011)
showed that only five of the 52 cases of democratic backsliding were direct transitions from a democratic regime to an authoritarian regime, and four of them took place before 1989.

There are two reasons the term hybridization has not become popular in transitology studies: 1) ‘hybridization’ can be used in two directions, both for the transition from a democracy to a hybrid regime, but also for the transition from an autocracy to a hybrid regime; and 2) even though the term ‘hybrid regime’ was preferred to ‘mixed regime’ (Morlino 2009), it is still a vague term and can therefore cause confusion in empirical studies that work with multiple regime categories. Tomini and Wagemann (2017) have consequently simplified the theory by omitting the term hybridization and calling any form of autocratic transition a ‘breakdown.’

**Democratic regression**

The second conceptual phenomenon is ‘democratic regression’ (Erdmann 2011; Tomini and Wagemann 2017). When we talk about a democratic regression, we do not mean the transition from a democratic regime to an autocratic regime, but rather the loss of quality of democracy within the same regime. Case in point, the US had a Freedom House score of 94 in 2009, while this score dropped to 86 in 2019. With this score, the US remains a ‘free country’ or a ‘liberal democracy,’ but the democratic regression is remarkable. The same phenomenon can also happen within a ‘not free country’ or a ‘closed autocracy.’ In this regard, we could call a hypothetical deterioration in North Korea, which is already a closed autocracy, a democratic regression because the imagined decrease happened within the same regime category.

**Methodology**

Since it is almost impossible to compare all existing democracy indices, this article will limit itself to four major indices: Freedom House, Polity IV, V-Dem and EIU. These indices were selected on the basis of two reasons. The first factor is that it is important for this study to measure democracy in a continuum model (i.e., more than two categories for different regime types) instead of a dichotomous model (i.e., democracy vs. nondemocracy) in order to provide the different graduations and transitions between the multiple regime categories. The second factor is that the chosen indices do not count the Schumpeterian minimalist ‘democracies’ as democracies, since the Schumpeterian definition does not support modern democracies in view of the fact that it reduces the democracy to the electoral process; instead, the chosen indices follow the Dahlian (1971) threshold: once a regime meets the requirements of ‘polyarchy,’ it can be considered as an

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3 If there exists no election with a minimum level of competition for the chief executive, then the country is a closed autocracy.
4 Joseph Schumpeter (1992 [1942], 269) defined “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.”
electoral democracy. There is even a counterfactual conditional: when Schumpeterian minimalist 'democracies' are included in the group of electoral and liberal democracies, then we obtain a more optimistic picture of the reality.

In the first phase, an overview and comparison of the four democracy indices will be provided. The sources of this phase incorporate the methodology papers and coding guidelines published by the democracy indices, the articles of political scientists who investigate the method factors of these data sets, and the data sets themselves.

In the second phase, the repercussions of the use of democracy indices and the different interpretations that result from them will be investigated. There is also additional evidence presented by exposing pronounced optimistic or pessimistic opinions on the transitions of democracies in the past 20 years.

**Comparison of the democracy indices**

Every data set project measures democracy differently and applies its own methodology. The four major democracy indices in this study are also not uniformly composed. Measuring a concept as disputed as democracy is always onerous, and some obstacles of conceptualization and measurement can never be definitively solved (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Coppedge et al. 2015), as will be demonstrated in the next section.

In recent years, large data set projects such as Freedom House and Polity IV have made some efforts to improve their methodology, and notable data set projects such as V-Dem and EIU have been set up. These indices rely heavily on expert coding, which is only reliable if there are clear coding criteria, but this is not always the case (Coppedge et al. 2011). The problems identified in the coding process cannot be easily solved. It is not possible for the democracy indices to change methodologies from one day to the next (which will be further elaborated below) because that can have a major impact on the time series data. It is also time-intensive to conduct tests on intercoder reliability in view of the fact that it requires an intense practical training before the coders achieve an acceptable level of coding accuracy (ibid., 251). Polity used to conduct intercoder reliability checks and training exercises in the year 2000, but after the fine-tuning of the guidelines, no intercoder reliability tests were carried out anymore. Polity records that the analysts have reached a high degree of coding convergence after the initial tests (Marshall et al. 2016), but there is a concurrent risk that intercoder reliability is actually analysts accepting other analysts’ judgements.

**Freedom House**

The first and most frequently used data set was developed by the NGO Freedom House and currently covers 195 countries (Freedom House 2019). This data set measures variables that are not necessarily components of democracy, including corruption, civilian police control, violent
crimes, willingness to grant political asylum, and the right to buy and sell land (Coppedge et al. 2011). In fact, Freedom House is rather a conceptualization of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The weighting coefficient of civil rights is greater than political rights, which is the main reason that the allocation of scores corresponds to the Declaration.

Freedom House analysts relate the total scores to a Freedom Rating: 1.0 to 2.5 for ‘free countries,’ 3.0 to 5.0 for ‘partly free countries,’ and 5.5 to 7.0 for ‘not free countries.’ For Coppedge et al. (ibid.), there are questions about this aggregation technique because the country coders have a general idea of the extent to which a country is democratic, and they could reflect their personal point of view across the different indicators. This ambiguous coding process is precisely the point where the subjectivity bias of the analysts becomes relevant. Bollen and Paxton (2000, 77) have found an ideological bias in the scores of Freedom House for the reason that it has systematically underquoted countries such as Cuba, Yugoslavia, and Romania, especially in the first years of its measurements back in the 1970s. Steiner (2014) has also discovered that the US and its allies achieved better scores in the Freedom House index than in other data sets.

Freedom House considers the political regimes as electoral democracies if they achieve an overall score of 20 or higher for political rights, and a score of 30 or higher for civil liberties (the threshold for civil liberties was added in 2016-17) (Freedom House 2019). Additionally, electoral democracies have to achieve a score of seven or better for the electoral process, which is a subcategory of political rights. Freedom House states that most free countries are considered liberal democracies in the Freedom in the World Project. This also means that some free countries can still be electoral democracies. Morlino (2009, 278) reflects on this issue as follows:

In the application of the term by Freedom House, all democracies are ‘electoral democracies’ but not all are liberal. Therefore, even those regimes that do not have a maximum score in the indicators for elections continue to be considered electoral democracies. More specifically, a score equal to or above seven, out of a maximum of 12, is sufficient for partially free nations to be classified as electoral democracies. Thus, in both uses of the term, an ‘electoral democracy’ could only be a specific model of a hybrid regime, but not a minimal democracy.

On top of the coding and aggregation rules, the collection of primary data is also a relevant process. Freedom House relies on expert survey data in which the country experts provide an evaluation based on their case-specific knowledge; previously, in the 1970s and 80s, Freedom House depended heavily on secondary sources such as The New York Times and Keesing’s Contemporary Archives (ibid., 250). Freedom House reduces data collection problems by not using representative survey data (which is the main source of EIU). However, the switch from one source to another—linked to some possible changes in the coding procedures—have jeopardized the
continuity of the time series data (ibid.). There have been no attempts to revise the previous scores, so that they are consistent with current coding criteria (Coppedge et al. 2011 who asked Gerardo Munck during a personal communication in 2010). In 2016-17, Freedom House made another review in its methodology to measure the indicators more accurately, such as adding the civil liberties threshold of a score of 30 or higher for electoral democracies. Although this was not a fundamental change in methodology, it does raise again questions about the integrity of the previous measurements.

**Polity IV**

The second data set is the Polity IV of the NGO Center for Systemic Peace, which comprises 167 countries and measures indicators from the beginning of the 20th century. The Polity Project (Polity IV 2016) has a less robust method: we cannot clearly distinguish the individual indicators from each other and the distances between the categories on the measuring scale are not always the same (Braml and Lauth 2011), which reduces the reliability and validity of the results. Moreover, unlike the three other data sets, Polity does not take civil rights into account. Democracy is therefore viewed from the point of view of the rulers (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). For example, Polity considered the United States to be a fully democratic country during the 20th century and a large part of the 19th century, even though neither women nor African Americans were allowed to vote until 1920 and 1964 respectively (Paxton 2000). This misinterpretation was caused due to the fact that democracy was viewed from a minimalist perspective. Polity analysts employ in-house coded indicators—which is a form of expert judgement-based data—based on an assessment of country-specific information in reports, academic works, newspapers, and archive material. Polity reduces data collection problems by not using representative survey data (which is the main source of EIU).

The disaggregated data from Polity has been made public but is challenging to interpret, which makes it hard to assess the data and coding criteria (Coppedge et al. 2011). The Polity analysts cannot explain precisely how the various components are coded in certain cases, or how the aggregation elements lead to a total score for a certain country in a certain year (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). Even in disaggregated form, Polity is highly abstract, and, on that account, susceptible to divergent interpretations (Gates et al. 2006). Polity combines six underlying factors, and the country’s score is the product of the sub-score of these six factors (plus the weighting system applied to these factors) (Coppedge et al. 2011, 249). Hence, two countries can have

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5 It is dubious whether these indices are properly regarded as interval scales (see Treier and Jackman 2008). There is no easy solution to this complication, yet, Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton (2010) offer some intriguing ideas.
different sub-scores on the components, but the same general score. Such lack of clarity yields a distorted image about the quality of democracy in those countries.

In the Polity data set, there are three standard categories: ‘democracies’ that have a Polity score from +6 to +10, ‘anocracies’ that have a Polity score from +5 to -5 (including three special categories -66, -77 and -88), and ‘autocracies’ that have a Polity score from -6 to -10.

**Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)**

The third data set, V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2019), started with democracy measurements in 2014. V-Dem analysts retroactively measure indicators until 1900 (for some indicators back to 1789), and contains 179 countries. The V-Dem Institute makes use of a multidimensional approach to measure democracy, with no less than 450 specific indicators, thereby creating the largest data set to evaluate democracies. There are seven different components included in the conceptualization of democracy: electoral, liberal, participative, majority, consensual, deliberative, and egalitarian.

In order to classify a regime as an electoral democracy, periodic elections must be free and competitive and receive the support of a broad electorate, and there must be freedom of association and access to alternative sources of information (Lindberg et al. 2014, 161). In fact, V-Dem’s electoral democracy corresponds to Robert Dahl’s concept of polyarchy. V-Dem identifies a liberal democracy by first looking for electoral democracy, plus four additional indicators, which are: protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances.

V-Dem collects information from various primary sources including in-house coded data, expert survey data, and observational data. V-Dem reduces data collection problems by not using representative survey data (which is the main source of EIU).

V-Dem divides political regimes into four categories: ‘liberal democracies,’ ‘electoral democracies,’ ‘electoral autocracies,’ and ‘closed autocracies.’

**Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)**

Finally, we have the Democracy Index project (EIU 2019). This data set has been measuring political regimes since 2006 and contains 165 countries (it excludes the micro-states, just like Polity IV). The smaller sample size does not affect the representativeness of the data in view of the fact that the entire world population is virtually represented in those 165 countries. This index has an equal distribution of the components, which consists of civil rights, electoral regime, horizontal accountability, and political rights. The EIU distinguishes between four regime

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6 Observational data refers to the data gathered through directly observable facts, such as the voter turnout rates, and the presence or absence of formal political institutions.
categories: ‘full democracies’ (scores of 8 to 10), ‘flawed democracies’ (scores of 6 to 7.9), ‘hybrid regimes’ (scores of 4 to 5.9), and ‘authoritarian regimes’ (scores below 4).

This index is subject to the problem of comparability since the aggregated scores are the product of underlying components (just like Polity IV) (Coppedge et al. 2011), which means that two countries can have different sub-scores on the components, but the same general score.

The EIU makes use of data collection methods such as expert survey data, observational data, and representative survey data, but it is highly dependent on the latter source of data that is collected in a non-comparable manner for the most countries (ibid.), since it is almost impossible to draw exactly the same samples for the 165 countries. Moreover, the answers of the respondents have to be traced back by the country experts of the EIU, but the procedures used for this method have not been made public. This data collection method is weak due to limited empirical support for the idea that respondents can assess their own regimes in a cross-nationally comparable way or that they tend to live under regimes that are compatible with their own values:

While surveys of the general public are important for ascertaining the attitudes of citizens, the problem is that systematic surveys of relevant topics are not available for every country in the world, and in no country are they available on an annual basis. Moreover, use of such surveys severely limits the historical reach of any democracy index, since the origin of systematic surveying stretches back only a half-century (in the US and parts of Europe) and is much more recent in most countries (ibid., 250).

The EIU considers compulsory voting to be a negative element for the quality of democracy, given that the EIU analysts believe that this obligation violates individual rights. On the other hand, compulsory voting improves turnout in the elections and, therefore, the quality of representation, and can, subsequently, be regarded as essential part of democracy (ibid., 249).

Even though there are evident advantages for the disaggregation of the five indicators in the EIU data set, and specific questions contribute to the independence and accuracy of the five indicators (ibid., 251), it is regrettable that EIU does not disclose the data for the sixty sub-questions, which makes it impossible to assess whether the components of a questionnaire are independently coded.

This data set has a stricter rating for ‘full democracies’ than other indices and does not classify many countries as full democracies. Even Belgium, which is considered a full democracy in any other data set, has been, according to EIU, a so-called ‘flawed democracy’ since 2016.

In the end, the discussion has shown that no data collection type is superior to any other when it comes to measuring the aspects of democratic rights (Skaaning 2018). Even the directly observable fact-based data (e.g., voter turnout) are not superior to judgment-based data that is
grounded on experience, knowledge and perception. This statement is also supported by Schedler (2012, 33): “If we truly had expelled judgment from data development, quantitative research on political regimes could not have blossomed as it has over the past decades.”

**Repercussions of indices on the assessment of democracy**

As the comparison of the data sets shows, the democracy indicators differ greatly. Not only are there different concepts of democracy used, but also the technical processing of the data often turns out to be a tricky issue. The question therefore arises to what extent these different conceptualizations and measurements have an impact on the research results concerning the alleged democratic backsliding.

Case-based evaluations often reveal interesting differences between various measures, especially when it comes to hybrid regimes (Hegre 2012). The assessment of the level of democracy in these intermediate regimes is sensitive to the incorporated indicators, and the weighting coefficient (ibid.). An example of this classification challenge is shown in Table 1. Freedom House allocated much higher scores in 2009 for countries such as Kuwait, Qatar and Morocco than Polity; whereas Polity allocated much higher scores to Congo-Kinshasa, Kosovo, Nicaragua and Russia than Freedom House (Högström 2013).

**Table 1: Deviations in the assessments of countries between democracy indices**

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<tr>
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<th>Kuwait</th>
<th>Qatar</th>
<th>Morocco</th>
<th>Congo-Kinshasa</th>
<th>Kosovo</th>
<th>Nicaragua</th>
<th>Russia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom House</td>
<td>Partly free (4.0)</td>
<td>Not free (5.5)</td>
<td>Partly free (4.5)</td>
<td>Not free (6.0)</td>
<td>Not free (5.5)</td>
<td>Partly free (3.5)</td>
<td>Not free (5.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity IV</td>
<td>Autocracy (-7)</td>
<td>Autocracy (-10)</td>
<td>Autocracy (-6)</td>
<td>Anocracy (-4)</td>
<td>Democracy (+8)</td>
<td>Democracy (+9)</td>
<td>Anocracy (+4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>V-Dem</td>
<td>Closed autocracy (0)</td>
<td>Closed autocracy (0)</td>
<td>Closed autocracy (0)</td>
<td>Electoral autocracy (1)</td>
<td>Electoral democracy (2)</td>
<td>Electoral autocracy (1)</td>
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<td>EIU</td>
<td>The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) did not collect any data in 2009.</td>
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When we carry out a tripartite comparison, by adding the data of V-Dem, there is a greater correspondence between the data from V-Dem and Polity, than between Freedom House and Polity or Freedom House and V-Dem. For Kosovo, the discrepancy is significant: in Freedom House, Kosovo is classified as an autocracy, in Polity as a democracy, and in V-Dem as a hybrid regime. This, apparently, proves that different conceptualizations and measurements of democracy sometimes have a major impact on classifications. What are the justifications of democracy indices concerning Kosovo’s classification? Kosovo is struggling with issues related to ethnic minorities and women’s rights, which caused Freedom House to give the country worse scores for civil liberties. V-Dem does not consider the civil liberties in Kosovo as problematic as in Ethiopia, Rwanda or Sudan, so that Kosovo was classified as a hybrid regime. Nevertheless, the parliamentary elections in 2007 are considered free and fair, which is the reason that Polity analysts
have given Kosovo better scores for its electoral process. As a result, if countries are not fully
democratic or fully autocratic, they pose a major challenge for analysts to properly classify them,
and the nuances of the data sets are considerably different when it comes to measurement of the
Kosovar regime.

**Democratization episodes**

A large number of electoral democracies and the optimistic expectations for the future in
the last two decades of the 20th century were based on a minimalist concept of democracy (Merkel
2010). *Democracy’s Third Wave* by Samuel P. Huntington (1991) was perhaps a perspective-shifting
study, but at the same time, it was massively criticized on the grounds that its empirical data was
based on a simple way of classifying democracy, in which minimalist democracies were grouped
with electoral and liberal democracies.

**First reverse wave**

Huntington (ibid.) identified three democratization waves and two reverse waves. However, when we stick to the same theoretical framework as Huntington, based on V-Dem data
(instead of modified Freedom House data that was used by Huntington), then there is only a
consensus about a first reverse wave in the eve of the Second World War (see Graph 1). The
second and third reverse waves cannot be detected on the line graph of V-Dem. Nevertheless,
there is still a division in the literature on this matter: on the one hand Lührmann and Lindberg
(2019) follow Huntington’s discourse by calling the three phenomena the “three waves of
autocratization”, and on the other hand, Levitsky and Way (2015) refer to a period of
“nondemocratization”. Doorenspleet (2000) prefers the term “trendless fluctuations”, as well as
Diamond (2015, 142) who calls it a “period of equilibrium”, where freedom and democracy have
not grown further but also have not experienced net declines.

**Graph 1: Evolution of ‘electoral’ and ‘liberal democracies’ in V-Dem**

Source: Author, based on V-Dem Online Variable Graph
According to Huntington (ibid.), the first reverse wave took place between 1926 and 1942 with the number of democracies declining from 29 to 12, while the decline based on V-Dem began in 1933 and ended in 1944. Both studies show that the first reverse wave approximately began with the emergence of (fascist and communist) totalitarian regimes, ending when the end of the Second World War was in sight. What is striking, is that the first reverse wave, based on V-Dem data, drops less sharply than Huntington’s assertion.

**Second reverse wave**

According to Huntington, during the second reverse wave (1960-1975), the number of democracies declined from 36 to 30, but the data of V-Dem contradict this. Based on the data of V-Dem, the second reverse wave (1961-1977) shows that there is no democratic backsliding but rather a stabilization regarding the fact that the number of democracies has remained very much equal during this period.

The Polity data—that follows a relatively different methodology than V-Dem—also shows a constant democratization process between 1800 and the present, except during the rise of totalitarian states and the Second World War. During this period, there was a significant decline in the number of democracies in the world. Such a decline did not occur later. The development line of democracy, based on Polity data, is shown in Graph 2.

**Graph 2: Evolution of democracies (≥6) in Polity IV**

**Third reverse wave**

Huntington was in no position to provide a reliable answer to the question about a possible third reverse wave (since this trend started about a decade after his publication); however, Huntington (1991, 12) called it the “third reverse wave,” but immediately admitted that the political scientists were unable to provide answers to the questions about the post-third wave era. V-Dem
shows that the number of democracies has fluctuated for a while, and then triumphed in 2018. Based on V-Dem, we cannot identify a third reverse wave.

**Optimistic studies**

Larry Diamond (1999, 34) was the first author to note that after the third wave of democratization, a reverse wave would not follow, but rather, possibly, a period of stabilization:

> It is theoretically possible for a wave of democratic expansion to be followed not by a reverse wave but by a period of stagnation or stability, in which overall number of democracies in the world neither increases nor decreases significantly for some time and in which gains for democracy are more or less offset by losses. It is precisely such a period of stasis we seem to have entered.

Similarly, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2015) reiterate that there is a period of stabilization. In Table 2 and 3, the evolution of democracies is presented, using the same empirical framework as Levitsky and Way, but extending the time period (1980-2018 instead of 1990-2013), changing the Bertelsmann Index for V-Dem, and making some small corrections to the Levitsky and Way’s basic miscalculations.

If we take the absolute numbers of democracies as a reference point, the number of democracies even peaked in 2012 based on Freedom House index, in 2016 in Polity index and in 2018 V-Dem index. Incidentally, it is remarkable that the number of democracies, based on EIU, is at a low point. It has declined from 82 in 2006 to 75 in 2018. The systematic decline in EIU data was also seen in the analyses of Levitsky and Way, but they did not emphasize it.

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<th>Table 2: Absolute numbers and percentages of democracies in the world 1980-2003</th>
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*Small correction to the miscalculation of Levitsky and Way (2015)

Levitsky and Way (2015) indicate that between 2005 and 2013, according to Freedom House data, more countries have democratized (10), than countries broke down (8). These authors also claim that the most significant democratic backslidings did not occur in democracies, but in regimes that were already authoritarian, such as the Central African Republic, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Jordan. Between 1990 and 2000, in addition to the Eastern European countries, several other important countries have democratized, including Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, Slovakia, South Africa and Taiwan (ibid.). According to Levitsky and Way, the overall picture of the past decade is one of stability. It is certainly possible for these authors to identify some cases of
democratic breakdown, but they find that the number of cases that have remained stable or made progress, falsifies any notion of democratic backsliding.

Table 3: Absolute numbers and percentages of democracies in the world 2004-2018

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<tr>
<td>Freedom House</td>
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<td>Polity IV</td>
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<td>57%</td>
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<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>V-Dem</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<td>EIU</td>
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\*Small correction to the miscalculation of Levitsky and Way (2015)

Source: Author

The fact that Huntington (1991) counted the minimalist Schumpeterian democracies together with liberal democracies resulted in a loss of a large amount of information. In this regard, the democratic backsliding of Russia—presumably after 2000—was not really a democratic breakdown, but a change from an oligarchic kleptocracy in the Yeltsin era to an authoritarian recentralization of the state under Putin (Merkel 2010), which is rather a democratic regression. The empirical study of Larry Diamond (1999) classified 118 of 191 countries in the year 1996 as democracies. His list included Yeltsin’s oligarchic kleptocracy, the corrupt regime in Georgia in the early 1990s, the nepotistic Philippines, the anarchic Bangladesh, and Sierra Leone with the death struggle during the civil war (Merkel 2010). These countries—that still contain illiberal elements—were classified together with outspoken liberal democracies.

Furthermore, Wolfgang Merkel (ibid.) is also one of the political scientists who assumes that there is a stabilization. Merkel (ibid.) states that if the hypothesis of “return of autocratic rule” was correct, we would not only expect a significant number of democracies and hybrid regimes tend to move towards authoritarian regimes (or in other words, would have a democratic breakdown), but we would also expect autocracies to have sufficient stability and ensure their autocratic regime survival. However, this hypothesis is falsified, partly thanks to the work of Barbara Geddes (1999) who investigated the stability and respective life expectancy of authoritarian regimes. Military regimes—controlled by a group of officers—have the shortest duration of existence, which is nine years on average; the monarchic dictatorships or personalistic regimes—where access to the administration depends on an individual leader—have an average
lifespan of 15 years; and finally there are the dominant-party regimes—where policy access and control depend on one political party—that have an average life of 23 years (ibid.). What is more important than these statistical life expectancies is the logic of these authoritarian dominions. Geddes (ibid.) indicates that the short existence of military regimes is mainly due to the lack of legitimacy and institutionalization; the medium-term existence of personalistic regimes is related to the fact that these regimes often end with the death of the leader; but the dominant-party regimes are somewhat stable autocracies due to relatively robust institutionalization, repression, systemic control over resources, and their ideology, such as Stalinist North Korea and state-capitalist China where the Leninist-Maoist ideology is maintained (Merkel 2010). However, the oscillations remain within the same group of authoritarian regimes, just as there are countries that make a transition from one hybrid regime to another. That is why Merkel (ibid.) falsifies the hypothesis of the return of autocratic rule.

Levitsky and Way (2015) point out that the regime landscape nowadays looks darkened because most of the observations in the post-Cold War period were over-optimistic. Particularly, Francis Fukuyama’s (1989) famous End of History theory had a major influence on the over-optimistic spirit of the time. The number of democracies made a huge leap from 1980 to ’90; depending on data set, 14 to 15 nondemocratic regimes joined the category of democratic regimes in this period. A year later, in 1991, the world became another 11 to 12 democracies richer. Such an increase had never been seen before. This resulted in a teleological reasoning in which political scientists thought that democracy became the ultimate endpoint for all nondemocratic regimes elsewhere in the world. As soon as the fluctuations started in the democratization process early 2000s, the political climate also darkened. Although the image is not as disastrous as it is presented, pessimistic authors can still draw gloomy conclusions from selective case studies (Schmitter 2015), which leads to a *pars pro toto* fallacy.

According to the aforementioned authors, we may judge that there is no third reverse wave going on, albeit a scenario of the new wave of democratization seems even more unlikely (Merkel 2010). The system appears to be frozen at the moment. In Table 4, there is provided an overview of cross-national studies that have a strong optimistic opinion about the transitions of democracies in the last 20 years. It is striking that the optimistic studies make use of multiple data sets to substantiate their results with empirical evidence.

**Pessimistic studies**

Hypothetically, the reverse wave could start with a democratic regression, which is not limited to young democracies, but also to old democracies (Erdmann 2011). Nevertheless, democratic regression is far too little taken into account by optimistic authors. The analysts at
Freedom House (2019) found a significant decrease in the aggregated scores of political regimes in the last 13 years while the increase was much smaller (see Graph 3). The falling aggregated scores do not necessarily mean that there is a transition from a democratic regime to a nondemocratic regime, but rather indicate a loss of quality of a democracy within the same regime category.

### Table 4: Overview of optimistic studies and data sets used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Used data sets</th>
<th>Other sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levitsky and Way (2002): The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism</td>
<td>Freedom House and own analyses of the authors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Diamond (2015): Facing up to the Democratic Recession</td>
<td>Freedom House and own analyses of the author</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakli, Fish and Wittenberg (2018): A Decade of Democratic Decline and Stagnation</td>
<td>Freedom House, V-Dem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Møller and Skaaning (2013): The Third Wave: Inside the Numbers</td>
<td>Freedom House and own analyses of the authors</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author

A number of reasons explain these falling aggregated scores: 1) the changes in electoral regulations in some countries—for example, the extension of the election period of the head of state: over the past thirteen years, leaders in 34 countries have tried to change the re-election period, and in 31 of them they have succeeded, especially in Africa, Latin America and post-Soviet states (Freedom House 2019); 2) the assaults on freedom of thought and expression, which could take place inside but also outside the national borders, such as the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul; 3) the more effective and repressive form of digital governance
such as China’s use of surveillance and face recognition technologies to suppress national minorities; and 4) the violation of the rights of migrants and refugees in various parts of the world by political leaders as party campaigns to marginalize internal political dissidents.

Graph 3: Regimes with progression and regression in the past 13 years

![Graph 3](source)

Mechkova et al. (2017), accordingly, find the optimistic studies objectionable. These authors, whose study is based on V-Dem, identify a downward trend. In particular, they consider the decline in the number of democracies between 2013 and 2017 to be a blow in the process of democratization. However, these authors mainly choose a limited period to offer a pessimistic explanation for the democratization process.

Graph 4: Political regimes contrasted

![Graph 4](source)
In Graph 4, Mechkova et al. (ibid., 163) demonstrate the evolution of democracies and autocracies, albeit in a dichotomous way. The development line starts in 1972 and shows a constant rise in democracies, but there has been a slight decline in the last five years. The question remains whether we should regard this as a harbinger of a new trend or as fluctuations in a period of stabilization, because, at the same time, the authors indicate that considerable progress has been made between 2006 and 2016, with 16 countries making a transition from an autocracy to a democracy.

Mechkova et al. (ibid.) also note that, in 2013, nine countries went from democracy to autocracy, and only five countries went the other way. The volatility of the past five years suggests a considerable degree of uncertainty about how robust the democratic achievements of the past decades actually are (ibid., 163).

The other two V-Dem analysts, Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg (2019), have retained the same discourse in a more recent article. On the one hand, they see a reasonableness in the optimistic literature, but on the other hand, they maintain the pessimistic undertone: “While the literature thus agrees that the process of autocratization has changed, it does not yet offer a systematic way of measuring the new mode of autocratization,” (ibid., 3). In a similar fashion as Huntington, Lührmann and Lindberg also speak about “three autocratization waves.” Even though their study relies on V-Dem, this data set does not support the so-called second and third autocratization waves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Used data sets</th>
<th>Other sources</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechkova et al. (2017): How Much Democratic Backsliding?</td>
<td>▪ V-Dem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lührmann and Lindberg (2019): A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?</td>
<td>▪ V-Dem</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carothers (2004): Democracy’s Sobering State</td>
<td>▪ Freedom House and own analyses of the author</td>
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Table 5: Overview of pessimistic studies and data sets used

The most important finding of Lührmann and Lindberg (ibid.) is that about 68% of all contemporary autocratization episodes—which start as democracies—are caused in a clandestine way by contemporary, democratically elected autocratizers, while the ‘old’ autocratizers of the 20th century often immediately enacted a new undemocratic constitution. This explains why we do not have rapidly evolving periods of nondemocratization this century, but this could give the first signs of a major democratic breakdown in the long-term. In Table 5, there is provided an overview of cross-national studies that have a pronounced pessimistic opinion on the transitions of democracies in the last 20 years. The most remarkable finding is that these studies are clearly in minority. It is a different picture from what many suspect. After all, the pessimistic studies also
make use of fewer data sets to substantiate their results, while the optimistic studies employ much more data sources.

Conclusion

The first assumption of this article was that the titles of works in this research field give rise to suspicions that democracy is breaking down worldwide. The article revealed, on the contrary, that the pessimistic authors are actually in the minority (which does not mean that a momentum has arisen for further democratization in the near future). Furthermore, little empirical evidence in favour of the expectation that the conflicting findings about the alleged democratic backsliding results from the use of differing democracy indices. Although the conceptualization, coding and aggregation rules are not always perfectly applied in these democracy indices, they nevertheless give a clear picture of reality. This is also supported by the statistical analyses of Högström (2013) and Elff and Ziaja (2018) who found a high correlation between the data sets. Only the EIU index gives a slight decrease in the number of democracies, but there is no study yielding a pessimistic conclusion based on EIU data. In addition, the conflicting assessments have little to do with the precision or reliability of the data indices, which is a corroborating evidence:

[T]he precision or reliability of all indices is too low to justify confidence that a country with a score a few points higher is actually more democratic. Note that most extant indices are bounded to some degree, and therefore constrained: there is no way to distinguish the quality of democracy among countries that have perfect negative or positive scores. This is acceptable so long as there really is no difference in the quality of democracy among these countries (Coppedge et al. 2011, 249).

Although several subjectivity biases have been discovered – mainly in the Freedom House index (Bollen and Paxton 2000; Steiner 2014) – these biases play a minor role in the classification of the vast majority of political regimes. Especially, in quantitative studies, we will not quickly notice the flawed classifications of a few countries, but in qualitative case studies, it could have a confusing effect, as we have noticed the divergent categorizations of Kosovo in the year 2009.

One could say that continuum data sets with a defective methodology\(^7\) paint a simplistic picture of reality because they include the Schumpeterian minimalist democracies in the category of electoral and liberal democracies, but Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), using a modern continuum data set, also note, in terms drawn from a similar vocabulary as Huntington, “three autocratization waves.” On the other side, there are both optimistic and pessimistic authors making use of the same modern continuum data sets. But one thing is certain: the historical perspective and the latest democracy data urge us to be prudent in our conclusions. Indeed,

\(^7\) See Huntington (1991) and Diamond (1999).
Lührmann and Lindberg (ibid.) note that, “As it was premature to announce the ‘end of history’ in 1992, it is premature to proclaim the ‘end of democracy’ now.”

In conclusion, the research into alleged democratic backsliding over the past twenty years does not seem to be manipulated by data. In order to find the vera causa of the division between the optimistic and pessimistic camp, future research could continue to explore the evolution of democratic regression in democracies, hybrid regimes, and autocracies. Democratic regression is an important indicator for monitoring the underlying volatility in regime trends. If democratic regression is not reported, many nuances can be missed in the process of democratization.

References


A Review of “The Indo-Pacific Axis: Peace and Prosperity or Conflict?” by Satish Chandra and Baladas Ghoshal

Chetan Rana

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Keywords
Indo-Pacific, China, United States, ASEAN, India, Peace, Japan, Rebalancing, South China Sea, Australia
The term Indo-Pacific emerged only in the 2000s and as a single, continuous security complex only in this decade. The emergence of this new strategic reality is a reflection of the rise of Asia, in particular of China, and the relative decline of the United States (Panda 2018, 119-20). Swaran Singh (2018, 142-143), while addressing the relationship between peace and prosperity, has claimed that China is utilising the idea of peace emerging from a prosperous region (an occidental idea) to legitimise its actions in the region. The United States used the same idea while building its hegemony. The book, “The Indo-Pacific Axis: Peace and Prosperity or Conflict?,” acknowledges this shift and explores the potential for peace as well as conflict in the region. The book is an edited compilation of thirteen papers by thirteen different scholars and bureaucrats. It sets out to cover diverse issues in the Indo-Pacific with a special focus on India’s location within the region. The book succeeds in exploring (i) the emergence and varying definitions of the Indo-Pacific, (ii) the complex economic and security relations amongst the states, and (iii) the potential role India can play. Yet there are key issues that have not been adequately addressed in the book.

A Region Reimagined

One of the fundamental features of the Indo-Pacific construct is its primary maritime character. It is seen as the “confluence of two seas.” China has been reluctant to accept this expansion of identity away from the earlier Asia-Pacific construct. Rajiv Bhatia (2018, 36) defines the Indo-Pacific region as the amalgamation of the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific regions where China’s primacy dilutes as opposed to Asia-Pacific where China was considered the primary power. This depicts that the former nomenclature is used in order to dilute the geopolitical and even social primacy attributed to China with the latter nomenclature with a greater emphasis on India’s inclusion as a stakeholder in the region. Ghoshal has identified economic primacy of the region as the driving force behind the shift. It has been argued that the rise of China and its hegemonic aspirations were the main reasons for the US’s re-engagement in the region through a ‘pivot to Asia’ or ‘rebalancing’ policy under the Obama regime, for example in the South China Sea (Vijayalakshmi 2018, 86-90).

The book successfully captures perspectives of the major actors that are the United States (Vijayalakshmi 2018, 79-108; Samaddar 2018, 109-118), China (Singh 2018, 141-154), India (Ghoshal 2018, 9-22; Wadhwa 2018, 23-26; Bhatia 2018, 33-48), Australia (Brewster 2018, 49-58), Japan (Panda 2018, 119-140), and Indonesia (Sundararaman 2018, 177-196). The variety of scholarship and perspectives bring out the prevalent ambiguity over the definition of the limits of the region, the prioritisation of different threats and concerns in the region, and the different internal and external drivers of foreign policies.
The United States and its allies and many non-alliance partners are driven to cooperate and preserve the existing rules-based order. This has manifested in clear condemnation of China’s policies in the South China sea, especially the land reclamation and militarisation of the Spratly Islands and the A2/AD strategy (strategy to prevent an adversary from traversing an area). Yet, the emergence of this new great power rivalry is starkly different from the US-Soviet Cold War. This new rivalry is characterised by multipolarity, a primarily maritime rather than continental playing field, the emergence of non-traditional threats, and comprehensive economic interdependence (Samaddar 2018, 112-113). The United States has shifted its policy from a “San Francisco Alliance System” to a “Pivot to Asia,” and the majority of scholars, along with US policymakers, have identified India as the “lynchpin” in the strategy. The need for realignment, both internal and external, is best captured in Japan.

“Ever since adopting the Peace Constitution, Article 9 has remained the cornerstone of Japan’s defensive posture. The changing geo-political situation in its neighbourhood has been compelling Japan to revisit this option. Given the strong pacifist sentiment in Japan, abrogating article 9 is not easy. What the Abe government is doing, therefore, is to dilute the spirit of the article slowly but incrementally by reinterpreting it in order to realise its objective without tampering with the constitution” (Panda 2018, 121).

Multiple Players and Multiple Motives

The need to invite contributors from varying expertise for the book encapsulates the layered and dynamic nature of relations in the region. Unlike the bipolar politics of the Cold War, the conflict in the Indo-Pacific demands more than just binary perspectives of bandwagoning and balancing. China is the biggest trading partner of almost all the countries in the region whereas the United States is still traditionally the strongest security provider. States such as Japan and Australia have been a part of the US’s security alliances; however, due to India’s historical policy of Non-alignment and Indonesia’s Bebas dan Aktif (Independent and active), they will always be reluctant to compromise on their strategic autonomy. Due to the immediate threat of an aggressive China and the stark asymmetrical capacity, countries in the region have repeatedly emphasised the creation of an inclusive Indo-Pacific as a means to dissipate China’s concern of a containment policy against it in the region.

Three categories of conflicts have been identified which capture the wide array of problems in the region, both traditional and non-traditional (piracy, terrorism, and climate change) threats. While China is at direct loggerheads with other states in traditional and neo-traditional conflicts, it is non-traditional threats (like natural disasters) that Asian states seek to collaborate with China. Collaboration (against piracy and for disaster management) and economic integration (such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are important policy tools in the hedging baskets available to the states in the region.
India: Balancer or Bridge

India has gained centrality in the politics and strategies of the Indo-Pacific players. India has been labelled as the ‘lynchpin’ of the US’s strategy (Vijayalakshmi 2018, 90-91). It recognises the Indian Ocean as its primary area of interest, and the Pacific (including the South China Sea) as its secondary area of interest. It has stakes in the region as India’s trade is vulnerable to various chokepoints and the South China sea is a part of its energy diversification plans. Furthermore, a hegemon for a neighbour is not desirable. However, there are still doubts about India’s stance on its role as a lynchpin (Samaddar 2018, 117). On the one hand, India will not act directly against China. On the other hand, India has been one of the loudest voices in creating an inclusive Indo-Pacific region. It is argued that India can best achieve its national interests by maintaining strategic autonomy. It has also sought to keep the US at an arm’s length by emphasising the centrality of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other multilateral arrangements in the region. Swaran Singh (2018, 153-154) suggests that Indian can aim to be a bridge. It can utilise its relations and proximity with the United States and China as a niche.

Comprehensive but Incomplete

The book has striven to provide a comprehensive assessment of the issues that it has sought to address. Yet there are key elements in the politics of the Indo-Pacific that have either gone amiss or have been inadequately dealt with. It only briefly mentions arrangements such as RCEP (in competition with US’s Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)) and projects on regional connectivity. The politics in the region are very dynamic, and for a book published in 2018, it has failed to update the status on RCEP, TPP, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Maritime Silk Route (MSR), the Quad, etc. These projects will fundamentally shape the emerging strategic coalitions and trade relations in the region.

Even though the book delivers in providing perspectives of various stakeholders, it does not address the centrality of ASEAN and its institutional arrangements. Most authors have only fleetingly mentioned the roles of the regional institutions and have failed to juxtapose the role of these institutions with the foreign policies of the states. Further, the roles of many littoral states and ASEAN states are not represented. Cambodia and Laos have paralysed recent ASEAN conferences as they are securing China’s interests. Similarly, many littoral states are leasing out islands for military bases. These events greatly influence the course of politics in the region. While the approach of stakeholder-wide discussion brings light on a great many details, it fails to juxtapose different strategies simultaneously in operation in the region.

In conclusion, the book is a compact guide to the unfolding politics of the Indo-Pacific. Most importantly, it elucidates the myriad discourses that are operating in the region without
making unfalsifiable predictions, and therefore preventing itself from creating an unbalanced narrative. It engages with the security as well as the political and economic considerations. Both the shortcomings and the achievements of the book reflect the complex nature of interests and the relations in the region.

References


