

# Why economic inequality pushes half of us to illiberal ideas, while the other half is fighting for diversity: The second wave and an increasingly important task in the philosophy of economics

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Humans use narratives to make sense of historical developments as well as to guide their future actions, and these narratives can in turn have great impact on their lives, societies and the world overall. Here I would like to put forward such a narrative to rationalize the increasingly forceful changes of our current decade. Arguing for the existence of three ongoing waves of emancipation of the individual in society, it is proposed that we are currently approaching the high-point of conflict of the second, economic emancipation process. After the outgoing first wave made (at least some) people fully aware of the importance of political equality and lead to the formation of (at least some) democratic states on the basis of national constitutions, we now have to fully accept the importance of economic fairness to enable us to continue our venture into the third wave of cultural fairness as diversity, which in my opinion puts the philosophy of economics under the pressure to tackle an increasingly important task, namely to develop ideas for better working constitutional principles for economic communities.

A failure to do so would mean to not only fail to implement fair and sustainable markets, but as a result to fall back behind even political equality, with strongmen – banally driven by childhood wounds and riding on waves of public discontent – capturing democratic states with badly informed narratives about western civilization, for instance in the form of ‘Christian Nationalism’. Intentionally obscuring the facts that liberal democracies and free markets do in fact not under-perform in comparison to the existing alternatives, and that extreme inequality is instead most often to a large part driven by the greed and ruthlessness of individuals who misuse their power to distort economic and political frameworks, these strongmen could then roll-back important civilizational

advances while trying to satisfy their insatiable ego: What 'great' men want is still so boring.

### **Making sense of our current situation**

In several countries around the world we see populist strongmen trying (more or less successfully) to capture (more or less) liberal democracies in the name of 'post-liberal' movements like National Conservatism, Christian Nationalism or Catholic Integrationalism. These movements often take away rights and redistribute away resources from their societies' most vulnerable and marginalized groups (kids, ill and poor people, girls and women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, refugees, immigrants, etc.) in the name of a restoration of (supposedly) traditional values. In the international arena, captured states then turn to rather short-sighted, strongly transactional strategies, with little regard for international common goods or even ideological alignment. Although it is often quite clear that neither the history nor the moral arguments behind their narratives are coherent, large parts of our societies seem to be willing to let these strongmen carry on with their blatant lies and cruel attacks.

The behavior of these parts of the public seems to be fueled by a deep-lying discontent with political, economic and cultural elites, which are not seen to be meaningfully addressing the real problems of their respective societies (although, comparing on a global scale, the complainants often live in rather comfortable and enabling conditions). The problems to address are most often those of economic inequality, missing sustainability, and/or related to health and education; complex problems requiring good-faith cooperation and the shared willingness to give for the greater good. Also not able to solve these problems over night, strongmen usually turn to 'culture war' arguments, the promise of simple solutions to complex problems and dismantling the 'deep state' (i.e. working bureaucracies), to mobilize conservative parts of their society to then obtain the executive overpower needed for state capture. The great allure of these arguments can be seen for instance from how easily the US right switched from extreme liberalism to authoritarianism, blaming cultural progressiveness for failures of economic neo-liberalism now.

Although we observe the effects of these developments first of all at the political level, the causes for them seem to be to a large part of economic nature. The economic model of the West has run into problems with both sustainability and geoeconomics; neither will it be possible to burn

resources at the rate at which we are currently doing it, nor will we be able to continue to make the global economic landscape to bent to every one of our whims. Captured states will nevertheless continue to try both, because their illiberal leaders are guaranteed to profit from any squeezed out advantages, while the disadvantages will be socialized. The fight is then about who controls the economic weapons and choke points of the global economy; the real problems are thus passed on to the next generations, and this in turn entrenches these problems and public discontent, which opens up further opportunities for populists.

'Liberation day' should be seen as the beginning of a 'hot' phase of this economic war. With tariffs aimed at foreign currency devaluation, the US tries to shift the burden from re-distributing resources within their nation to re-distributing resources from poorer countries to 'poor' US Americans. (Although, in a way, what's really new about this is that this time western allies are being treated as the Global South has been for long). Even worse, this upside-down projection of internal inequality onto the world, when US workers are told that the global poor are the reason for their misery, firmly restricts the opportunities to ever reach a fairer global economy. In the past, the relative lack of worker rights and social security nets gave the US a growth advantage, but now we see that this advantage can be exploited only up to a point. Once even basic health care and educational opportunities depend too strongly on the individual's financial means, people become politically vulnerable and quite a few will start to not be moved by anything other than their personal material discomfort.

So the really dangerous part starts when authoritarian policies are sold as 'order' in the light of larger economic developments that would need much more flexible problem solving approaches. This is why the current situation in the US should not (again) be seen as a one-off; it clearly is the symptom of a much more substantial shift and, judging from history, it doesn't seem unlikely that truly horrible things will have to happen (in the US and elsewhere) before there is a chance for betterment. The modern illiberal narrative freely mixes religious, cultural and nationalistic elements, but is more than willing to ignore any interfering complexities to build its 'vision of strength', in which empathy beyond personal bonds (a – if not the – core tenet of Christianity) is just weakness. At the heart this vision is much more about dominance than deeper strength. Like in earlier fascist ideologies the impending demise of the civilization of your choice is conjured up, and any idea of rational enlightenment is replaced with a recourse to the 'obvious' nature of humans, cultures and

zero sum social interactions. As of course the science behind this doesn't hold, researchers (as well as journalists and judges) become a prime target. As do trans people, whose very nature is questioning the claim of their 'common sense' understanding of identity, which is supposedly backed by a materialism of 'how things really and clearly are'. This itself is a highly incoherent argument, as of course proper materialism does not know of either religion, culture, or nation in the same sense as it does not know of gender identity or even proper objects; it's all just particle-like field-excitations in spacetime and people making up poetry on top of it. (How that could turn out to work if non-material properties are not real, is of course itself a much debated topic in philosophy.) So it's materialism or idealism depending on what suits the strongman's henchmen best in any given situation.

But although many people have most likely not fully thought through all of this, people are rarely just dumb or cruel. There will always be people substantially more conservative as well as those substantially more progressive than the average of their societies (with the averages themselves as moving targets). And there will always be people substantially better off, as well as those substantially worse off than the average. We will also always see a competition between preserving and developing approaches, as well as cooperative and competitive strategies on all sides. Most often, rapidly changing political, economic and/or social circumstances will be felt as threats, thus pushing intuitions towards conservative, preserving and ('they against us') competitive ideas, though if changes are too great to accommodate, this will not lead to helpful problem solving strategies. Once threats become overbearing, the conservative answer is in danger to become Janus-faced; proclaiming the value of culturally traditional ways while calling for a revolution from above; the strongman. On the other end of the spectrum no such split of mind is necessary to call for a revolution from below, which, judging from history, still seems to more often than not result in illiberal follow-up regimes, too. A multi-party political system will have some options to dominate the middle without turning to illiberal leaders, with underserved constituencies gathering in new or revived parties, but much less balancing is possible in two-party systems. The breaking point is reached when 'dark' counter elites replace the 'non-caring' ones in the name of the lower classes, only to do worse.

And exactly because people are rarely just dumb or cruel, 'common sense' must be mobilized against professional authority in culture wars first, before then wishful political and economic

thinking can replace coherent arguments. (Which sadly enough is thus the easier the more cultural progress was achieved beforehand.) Somewhat ironically, the 'non-caring' elites still have the most (especially also potential profit) too loose from speaking out against illiberal leaders, so that it takes determined individuals in established institutions to organize elite resistance against state capture, when policies, budgets and oversight are 'adjusted' and investigation, raising alarm und making things public become vital for the survival of the democratic state. (Clear signs of the beginning are disregard for the law, private enrichment and rising costs of opposition.) It should be clear from the above that the vitally important fight is not between (good-faith) conservatives and progressives, not between religious people and atheists, but between liberals and authoritarians (as well as anarchists); it is the task of both conservatives as well as progressives to not let populist strongmen get away with lies and cruelty. Although conservatives might initially feel vindicated by a movement taking up their ideas, there can be no doubt that the movement's illiberal leader has neither a deeper understanding nor any real allegiance to these ideas, which are thus in great danger to lose their credibility for generations to come. For the strongman, the only point really is to get enough votes for long enough; further free elections will not be necessary. Fundamentalist Christians or white supremacists might for some time feel comforted by the thought that at least they will profit from whatever will come, but once the guardrails of liberal democracy are off, nothing guarantees that the strongman (or his successors) will not at some point turn on his former allies to secure even more power for himself; at least historically, this seems to have been the rule rather than the exception.

The two things that give some hope are first that the fascist uber-reaction lays bare the underlying problem; current markets are not fair and free only for some. And furthermore, state capture is a most powerful demonstration that no current order is the only possible one. Strength mistakes kindness as weakness, but there can be no question that the 'kind majority' has everything at hand to address the underlying problem via major adjustments to the framework conditions of liberal democracies' market economies. Failure to do so will, at least in the long run, most likely mean to give up again also political equality – and what's even worse; without solving any of the economic problems. Because we have to see this clearly: There is no sophisticated philosophy or brilliant idea behind the strongman's plans, it's just deficient character, still overly driven by childhood deprivations. (Ironically, the implicit claim that his 'will to power' is the only true driving force

of humans, is indeed true for him, as he is psychologically cut off from a deeper understanding of humanity.) For whatever important, complex problem or theory he might field as a weapon in his culture wars, for him it's just that; a weapon. The scandal is not that there are people like this; the scandal is that we let them acquire power – and that some people play with this to further their own goals. 'Sleeping' democracies are probably prone to have functional elites replaced by psychologically condemned ones, but awake ones could succeed in extending political equality to economic fairness; acknowledging not only the importance of the freedom from political bondage, but also the importance of the freedom of all to engage with the world on the basis of a right to a fair share of that world. ('Fair' is unquestionably hard to define perfectly, but a situation that is with only little doubt substantially fairer than the current one is actually much easier to suggest.) Neo-liberal capitalism tried to sell us stuff-based happiness instead of more meaningful connections with other people and the world; once we can admit that this was an erroneous path, we can move on to something better. What is in some sense really noteworthy about Western culture and Christianity is not any 'timeless' or 'inherent' strength, but a pronounced willingness to accept our great weakness – be it in face of God's forgiveness or philosophical skepticism. This allowed us oftentimes to admit and address past errors, transforming both culture and religion many times in the process, with the spirit of Christ's core message of universal love actually being well kept alive especially in the idea of liberal democracy. So the question is: What would be a renewed vision for the West that would be helpful for a constructive engagement with the wider world, too?

### **Three waves**

In the following I would like to put forward a narrative for the emancipation of human individuals in their societies, proposing that this narrative is 'true enough' to be helpful with organizing our thoughts about certain, themselves extremely complex historical developments, in the hope that reasonably well-informed ideas can be derived from this, although all of it should be understood as very open to better-grounded revision. The following proposal of three waves of emancipation of the individual in society should not be understood as implying a fixed sequence or somewhat necessary developments (like for instance in dialectic materialism), nor should the waves be understood as being sharply defined in time or space. While some societies might have gone almost

through the whole first wave, now approaching the high-point of the second wave with the third wave not yet being fully recognizable, others might be at a very different place, maybe even with the waves strongly shifted towards each other, and still others might never go there at all, if a completely different development direction was taken right from the start. The idea is that within a wave, societies will wither back and forth, but if the respective narrative of a wave is taken up, and until that narrative is overwritten by a more promising one, at least some parts of a society will continue to fight to reach the end of that wave, due to the argumentative force of the central idea and its resulting ability to enable increased individual and societal growth.

The first wave is about political emancipation, with its (modern) 'high-point' in the West around 1800, when the idea of political equality started to become a model for success. (The 'high point' of the waves is thus meant to be the point at which the new paradigm starts to dominate the old one, so that afterwards it becomes more and more 'normal' for a society to be structured according to the new paradigm.) Humans have both cooperative as well as competitive strategies for survival, reproduction, as well as higher-level human activity available. It is overall less than clear how well these strategies work in deprived or less deprived and more clear-cut or more complex environments, with the outcome strongly dependent on the actual social structure individuals are operating in. Some balance of competitive and cooperative strategies seems to be best for societies as a whole, but this in turn then allows strongly competitive individuals within these societies to profit disproportionately from the willingness of less competitive individuals to contribute nevertheless (also because up to a point the later profit indirectly from increased competitive activities). Already this basic mechanism suggests that human societies easily fall prey to authoritarian structures, which in addition become self-reinforcing when elites re-distribute common resources towards themselves, robbing other individuals from especially educational and then participatory opportunities. The political emancipation of individuals, institutionalized in the idea of liberal democracies, must therefore be seen as a great civilizational advance; for the individual anyhow, but also for our societies as a whole, which have in the past more often than not profited greatly from an increased number and diversity of contributions to the whole. The essential step forward was here to free the individual from political bondage, freeing up the full force of (ideally) all individuals in turn; this should be understood as the essence of the first wave. (There is no question that even in highly developed societies the full implications of this wave have not been

perfectly realized yet.)

The second wave is then about economic emancipation and (at least in some western societies) we seem to approach the high point of conflict of that wave now. Our current paradigm for 'free' markets is on the one hand hitting sustainability and geoeconomic walls, and is on the other hand not able to deliver material gains as relevant as in the past, largely due to very basic framework conditions (in the West, doubling the average life span again will simply be much harder than the first time, etc.). At the same time, with political equality seemingly safely established in the background, questions of how to live become ever more dominated by 'freedom to' considerations on what resources it takes to realize our live plans, as opposed to 'freedom from' considerations about political equality. These considerations quickly lead us to fundamentally question economic inequality, although inequality is in a sense a 'natural' first outcome of innovative growth, i.e. a 'side effect' of the core advantage of market economies which we, as whole societies, want to profit from. Unlike in the first wave, we do not want to totally level the playing field, but for the greater good we want to put guardrails at the bottom and top and add rules that make sure that future generations are not deprived of vital resources (economic fairness includes sustainability already at the fundamental level). So the situation is very different to the one with political equality; in the second wave we don't want economic fairness to mean equality before the law, but to mean similar opportunities as well as outcomes which are not so unequal or unsustainable that they start to distort or destroy the system. (Our current understanding of economic fairness as the right to unlimited economic activity on the other hand, is a type of fairness we would rather want to grant in the cultural sphere of the third wave.) As with dethroning kings, reigning in those who profit from the existing rules is of course not an easy task. But as any economic activity is only ever possible on the basis of societies' principal support, there can be no question that societies have the right to set up their markets according to the needs of all.

That we might be approaching the high point of conflict of the second wave is suggested by the observation that social upheaval and international conflict are indeed centering on economic issues now – from the viewpoint of the West one should add. Within societies an attempted economization of the state can be observed with bureaucracies cut down by 'political start-ups', while between societies geoeconomics replaces geopolitics as main theater. We could now speculate about all sorts of parallels between illiberal movements after the high-point of the first wave and



the illiberal movements we should expect for after the high-point of the second wave; essential to both were and are large underlying shifts in the lives of the many and missing empathy for them in elite circles. While 'material' growth remains essential for less developed societies and to some extent the worse-off in western societies, the impact of 'more stuff' is becoming more and more marginal for the better-off, so that they have begun to swim in the next wave already.

With political equality and economic fairness acceptably well implemented for us, the better-off in western societies have thus forcefully started to work towards the goal of the third wave; cultural fairness. Not political fairness as freedom from, nor economic fairness as freedom to, but 'freedom as' actually realized in the expression of the individual's idea of its life. While in the first wave blood lines were most essential until they weren't, and in the second wave wealth is most essential until it will no longer be, in the third wave, attention takes center stage. No more basic currency is available to us than our life time, and at least some (even if very private) form of recognition of their life will be wished for by almost everyone. The third wave is then about realizing opportunities for everyone to get their fair share of taking part in society, not only concerning political participation and economic opportunities, but also fair access to public 'attention infrastructure'. And this is by no means an idle project, as of course for marginalized groups attention is absolutely essential for claiming the more basic rights of political equality and economic fairness; all three waves have long tails underlying the other ones. (Where for instance LGBTQ+ people are shut off from public attention, there is zero chance that their political and economic rights will be fully realized.) So the progressive 'better-off' fight for diversity in the third wave, while having lost the conservative 'worse-off' on their way out of the second wave, which opens up opportunities that the illiberal populist seizes on. He himself is already dragged along by the third wave and thus well aware of its essential currency, and sets out to dominate and row back public attention by any means; there is nothing to gain for him from cultural fairness. 'Freedom of speech' then becomes a disputed weapon, with strongmen claiming the freedom to lie and attack (for themselves, not so much for others), thereby corrupting the public attention infrastructure and instrumentalizing the discontent from economic inequality to shut down the quest for cultural fairness.

The US could have driven the second wave further down and could have continued to feed the third wave, leading a culturally attractive and economically still strong western block into a multi-polar world, but the flexibility of the US market economy seems to have been an advantage only

up to a certain point, at which it has become a political liability now. Whether the EU, with less but probably more socially sustainable growth, is on a better track to preserve the essential civilizational advances of western culture, is hard to foresee. Maybe the future lies with unions of regions beyond nation states, maybe in a reformed Islamic world or the future Africa. One could indeed try to make the point that we do not only see the downfall of the West's political and economical model, but actually the bankruptcy of its underlying (non-)value system; that the focus on materialist science and technocratic optimization failed to deliver properly meaningful answers to our most basic questions of what there is and what to do; that the good life is badly captured this way. (For Philosophers; that this demise can for instance be seen from the fact that in anglophone analytic philosophy the most cited people are still those lighthouse figures from the beginning of the project to define meaning basically through logical relations in vacuum, while younger generations increasingly turn to non-western philosophy and a psychologically more realistic epistemology, if not outright metaphysics again.) But that would completely overlook also here that the West's real strength lies within the determination of a good part of their populations to own their errors: The above criticism is well established in the discourse and alternatives have been suggested already, waiting to be taken up by a broader public. There is clearly no need to pivot from the ailing project of materialistic rationalization to the complete opposite. Values are not logical relationships, but neither are they hermetically sealed against rational scrutiny. To insist on the former again and again is a substantially important contribution of typically conservative thinkers; to continue to admonish us to find out what that means is an equally important contribution of the progressive side. The rejection of reason and the denial of complexity is in the interest of neither side, but they are in the interest of illiberal populists capturing states.

### **What is to be done?**

An important insight within (not only) western culture is that we have so far failed to rationally establish beyond doubt any fixed meaning of our lives or the world. Another important insight is that the human condition seems to imply not only a quest for happiness, which will for most people be related to close social contacts, bodily experiences, the nature of the material world and how we experience us in the 'now', but also a quest for satisfaction with our overall lives, closely related

to creativity and love, i.e. meaningful interactions with others and the world. According to the first insight we cannot in general say what is meant by 'meaningful' in the previous sentence, but most will be willing to concede that reality seems to be structured in a way that it offers the possibility to realize a practically infinite variety of meaning, and that this is something which people seem to pragmatically turn to for their own lives: They try to make life meaningful for themselves, also in the hope that other people pick up on this and that this way something bigger than the individual is created and appreciated as meaningful, which in turn is a highly effective glue to keep societies together. In the sense of all of the above, our focus should then turn to individual and societal growth, leading to individual happiness and fulfillment, creativity and love, as well as individual and shared meaning. Whatever rules we want to come up with for our societies, this should be our overall goal, as everything else seems less defensible. And whatever rules we want to come up with, it must be clear that reaching this goal will require a delicate balance between individual rights and social obligations. The conceptually ugly thing is that we are convicted by birth to agree to the general contract at the basis of our society; Philosophy has many valuable thoughts on this, but for the problem at hand we just have to pragmatically accept this as another given here. So then our rights are granted by our society – if we are lucky in the best interest of all parts of that community. Again, the literature on this is both extensive and enlightening, but many of those reading this text will have pulled a big one already; as citizens of a western liberal democracy. This is the basis we start from, turning to the question of economic fairness now.

As with political rights, economic rights are then granted to us by our society. There is no principal reason for certain people having immutable economic rights that others don't have. There is also no principal right to private property, but history tells us that allowing for private property means to force people to own the negative consequences of their errors, which is why up to a (non-system distorting) point, private property is a rather desired feature of conceivable economies. (An important argument is also, that a certain amount of ownership of things seem to be a necessary extension of our bodily nature.) Adding a generally accepted means of exchange to the mix, we seem to arrive at modern 'free' market economies, but only if we gloss over the facts that such markets will still require all sorts of regulation to avoid for instance harmful transactions, and that the implicit assumption of a fair distribution of resources at the 'opening' of the market is hardly ever met. So what 'free' markets mean is not obvious and philosophers and economists have of course

investigated this problem in all detail. In any case, we face one central trade-off: People will call on society to make rules, which means more regulation, less economic flexibility, and as a most likely result somewhat diminished growth. In this situation, economic growth is just one outcome to maximize among other desirable outcomes like safety, fairness, sustainability etc., with overall 'good' growth helping to advance not only social cohesion and keeping planetary boundaries, but also individual happiness and life satisfaction. Any rules that make things somewhat better for some people, will likely have also some impact on the profits of some other people; we need those rules which further the overall 'right' kind of growth – and this 'right' is of course not easy to define, but given the above goal also not impossible to approximate. The underlying question is not one of collaborative vs competitive strategies, but rather between zero-sum and positive-sum thinking, especially when in highly developed societies the focus shifts from material to intellectual and social growth.

The philosophy of economics and economist themselves have pondered the above problems and many more in much detail, illuminating not only the great complexity of the issues at hand, but also suggesting many good (as well as some not so good) ideas on how to improve things, and it is probably fair to say that especially in the last decade, more self-critical economists have made substantial progress with understanding the current economic problems of our societies, as well with making helpful suggestions for what to do about it. The point of the following is that on the practical side this work is concerned with legislature to more or less reign in market participants, i.e. act at the level of state politics or added contracts with other states under the guiding principle of political equality, which means that citizens of liberal democracies are supposed to enforce their – mostly only implicitly existing – economic rights to a fair share by voting for political actors who promise to act in the direction of them. This situation is very different to political fairness, where the participants have inalienable rights, which citizens can expect to be enforceable by judicial power. Existing 'economic constitutions' are first of all constructed to grant liberties concerning economic activity and contain most often a mix-up of basic principles and specific laws. So that's then the increasingly important task in the philosophy of economics, the outcome of which would be seen as the 'normal' state of affairs at the end of the second wave; to formulate inalienable economic rights to a fair share, enshrined in 'proper' economic constitutions for 'truly' free markets. (Fortunately, a lot of work in this direction has already been made, though mostly not concerning rights to a fair

share.)

Constitutions enshrine political rights, economic constitutions enshrine economic rights, and as political rights collide with maximum sovereignty, economic rights to a fair share collide with maximum growth. Political rights mean less power – historically, first of all for kings. Economic rights in the above sense mean less growth – but what growth and for whom? Comparably few societies command the largest part of the world's economic resources and within these societies rather few individuals command the largest part of their societies' economic resources. Less but better distributed growth will be fine for almost everyone. Economic constitutions are also an opportunity to enshrine trans-national rules in 'markets open to the willing', thereby allowing to address trans-national, if not global distribution and sustainability problems.

But what economic rights shall we enforce? Certainly as few as necessary, because economic rights come with the danger of corruption via increased opportunities for arbitrary market interventions by state officials. Furthermore, economic rights should make individuals strong, not dependent; we do not want to enshrine a specific level of redistribution, but enable the weak to stand up to the strong. At the one end of the spectrum this means guaranteed health care and educational opportunities for everyone, as well as strong worker rights and most likely also something like minimum wages or negative income tax, rather than universal basic incomes or relying on redistributing taxes only. At the other end this means sharp anti-trust, conflict of interest and financial regulations, as well as the principle commitment to 'tax the rich' in some way (at minimum temporarily in times of crisis). Between societies, we additionally need rules for the stewardship of economic choke points. Concerning sustainability, new measures for growth and the value of natural resources are needed. Core open questions are how to properly value care work and how to bring – most likely over decades – willing nations from the global south into such markets. The economic tools for all of this are available today, from 'New Institutional Economists' and many others, but the point of 'proper' economic constitutions (unlike the existing ones) would not be to enshrine specific tools, but inalienable, enforceable rights to a fair share for all market participants. On one side this would mean little more than to transfer the economic implications of universal human rights into enforceable, explicit form. On the other side this would include enforceable rights to fair (non-arbitrarily distorted, non-fragile) and sustainable markets. Is it possible to develop and implement working economic constitutions based on such rights? We should certainly try (harder).

## **Outlook**

Pushing the three waves forward still seems to be our best bet to promote individual and societal flourishing. The problem progressives and liberals are stumbling over currently is that the unsolved conflicts of the economic second wave put too much drag on the cultural third wave. The solution is to stand firm against any regression on cultural issues, but first of all push forward on the second wave.

## **References**

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