Resignation is the curse of our time. Yet life could be otherwise, says Sofia Näsström

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Demokracie je na nejistotě závislá, tvrdí Sofia Näsström. Koláž: Deník N

"Our everyday life is full of new uncertainties, but our democratic systems still don't know how to deal with them," says political scientist Sofia Näsström in an interview. According to her, we need a new way of thinking about democracy, and we need to look for ways to build democratic resilience. "One could say about our current situation that the laws and institutions we have built to keep the future under control are incapable of facing the uncertainty we are experiencing," she adds.

In the interview, you will also learn:

- How do democrats play into the hands of autocrats?
- What are democracy theorists overlooking?
- Why can't citizens simply be told that they have to learn to live with uncertainty?
- Where can we look for new sources of social solidarity?
- Why should we talk about building bridges instead of bunkers?
- How much of autocrats' ideology uses the rhetoric of freedom?

As an expert in political theory, you focus on the question of what we must not lose if we want to maintain and further develop the democratic system. It is a question that is, on the one hand, theoretical, but also historical and contextual — and undoubtedly extremely relevant today. What makes your approach particularly interesting is your effort to carefully rethink the concept of democracy so that democratic politics can be more adequately developed on its basis. You present the motivation for this need to develop a new understanding of democracy right in the first sentence of your upcoming book *Democracy and the Social Question*: "The future has never been so uncertain." Do we need to transform our understanding of democracy because we are facing new uncertainties?

Yes. Our world is changing and bringing new uncertainties. Climate change, migration, new technologies, wars, pandemics, growing inequalities, and financial instability are leading to major social transformations that, of course, generate uncertainty. At the same time, it is also true that uncertainty is a fundamental human experience that shapes human nature — it largely governs human action and decision-making. Humanity has therefore always tried to keep uncertainty under control through various tools: prophecies, rituals, laws.

And our current democratic tools for coping with new uncertainties are not sufficient.

Yes, one could say about our current situation that the laws and institutions we have built to keep the future under control are unable to face the uncertainty we are experiencing. In this moment of *interregnum* (a power vacuum or transitional period — editor's note), to use the words of the famous Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, a variety of morbid symptoms appear. We see presidents who do not behave like presidents. The world seems upside down. This situation is deeply unsettling, and if democracies hope to survive the 21st century, they must find constructive ways to address it. We need a new way of thinking about democracy, and we need to look for ways to build democratic resilience.

I really appreciate that your solution lies, among other things, in the self-reflection of democratically minded theorists and politicians — in the ability to change their thinking in the face of crisis. What is wrong with the current conception of democracy?

The problem is that political thinkers work with an overly reductionist understanding of what democracy is. In an effort to avoid the authoritarian failures of 20th-century socialism, many of them have reduced democracy to politics alone. They define democracy as an ideal of political equality or as a process of political negotiation and decision-making in which all citizens participate. They then debate which of these models best represents real democracy.

Reducing democracy to what happens in laws, parliaments, and political parties fundamentally weakens its appeal to citizens. Theorists overlook the real dramas that unfold in the social sphere: in work, housing, education, and so on. It is precisely there that the most important things happen for the majority of people.

In your upcoming book *Democracy and the Social Question*, you show that many political theorists separate the social question from democracy in three different ways.

Yes. They tend to frame it in one of three ways: as pre-political, meaning that a certain level of social and economic equality must exist for democracy to function (an idea advocated, for example, by Robert Dahl); as too political, where the social question is seen as part of an ideological struggle that democracy is supposed to calm and resolve (as suggested by Adam Przeworski); or as apolitical, where social issues become more of a technical matter to be handled by bureaucratic systems of social control (a critique found in the works of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe).

In all these cases, the social aspect of democracy is ultimately pushed to the margins. This separation not only creates false dilemmas but also prevents us from understanding how democracy declines or renews itself during times of profound change.

Do democratic politicians themselves presumably commit the same kind of separation?

Yes, they fear being rejected as ideologues, and this "socialist card" is played not only by autocrats but sometimes even by well-meaning defenders of democracy. But in doing so, they actually play into the hands of autocrats. Because autocrats ask: "You can't eat democracy, so why should citizens support it?"

Does this mean that democratic politicians, in their practice, are afraid to emphasize the social question as a democratic issue so they won't be labeled as socialist ideologues, which autocrats then exploit by attacking democracy as a whole?

Yes. The main struggle today does not take place between democrats with different understandings of democracy - liberal, republican or deliberate - but between two different political forms: democracy and autocracy. In this struggle, social discontent plays a major role, with autocrats skillfully exploiting fears about the future and social unrest to strengthen their power.

"Can you provide a specific example of such a political maneuver from Sweden or another country?"

One obvious example is how autocratic forces exploit the migration issue, and this has become very clear in Europe after the war in Syriah in 2015, and particularly in Sweden which welcomed many refugees at that time. It gave a strong push to the Sweden democrats, a right-wing party with roots in Nazism, and they have since become a real force in Swedish politics. Instead of creating the conditions for long-term social integration — which is the democratic path forward — they try to sow division between natives and newcomers. They push moderate forces on the right ahead of them, demanding reforms that affect not only migration, but the future of democracy itself.

In an attempt to sway public opinion, the government has, for example, proposed that Swedish citizenship should require financial independence, knowledge, good behavior, and the right values. But if “we the people” decide to raise the bar in this way, we simultaneously tell the same thing to ourselves: this is what we think is required to be a citizen in our country: resources, education and love of country and law. The result is that the poor, the uneducated, and the minorities who live in Sweden will see newcomers rejected citizenship on grounds that include them as well. Newcomers who pass the tests will in turn have to compete for something that natives receive freely. Why, they may ask, should natives not be tested in the same way (as one of my international students suggested)?

This is one way that autocrats exploit migration to undermine democracy: their alleged effort to “protect democracy” through a more restrictive migration politics will in the end weaken rather than strengthen the democratic status of citizenship. The maneuver is executed with precision, quite clever since it falls under the radar of well-meaning democrats who believe the issue is only about migration.

Let’s go one level down to the topic of uncertainty, which you consider the core of the problem and the place from which a new understanding of democracy should grow.

Yes, uncertainty is a basic human condition, and all political forms seek to tame the essential uncertainties of the future in one way or the other. What is unique for modern democracy is that it does not merely tame uncertainty; it mobilizes it for emancipatory purposes. It creates laws, institutions and policies that give everyone equal freedom and responsibility to shape an uncertain future, and the right to fail and begin anew when confronted with unexpected change. This “spirit of emancipation”, as I call it, referencing the work *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu, is what connects the political (who governs and how) and the social (who gets what). Uncertainty about the future calls for recurrent ways of distributing power, and this same uncertainty also cries out for recurrent distributions of resources. The political and the social are therefore not two different animals. They are two different configurations of the same underlying spirit of emancipation.

In a certain sense, uncertainty defines humanity. It cannot be eliminated, but people seek ways to tame it, keep it under control, or learn to live with it. But can uncertainty, within a certain political order, even serve as an impulse for development?

It certainly can, but only if approached in the right way. Democracy relies on an uncertain future and promises change. It tells its citizens: "Life can be otherwise." The problem is that this experience is double-edged.

Uncertainty about the future can inspire hope that tomorrow will be different from today. It suggests that the future is not predetermined but shaped by human activity, which is essential for the renewal of democracy. Yet, the experience of uncertainty can also be exploited for authoritarian purposes. Autocrats can use it to provoke fear, resignation and mistrust among social groups.

The crucial question we face today is how to channel experiences of uncertainty more toward democratic rather than authoritarian outcomes. And to this, it is not enough to simply say, "You must learn to live with uncertainty." That would be an insult. When uncertainty arises from profound societal changes, it cannot be placed on individuals alone to deal with. Instead, uncertainty must be distributed evenly through the creation of laws, institutions, and policies that both tame and tolerate it. I believe this point is extremely important.

How does uncertainty differ from risk? There is a famous book by Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, which points out that risks in society are not distributed evenly but unjustly.

Risk is something that can be predicted and calculated—for example, the risk of a particular party winning an election or the risk of a nuclear explosion—whereas uncertainty is something that cannot even be addressed with statistical estimates. Uncertainty belongs to what scientists call "unknown unknowns." It suddenly strikes us—like a storm, a revolution, or a sudden turn of events that no one expected.

Beck, in his work on the risk society, primarily discusses calculable risks. He shows how modern societies have shifted from the distribution of "goods" to the distribution of "bads" or risks, such as the side effects of continuous growth in the form of climate catastrophe.

He also discusses how modern societies, faced with an uncertain future, focus on creating security and social safety nets. In my opinion, shifting attention from risk to uncertainty has the advantage that the future is no longer tied to constant growth. We are not doomed to extinction if we reconsider the meaning of the term “well-being.”

Regarding social security, I believe it is a very good thing—with one important caveat: it is based on the idea that we all share risks. However, in today’s world, this is becoming increasingly difficult. Many wealthy citizens have little incentive to support a social security system from which they do not benefit. Therefore, I think its focus needs to change. Instead of merely sharing risks, we should start thinking about sharing our uncertainties. This could create a new source of social solidarity.

Referring to Montesquieu, in your work you show that political regimes are determined not only by structure but also by a certain “spirit”—something that drives a society forward while keeping it in balance. Could you mention these different forms of government and their driving forces?

The main message of Montesquieu’s work *The Spirit of the Laws* is that when we talk about different forms of government—such as republics, monarchies, and dictatorships—it is not enough to look only at who holds power and how they manage things. We must also understand the spirit that drives each system at its core.

In a republic, the key is virtue or patriotism—love of country and law. In a monarchy, it is honor and distinction—people pursue status and titles. In despotism, it is fear. Each type of government operates based on its own kind of motivation, much like different engines require different fuels. If you put the wrong kind of fuel in, everything goes wrong. But Montesquieu does not stop there.

He says that these driving forces—patriotism, status-anxiety, and fear—not only influence the leaders but also shape everyday life. They affect how people behave, how children are educated, how money and power are distributed, what kind of luxury people value, and the role women play in society.

In other words, government is not just about laws and politics. It depends primarily on the driving force behind them. If a king fails to promote social class and inequality in things like education or land ownership, he is actually undercutting the very idea of monarchy—and his own power along with it. So, these driving forces go beyond politics. They shape both the political and the social: who governs and how, and who gets what.

You build on Montesquieu in your book *The Spirit of Democracy*, where you formulate the driving force of democratic politics.

Montesquieu inspired me by seeing political and social issues as always deeply interconnected across all the mentioned political systems. In my book *The Spirit of Democracy*, I argue that the same applies to democracy: its driving force is emancipation.

Does the democratic spirit of emancipation have any advantages compared to other driving forces?

The main advantage, of course, is that emancipation is a *democratic* spirit, as opposed to an autocratic one, like fear in despotism or distinction in monarchy. But it has yet another advantage. Since the spirit of emancipation gives everyone equal freedom and responsibility to shape an uncertain future, democracy can adapt and reform under novel historical circumstances.

It is no coincidence that the history of modern democracy has been a struggle by ever new groups of people demanding to be included among decision-makers, like workers, women, black people, indigenous groups. It reflects the emancipatory spirit of modern democracy, and the hope it carries with it. “We do not have to accept our subjection—life could be otherwise”.

It is striking how this spirit is fading today. One gets the feeling that many people have lost faith in the future and believe they must accept their subordination to corrupt autocratic leaders—or worse, that this subordination is in their own interest. This is perhaps the most subversive aspect of autocratization.

Perhaps this is the most subversive aspect of autocratization. It does not just erode democratic institutions—it undermines the very spirit of emancipation that animates and sustains them. Today there are powerful actors around having a strategic interest in people feeling this way.

"Can you give an example of such undermining? Do you observe it also in Sweden, or more broadly in Scandinavia?"

Resignation is the curse of our time. It is a feeling that can lead to dangerous forms of nihilism and apocalyptic thinking if strategically exploited.

I immediately think of influential billionaires and tech investors like Peter Thiel, who passionately promote various doomsday theories—perhaps as a way to avoid taking responsibility for the very future they are actively shaping. In their world, democracy is powerless, and people are beyond saving. All that remains is survival, and many of these billionaires have even built bunkers for themselves to withstand the collapse.

But what kind of mindset—or what kind of spirit—do these visions of a massive societal collapse promote, if not an escape from our own freedom and responsibility? There are many possible paths forward, and that's what we should be talking about. Not about building bunkers, but about building bridges.

“But aren’t these ‘powerful actors’ using democracy’s own principle of emancipation against it? Perhaps that’s also why it’s so difficult to argue against them: ‘I won’t let myself be vaccinated like sheep, I am a free person. I won’t naively believe what they tell me on TV, I won’t be manipulated. We don’t need to be in the European Union and serve Brussels. We have freedom of speech, so I can write vulgarities about others as I please. I can’t even compliment a woman anymore, we are in a new totalitarianism. When someone is called a disinformer, it’s just to silence them. Our life can be different, freer without all those commitments that the elites promised us.’ Aren’t we actually missing, more than liberation, a certain trust in each other, a possibility to rely on the system?”

A large part of autocratic ideology uses the rhetoric of freedom. And that is no accident. We should not underestimate the legitimate criticism of democracy that says democracy is ruled by elites. The big chainsaw (Milei in Argentina, Musk in the USA) can evoke an immense feeling of freedom: finally, someone is doing something! Finally, real change!

However, disinformation is a big problem in this context because our desire for freedom is not based on reliable facts. That is why many researchers are beginning to talk about the need for trust in sources, not just criticism of information sources. There must be institutions in society, such as the public sector, that we can trust.

Because when something is said on social media and we doubt whether it is true—which happens often today—where do we turn to verify if it is true? That is precisely why autocrats

so hate professional journalists and also public media: they cannot be deceived so easily. And yes, I believe democracy needs trust to function—at least the ability to see that we live in a society where we depend on each other to survive and prosper.

Trust, however, is not a universal cure for autocracy. We often think that trust creates good institutions.

But trust is not a universal remedy against autocracy. We often think that trust creates good institutions. But a sense of trust within one's own group or organization can drive both democratic and autocratic movements. One can "bowl for fascism" (as a book on the civil society organizations operating in Germany in the interwar years puts it) as well as for democracy.

Your conception of democracy combines certainty and freedom, acceptance of uncertainty as a human condition, and the development of the ability to cope with uncertainty. Closely related to this is the concept of resilience, which does not deny the existence of crises, uncertainties, and adversities, seeking to use them for transformation, but at the same time rejects the idea that more uncertainty is better for people. The theory of social resilience argues that a resilient society is recognized by the fact that its citizens have sufficient security and economic and cultural resources to manage dangers, that they feel recognized within their society, and that they can rely on a system of trustworthy institutions. What is the relationship between security and freedom in your conception?

I think work serves as a good example of how to build democratic resilience. Climate change, financial instability, and new technologies are putting increasing pressure not only on political institutions and decision-making bodies but also on ordinary people – affecting their jobs and livelihoods.

People are asking real questions: Can I support my family during an economic recession or a transition to degrowth? Will artificial intelligence take my job, or will it help me find a better one? To strengthen our ability to cope with such challenges and crises, we must invest in each other. Through educational systems, social services, and protections, we need to build capacity to manage unexpected changes.

The primary purpose of these systems is not to reduce poverty, but to reduce uncertainty. Even if someone loses their job, they should have support to recover from it and find a new path in life. This combination of security and freedom is the foundation of the democratic spirit of emancipation.

The Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko argues that the European Union is one big insurance company. He believes that European society is unwilling to take any real risks, which paradoxically makes it vulnerable. Haven't we, on the contrary, become accustomed to having the right to be insured?

That is an intriguing question. The idea that one must sometimes sacrifice personal comfort, take risks or give up something in life for the common good is, I imagine, very much alive in Ukraine in the face of the Russian aggression. I associate this idea with the republican spirit of virtue, a readiness to defend one's country and law.

Are those animated by the spirit of emancipation perhaps too reliant on systems of reassurance, and therefore more vulnerable in times of crisis? Maybe so. Every political form has its own potential distortions. Virtue can turn into a vice if love of country and law becomes chauvinistic. And emancipation can slip into servitude if the desire for security trumps the desire of freedom.

How does the sentence "life can be otherwise" relate to the sentence "make America great again"?

We often connect democracy with progress, so it is no surprise that messages like making America "great again" can feel jarring. But here is the thing: democracy depends on uncertainty. So looking backward to some imagined golden age or forward to a fixed pre-designed future does not fit with how democracy works.

If we believe in the idea that life can be otherwise, then we need to face today's uncertainties—spurred by climate change, war, disinformation or rapid technological shifts – and build new institutions that can meet those challenges. This is the dilemma we are facing: our daily lives are full of new uncertainties, but our democratic systems have not caught up. And in that gap nostalgia finds room to grow.

Could it be said that the spirit of fear, like a Trojan horse, threatens the spirit of emancipation in many contemporary democracies?

Yes. Fear is a basic human instinct, and sometimes we have good reason to be afraid: fight or flight. But fear is also a driving force, a tool in the hands of autocratic movements and leaders who want to undermine democracy from within. In times of crisis—and perhaps especially during times of war—it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.

Is it generally possible that the spirit of fear, hierarchy, loyalty to the state and emancipation are (at least latently) activated simultaneously in a democracy through various social disputes and discourses?

Yes, that is precisely how it works. There is not *one* spirit activated in *one* political form, but they always co-exist and compete for our attention. Political forms are hybrids. Much like Montesquieu's famous idea of the separation of power between the legislative, executive and the judiciary means that neither instance can speak for the whole (although Trump as the executive tries to do so). This means that there is no pure democracy, but sometimes we act on fear, sometimes we seek status and sometimes we strive for emancipation. What matters in the end is what spirit takes the upper hand in our collective actions and institutions. If it is emancipation, we call it a democracy. If distinction, a monarchy. And so forth.

You write that the cure for the current crisis cannot be the promise that tomorrow will be better than yesterday. The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz also suggests replacing the idea of progress with resilience – the ability to cope with uncertainties in the social and political sphere. I would add: to transform oneself under bearable conditions in the face of new situations. Does that make sense to you? What do you think we should be aiming for?

Yes, it makes perfect sense. I would add that the goal should be to build institutions that support us in this difficult work of adapting and growing when the world around us changes. Change brings uncertainty. It means that what we thought we knew no longer holds true.

Some people find that exciting, while others find it frightening. But we cannot base a society's resilience on individual personality traits alone. Not everyone is wired the same way. That is why we need institutions that help everyone—regardless of how they personally respond to change—cope with uncertainty. That, to me, is the true meaning of emancipation. It is not something we achieve alone; it is something we build or suffer together.

Is it not possible to argue that in any democracy there will always be a dispute over emancipation - a dispute over what is healthy uncertainty and threatening uncertainty, who bears what as a measure of responsibility and uncertainty? In other words, who decides, and on the basis of what (deliberative or agonistic processes), how specifically to live emancipation in policies and lives? Why is the agonistic principle not deeper than the emancipatory drive?

Yes, in a healthy democracy, there will always be disputes about what emancipation really means – and that is a good thing. But what stops us from turning those disagreement into violence? Why do we throw paper stones – arguments- instead of real ones? The answer lies *in what spirit* we disagree. Are our conflicts driven by fear, status-anxiety, patriotism or emancipation?

The spirit behind our disagreements ultimately shapes the kind of political form we will end up living in. And that brings us back to a previous point: the primary conflict today is not between different versions of democracy – it is between different political forms. This is why it is so important to learn how to detect the spirit at play in the conflicts we engage in.

A specific situation can be observed in Eastern Europe, where the spirit of resistance to Western Europe is combined with what I called a punitive culture in my research, Resilient Society: Between Powerlessness and Tyranny. How do you perceive the difference between the spirit of Western and post-communist democracies?

I understand why people in post-communist countries feel disappointed. Neoliberalism acted as a Trojan horse for Western democracies – it came to post-communist countries with the promise of freedom and prosperity, but instead it painted democracy in a terrible light. Some people are now saying, "If this is democracy, we don't want it." That's true.

Interestingly, many people living in Western democracies are starting to feel the same way – they want a better version of democracy. I am fascinated by how little many Western democracy experts know about autocratization. They often seem surprised by these developments in Europe. In contrast, scholars in the East have had direct experience of these changes and understand them much better. So perhaps in some ways the East and the West are getting closer than we thought.

Can you give specific examples of the desirable democratic connection of political and social issues?

A good example is artificial intelligence. It is bringing about a completely revolutionary social change, not unlike the industrial revolution, perhaps even more radical in its consequences. From a political perspective, we must ask who decides how artificial intelligence will develop and for what purpose. From a social perspective, we must ask who owns these companies and what are their impacts on our well-being. Artificial intelligence cannot be avoided, it is already here and it is causing a lot of good things too.

What we can do though is to mobilize the uncertainties it creates for democratic purposes. This means not merely being attentive to who owns the technique and the platforms, but looking at how the algorithms are designed. What kind of spirit do they encourage in us? Perhaps there is a way to re-bot or redesign the algorithms in such a way that they are guided by a spirit of emancipation rather than one of fear, status anger or hatred.

Are you aware that anyone would care about such algorithm modifications? And what is it that current algorithms are driven by fear, anger, and hatred?

I am by no means an expert on these matters. I know that the EU has created the so-called Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires large social platforms to delete illegal content in the form of hate speech and disinformation, and individual countries such as the UK and Germany have done the same. Algorithms are now amplifying social divisions and prejudices.

However, I want to emphasize that the forces driving these algorithms may not be based on hatred or fear per se, but rather on the desire for profit and control. When we search on Google, use tools like ChatGPT, or post on social media, we routinely hand over vast amounts of personal data to large corporations – often without realizing it

That pursit of profit and control has enabled the rise of tech oligarchs (and the billion-dollar companies they control). As Oxfam warned recently, the wealth of the very richest is surging, and with obscene wealth comes extreme power. Today we witness how figures like Musk or Thiel do not merely have economic, but political ambitions. They seem to view themselves as more deserving and more knowledgeable than others, as masters of the universe—deeply delusional, and incredibly dangerous.

As a professor of political theory, how do you feel in the midst of this geopolitical situation? Do you feel that the academic world also needs to undergo a transformation in order to be part of the reinterpretation of democracy? Who would you need to collaborate with? What do you propose to change in academia? What shall academia get rid of?

This really touches on a lot of what I have been thinking about lately. I will try to keep it short. Right now, universities and scholars are being targeted by authoritarian leaders. For a long time, we assumed that democracy was so widely valued that research could safely support it. Promoting democracy was seen as a good and neutral thing. But that is no longer the case. Supporting democracy has become more political—and in some cases, even seen as a partisan move. This creates a serious challenge for universities. It is not just about protecting academic freedom anymore. The big question is: Should we also stand up for democracy? Or would that make us look biased and damage our role as neutral experts?

Personally, I think scholars in the West need to work more closely with those in the East, who often have first-hand experience with authoritarianism. But there's another issue too: We need to bring back the spirit of deep thinking in academia—the courage to ask hard, complex questions that take time to explore. Right now, the system rewards young researchers for publishing lots of papers quickly, not for asking meaningful, big or difficult questions. Why take the risk of going deep when simpler work gets you further ahead in your career? That is a real danger. If ordinary people—who often fund universities—see that this is happening, why would they care about what we do? Why would they want to fund us?

And how do you feel as a citizen of Sweden? On what do you base your own personal hope, your freedom and security?

As for hope, I believe people have the power to make things right. We are beginning to see what happens when leaders like Trump come to power: war, corruption, misogyny, confusion, oligarchy and injustice, you name it. The consequences are real, and while it may take some time, my hope is that this experience will not develop into fear or inertia, but instead give birth to new struggles for emancipation.

Can we summarize: how to make uncertainties about the future work for democracy rather than against it?

By sharing and dividing them equally, politically and socially. We need to create laws, institutions and policies that tame the uncertainties we experience under large-scale social transformations, and we need to so in ways that foster both reassurance and freedom.