

# The legitimization of the use of sweat shops by H&M in the Swedish press

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In the Swedish news-media we find sporadic critical, or reflective, reporting on the production conditions of Swedish ‘sweat-shop’ factories in the Global South, used to supply Transnational Corporations (TNCs). In this paper we carry out a critical discourse analysis, in particular using Van Leeuwen’s social actor and social action analysis, to look at examples from a larger corpus of 88 news reports and editorials from the Swedish press, between 2012–2017, which report and comment on activities of the Swedish company H&M in relation to its production chains. Analysis reveals how these recontextualize events, processes and motives, to represent Sweden and Swedish TNCs as characterized by a benevolent, democratic, humane, form of capitalism, drawing on discourses of a former social democratic Sweden of the 1960s before it became highly neo-liberalized. This nationalism converges with other discourses promoting the exploitation of the Global South.

**Keywords:** Sweden, nationalism, transnational corporations, sweatshops, fashion industry, working conditions, news

## 1. Introduction

The global garment industry is worth up to 1.5 trillion dollars globally and is an industry which doubled its production between 2012 and 2020 as new markets were developed and fast fashion encouraged faster, throw-away, consumption (Singh 2017). While there are many companies involved, the biggest four globally are: TJX Companies (TJ/TK Maxx) Inditex (Zara) H&M and GAP (O’Connell 2020). These all probe the world for the cheapest production costs and most weakly regulated environments, aggressively negotiating prices. Production takes place where there tends to be poverty, in countries opening themselves up to neo-liberalization, or in those forced into Structural Adjustment Programs (Oxfam 2019).

There have been a number of highly publicized instances in the international news media where TNC's have faced criticism, especially in relation to the use of child workers, or dangerous working conditions (Guo et al., 2012; Ross 2004). As a result, many TNC's, mindful of their brand reputation, carry out public relations work, such as H&M's 'conscious collection' and 'better cotton' initiative. Yet these have been criticized as mere cynical empty gestures, given the fundamental nature of the business model (Newell 2018).

In this paper, drawing in particular on Van Leeuwen's social actor and social action analysis (2008), we look in detail at the discursive script found in a corpus of 88 news and editorial articles from the Swedish press, collected between 2012–2017. These all report, or comment on, the activities of Swedish TNCs in the Global South. We look in detail at two articles from the corpus which allow us to illustrate discourses that run through it. Articles in the corpus present a surface stance of being critical, of monitoring exploitation, signifying a journalistic 'watchdog' style. But closer analysis reveals a recontextualization and legitimization of the aims, motivations and consequences of Swedish TNC activities, where a nationalist discourse plays a key role. In Critical Discourse Studies, it has been demonstrated that nationalist discourses can be shaped, promoted and deployed for ideological purposes (Wodak et al. 2009; Wodak 2017). In this paper we show there is a convergence of Swedish nationalist and other discourses that legitimize exploitation in the Global South.

In order to draw out the discourses we find in the texts, we begin with a literature review to provide the context of how TNCs operate and of the global regulatory and finance system which allows them to do so. We also look specifically at the activities of H&M in the Global South. These two steps allow us to then show which forces, processes, causalities and actors are recontextualized – deleted, substituted, evaluated, added or re-sequenced – in the texts in our corpus. Finally, we review the literature on the representation of the Global South in the news media which provides us with some highly useful resources for understanding the nature of the reporting we find.

## 2. Global supply chains and exploitation of workers

There have been a number of high-profile cases of sweat shop exploitation of workers in the news media. However, it has been argued that it is simply not the case that this situation is limited to individual corporations, countries or factories. It is rather a systematic part of the global manufacturing system (Smith 2016). The use of global supply chains for the outsourcing of production of consumer goods in the West started in 1960s and 1970s and intensified with the implementation of

neoliberal policies across the world from the 1980s (Smith 2016). From this time, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, controlling international finance and trade, liberalized economic relations, accelerating and intensifying the process (Hart-Landsberg 2013). As a result of these policies TNCs were able to shift suppliers within and between countries, thus creating a situation where producers must increasingly push down wages and working conditions in order to remain 'competitive' and be attractive to foreign companies (Ross 2004; Parenti 2011).

TNCs, therefore, are free to seek out the lowest costs, shortest production cycles and the weakest regulated zones in regard safety and the disposal of waste (Anner 2015). The results are terrible, highly dangerous, working conditions, as producers seek to lower costs to get contracts (Ross 2004; Human Rights Watch 2012) In their 2019 annual report on the clothing industry McKinsey noted consecutive years' profit increases in the sector derive largely from improved operating margins driven by cost cutting' (Amed et al. 2019).

In many countries TNCs arrive as part of enforced neo-liberalisation as governments are pressurised to repay debts by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Paczynska 2006) – countries may be in a situation where 70% of GDP goes to paying off debts (Kimberly 2005). In such circumstances these countries will be placed into Structural Adjustment Programs which will include enforced privatization of public services and financial liberalization, which means a complete removal on restrictions as to what foreign corporations are allowed to do in the country – what they can own, the transfer of money in and out (Peet 2009; Parenti 2011). Countries in Structural Adjustment Programs are compelled to offer highly attractive conditions for profit-maximization of TNCs, including low cost workers, favorable locations, tax exemptions and non-existent labor laws (Bellamy Foster et al. 2011). The Structural Adjustment Programs have been shown to have devastating effects in these countries (Geo-Jaja and Mangum 2001), leading to a breakdown in infrastructure, with cuts in education, health and social services, hikes in utility fees and deepened poverty (McMurtry 1998). Where there are gains this will be amongst elite socio-economic groups (Paczynska 2006). Further instability will result as the TNC's may quickly relocate to another region should it be in their economic interest (Geo-Jaja and Mangum 2001).

TNCs, aware of the growing importance of ethical shopping, have sought to handle media criticism by developing their own 'codes of conduct', or by promoting 'corporate social responsibility'. Although, given the fundamental nature of this overall business model these have been criticized as superficial at best, if not outright cynical PR (Newell 2018). And while TNCs may exercise pocketed levels of ethical practice, actual supply chains are highly complex with many layers of

shifting outsourcing and sub-contacting. Actual monitoring is difficult (O’Keefe and Narin 2013; International Labour Organization 2014).

### 3. H&M and its global suppliers

The Swedish company H&M is one of the world’s largest clothing retailers with production outsourced to around 900 suppliers across almost 2,000 factories in Asia and Latin America (ITUC 2016, p.21), and is expanding into Africa. These employ around 1.6 million workers to produce its clothing (ITUC 2016, p.41). H&M sells about 25 billion dollars of clothing each year using its ‘fast fashion’ model, where consumers are encouraged to frequently buy very cheap disposable garments to be worn only a handful of times.

H&M devotes a special section on their website to their sustainability goals and working conditions and has engaged in publicized campaigns to improve working conditions across their global supply chains, such as the ‘H&M Roadmap to a Fair Living Wage’ and their ‘Model Factory Programme’, a partnership program with the International Labour Organization and the ‘Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh’ (Asia Floor Wage Alliance 2016). H&M has created its own list of what it calls ‘platinum’ and ‘gold’ suppliers who meet higher standards of production conditions (H&M 2018).

Despite H&M’s publicized initiatives, reports show that working conditions appear still for the most part, unsafe, unhealthy and exploitative (Andersson et al. 2016; ITUC 2016, 2019; Lindström 2004; McMullen and Majumder 2016). These are often in conflict with International Labour Organization standards, national laws and H&M’s own codes of conduct (AFWA, 2016), with documented cases of uses of child labor, including orphaned Syrian migrant children in Turkey (Pitel 2016). This is the case even in factories that H&M has rated as ‘platinum’ and ‘gold’ suppliers (Preston and Leffler 2016). It is estimated globally that around 170 million children are involved in child-labor of a nature that is unacceptable or prohibited for children, where most of these are in the fashion industry (O’Keefe and Sun Narin 2013).

As Bain (2017) notes, there is a contradiction where H&M seeks to improve its ethical image, yet at the same time drives to increase productivity through the global supply system. And simply, given the nature of complex supply chains, H&M’s ethical promises cannot extend down shifting chains of subcontractors (Liebelson 2014). A report by The Center for Alliance of Labour and Human Rights (2019) in Cambodia, where H&M had been promoting their intentions to improve working conditions, stated clearly that with the pressure to reduce costs, and the nature of the this business model, all such initiatives had been unsuccess-

ful. This has led some observers to view such ethical campaigns rather as corporate clean-washing (Kärnstrand et al. 2016; Siegle 2016).

#### 4. The news media and reporting the Global South

The discourses we find in the articles in our corpus must in part be understood in the context of those used to represent the Global South in the news media in general. The Global South is largely under-represented in news (Hafez 2007; Williams, 2011). Stories only appear if they bring a domestic angle or where there are western people involved, either the famous or as victims (CARMA 2006).

Where there is coverage of the Global South this is 'episodic' and highly selective/ fragmented, with little coverage of everyday life and politics and more focus on a number of current hot spots (Williams 2011). These are covered with a handful of typical frames such as wars, military coups, famines and disasters, usually delivered by negative and stereotypical stories and images, emphasizing drama and conflict (Hafez 2007; Peterson 1980). Countries become temporarily visible if there is some kind crisis, although many major conflicts are simply not reported at all (Franks 2005)

Crucially these stories are often reported without any substantial context, appearing almost as random events without clear cause (Lugo-Ocando 2014). There is no mention of the legacy of colonialism, nor of ongoing Western economic and political interests, nor the role of the global economic system, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, etc. (Abalo 2015; MacLeod 2018). Such simplification typically fails, therefore, to contextualize the difficulties, strains and struggles in Global South countries in relation to history and wider forces (Lugo-Ocando 2014). Instead, such coverage often reproduces Eurocentric perspectives whereby people from the Global South are stereotypically portrayed as deviating from norms of Western rationality, thus reproducing a colonial imagery with a sense of them being irrational, uncivilized, innocent, hostile, corrupt, poorly organized and over-emotional (Lugo-Ocando and Malaolu 2015; MacLeod 2018).

Since the 1990s there has been some attention to the activities of TNC's in the Global South in regard to the exploitation of workers in supply chains (Greenberg and Knight 2004; Hilary 2013; Ross 2004). However, such coverage addresses only a handful of exceptional cases and tends to adopt a 'consumer versus producer' frame which foregrounds the power of consumer choice to boycott particular stores, ignoring the fundamental nature of the system (Greenberg and Knight 2004; Slater 2009).

## 5. Theory and methods

In this paper our analysis draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in particular, Van Leeuwen (2008). CDA is interested in the role of language in the functioning of society and politics. It seeks to reveal where language is used for the purposes of maintaining, legitimizing and naturalizing power relations and systems of inequality. Analysis looks at the details of choices in language and grammar and how they shape the representation of events, processes and participants, in ways which support the maintenance of inequality and injustice.

A key concept in CDA is 'discourse' (Foucault 1979), a term which captures the kinds of knowledge or models of the world communicated through language. Through close analysis of texts CDA seeks to reveal the discourses which are buried in them (Van Dijk 1998). Such discourses, Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) argue, are comprised of discursive 'scripts'. These scripts comprise the doings of discourse and include elements like kinds of participants, actions, processes, causalities, times and places. Such discursive scripts can involve recontextualizations of the actual nature of ongoing events, by additions, deletions, substitutions, abstractions, evaluations and resequencing (Van Leeuwen 2008).

In this paper the aim is to reveal the discursive scripts for the activities of H&M in the Global South as they are realized in our corpus. To do this we use Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor and social action analysis. This allows us to show what kinds of participants are represented in the news texts, their intentions, priorities, what actions they carry out and in what kinds of processes and forms of social relations they are involved. It allows us to draw out where the nature of these, as established in the literature review above, have been recontextualized.

We analyze two representative texts from a corpus of 88 articles collected between 2012 and 2017, evenly distributed over the years, as part of a larger ongoing project on the representation of working conditions in the Global South in the news media. These were taken from the six Swedish newspapers with the largest readership: *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Göteborgs-Posten* and *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*. The corpus was assembled using Mediarkivet, Scandinavia's largest digital archive of media sources, carrying out key word searches and then assessing individual articles as to whether they were relevant. All of the texts were then read to identify the topics and discourses they carried. Running across the corpus were: first, discourses representing the consumer as having the power to make a difference by buying only ethically produced products – in other words, this situation becomes an individualized moral, discourse. Second, there was a discourse which portrayed the actors in the Global South as being responsible for poor working conditions due to a combination of corruption, irresponsibility, greed and lack of humanity. Third, western TNC's

are represented themselves as innocent victims of their dealings with the actors in the Global South. Here they point to their codes of conduct and the challenge of dealing with a kind of wild west of factory owners, politicians and workers organizations in the Global South. Fourth TNCs should be responsible and ethical – here it is possible to operate within these transnational supply systems but have good working conditions.

There is one other discourse that runs through the corpus, which we look at specifically in this paper. This relates to nationalism, which converges with these other discourses, legitimizing the TNC supply system and plays a special role in reassuring that it is the people of the Global South who will most benefit. In this paper we are dealing with a form of nationalism which has a specifically Swedish accent.

In Critical Discourse Studies, it has been demonstrated that nationalist discourses can be shaped, promoted and deployed for ideological purposes (Wodak et al. 2009). They are used to mobilize against migrant populations (Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2008) legitimize discrimination against ethnic minorities (Breazu and Machin 2018), to distract populations from social and economic inequalities (Abousnouga and Machin 2013) and as a reason to go to wars which in fact have primarily geo-political aims (Graham et al. 2004). Such discourses are disseminated in political speeches and by the news media, but also in everyday banal events, routines and objects, such as sports, history programs, schoolbooks (Billig 1985). Such discourses of nationalism must be understood as fundamentally constructed, imagined, and unrelated to any existing concrete entity, and also that they are continually shifting where processes of globalization have often led to re-emerging nationalisms (Wodak 2017).

Andersson (2019) argues for more research looking at the work done by the nationalist discourses of different countries, which may each have their own inflections. In her work she shows how former Swedish democratic ideals have become colonized and recontextualized for commercial purposes. This discourse of Swedish nationalism draws on romantic notions of the 1960s social democratic movement relating to equality, fairness, transparency, human rights and consensus (Ehn 1993), now long replaced by rapid neo-liberalization and growing social inequalities (Therborn 2018). Such discourses are now nevertheless used commonly in advertising and in nation branding (Swedish Institute & Ministry for foreign affairs 2017) where Swedish people, as well as visitors, can be reassured that the country is unchanged and is the progressive nation it once was, despite its fundamentally changed nature (Andersson and Hilson 2009). In this paper we see how this Swedish nationalist discourse converges with others in the legitimization of exploitation of the Global South.

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1 Article 1: ‘Exporting Trade-union rights – H&M and IF Metall want to fight bad working conditions in Cambodian factories’ (*SvenskaDagbladet*, 23/10/2012)

This is an article from the more conservative- centrist *Svenska Dagbladet*. It reports on how H&M and the Swedish trade union IF Metall want to work to improve the situation in Chinese owned factories in Cambodia, where there has been strikes. The report explains that they will bring about a mutually beneficial solution.

#### 6.1.1 *How the participants are represented*

##### 6.1.1.1 *The Swedish participants*

In the first place we have the participants from Sweden: the Swedish trade union organization, IF Metall, and the clothing corporation H&M. In the report these participants are represented through *individualization* – their spokespersons are named respectively: “Erik Andersson” and “Helena Helmersson”. We find examples of this in Extracts 1 and 5 below. This has the effect of creating greater levels of *personalization* since individualisation can be one way in which the reader is encouraged to align with particular participants (Machin and Mayr 2012, 80). Both of these participants are also *functionalized*, in a highly specific way, in other words we are told their exact job titles. These are “international secretary” and “sustainability chief”, respectively. A less specific functionalisation could be ‘worker’, or ‘employee’. In this case these titles point to officialdom, high rank and power, through the honorifics “international secretary” and “chief”. In the first place there is a sense that Sweden is very engaged with the world at an international level – here with an interest in Chinese factories – and in the second case that H&M has an official and high-ranking position related to sustainability, signalling how committed it is to this.

We also find the ‘Swedish model’ as an agent presented as having influence, seen in Extract 6 below. The exact nature of this model is never explained. And it is implied that the union and H&M are somehow aligned with it. That this model is not explained points to the fact that the text producer presupposes that this is a given. There is a presupposition that there is a Swedish model of TNC conduct, in contrast presumably to other non-Swedish models, which must be inferior. As Andersson (2019) shows in the case of Sweden, this use of national branding can be used to connote a discourse which signifies the 1960s idea of a Sweden organized on the basis of social democracy, equality and social justice, which has long



since declined, replaced by neoliberalism and market-oriented politics. The social democratic system included a specific relationship between workers and employers, acknowledging that the two had conflicting interests and that there should be a compromise so that one can create profits while the other can experience justice and prosperity (Blyth 2011; Therborn 2018). This shifted through the 1970s and onwards where under the neoliberal system with an emphasis on profits, working conditions must adapt and be flexible in order to maintain competitiveness, keep jobs and benefit the national economy, as seen in the revision of the strike law in 2019. What we see in this news text, and in our corpus, is that the news media appear to have internalized this neoliberal view which suppresses conflicts between labor and capital and sees them as both pulling in the same direction. In this text no possible conflict of interest is identified between H&M and the union IF Metall.

#### 6.1.1.2 *Chinese and other participants*

In the case of the host countries we find no such individualisation. They remain generic, functionalized as “Chinese bosses”, seen in Extract 1. Here the term ‘boss’, sounds less formal, less official or modern. This chimes with a discourse of ‘orientalism’ and associations with the Global South as disorganised, informal and unregulated (Said, 1978). What is also foregrounded here is that they are *Chinese* bosses. They could have been represented, for example, as ‘the managers of Chinese owned factories in Cambodia’. But here national identity is used to signal a type of orientalist *Chinese* boss.

- (1) ‘Anyone would feel bad about Chinese bosses who do not at all think they need to talk to the workers, 30–40 degrees heat and not even permission to leave to drink some water, says Andersson.’

In the report the workers remain generic and collectivised through the *functionalizations* ‘workers’ and ‘staff’, seen in Extract 2. This glosses over that many of such workers are likely to be women, in an industry where 80% are women (Oxfam, 2019) and where a large part of the labour force can be comprised of children (O’Keeffe and Sun Narin 2013). None of the workers are individualised or named. They are also *aggregated* as 100,000 textile workers. The inclusion of numbers here also helps to create a sense that we are dealing with facts or concrete information (Machin and Mayr 2012).

Later in the text both workers and bosses are represented as “the Cambodian parties”, seen in Extract 12 who will benefit from the Swedish model, again backgrounding the make-up of these workers. These participants are not permitted to speak, allowing H&M to come to its own conclusions about their problems and what kinds of solutions are required.

- (2) About 100,000 textile workers in Cambodia work in Chinese-owned factories that supply to H&M, among others. Wages are low and conditions are often miserable with low wages, nutritious food and too much overtime. In recent years, workers have fainted for hundreds and shown a number of other symptoms.

The story, therefore, sets up a polarization based on national identity. In this way the actions and priorities of the two may be interpreted in relation to their nationality and 'culture', rather than the nature of the overall global supply system. Using van Leeuwen's (2008) terms we could say that this simplification *substitutes* the actual purposes and forms of relationships, driven by economic interest. And we would say that we have a process of *deletion* where other participants – level officials in government, managing organizations such as the WTO, which facilitate the complex trading environment that underlies fashion production, are not present as part of representing the nature of what is taking place. The situation we are dealing with in regard to worker's conditions is built into this system, yet in this report it becomes a matter for unethical Chinese bosses who are now confronted by the Swedish model and its officialdom.

### 6.1.2 *What the participants are represented as doing*

#### 6.1.2.1 *What the Swedish participants are doing*

At the start of the report we are told:

- (3) H&M and IF Metall want to fight bad working conditions in Cambodian factories

Here we see the intentions of H&M and IF Metall as clean, simple and noble: to fight bad working conditions and here with no conflict of interest. Although here modality is slightly lowered. They are not represented as actually fighting conditions but 'wanting' to do so.

The use of 'want' here also represents the mental process' of the participants, which can have a humanizing for the reader who gains access to more personal concerns. At several points in the report we are told about the hopes and feelings of H&M and IF Metall. We see this in the following:

- (4) Thanks to H&M, which has already been in Cambodia for several years, IF Metall has the opportunity to pursue solidarity work. H&M, for its part, hopes for stability and that employees should be treated with respect.

Here H&M is 'hoping' for stability. And in Extract 5 we see that the corporation also 'thinks' in terms of responsibility:

- (5) We have a huge responsibility to help the workers have a salary they negotiate themselves and working conditions that are healthy, says H&M Sustainability Manager Helena Helmersson.

In Extract 4 we also see that IF Metall will now “pursue solidarity work” in Cambodia. It is not clear what this means in concrete terms, but it sounds positive, the rhetoric of ‘solidarity’ suggests bringing people together, uniting them. It is not clear how solidarity can help in this situation where there is the drive for low production costs in a global market where TNC’s will quickly shift to cheaper suppliers. Nor is it clear how workers will be helped to be in a position to negotiate their own salary and working conditions, as is suggested in Extract 5.

Extract 4 is also of interest as we are told “Thanks to H&M, which has already been in Cambodia for several years, IF Metall has the opportunity to pursue solidarity work”. Here H&M take a benevolent role and are to be thanked for giving an opportunity.

We are also told simply that:

- (6) The Swedish model would help both the employees and the employers

Again, the conflict of interests between producer and workers in this supply situation is deleted from this formulation where the Swedish model can help both. We are also told that IF Metall will use “Swedish negotiation methods”. What these involve is not stated. But they are ‘Swedish’ connoting both the former sense of democratic values as well as pre-neoliberal labour-capital relations, where negotiations will aim to serve both sides equally for justice and prosperity. But what has been communicated to the reader foremost here is the humane mindset: of hoping, wanting to fight for workers, pursuing solidarity work, having responsibility.

Also, of note in the case of the Swedish model as a solution, is that it is treated as a simple ‘thing’, an entity. This is exportable and effective regardless of the countries’ different situations, as well as political histories and irrespective of the huge economic traps in which many former colonies, under pressure from the World Bank and crushing debts and Structural Adjustment Programs, are suffering.

Of particular note in this report is that the trade union organization and the corporation appear to have no differing or conflicting accounts of this situation. At the end of the report the H&M representative states:

- (7) Recurring strikes do not benefit anyone

Yet here we might expect a trade union organization to see this otherwise. And it is of note that the report does not mention the strikes until the very end, once the benevolence and humanity of the Swedish model, in contrast to the orientalist Chinese bosses, has been established. And this is stated in high modality as a

simple fact, suppressing the very notion that striking could be a viable strategy for these workers to bring about change.

H&M are also given the agency to define the nature of the problem at the factory.

- (8) According to an investigation that H&M had made, this is “mass psychogenic illness”, a kind of mass psychosis. Theories have been put forward about toxic chemicals or poor ventilation. But H&M’s conclusion is that it is more about the staff’s almost non-existent opportunities to influence the work situation.

Of importance here is how other explanations about the effects of chemicals and ventilation are dismissed. Here we find ‘Theories’ represented in the form of a nominalization. So complex ideas and arguments about causalities are reduced to a thing. We do not know whose theories they were; for example, were they produced by an international NGO? Moreover, calling such information ‘theories’ suggests that it is only *theoretical* that toxic chemicals or poor ventilation are causing the problem of people passing out. H&M, having dismissed these ‘theories’, conclude that the problem is more psychological: a lack of agency.

Finally, in the ‘facts’ section at the end of the report we are told:

- (9) Since December 1 last year, H&M has broken with 117 of about 750 suppliers around the world because of a breach of the company’s code of conduct.

Much research points to the fact that the very nature of this business model requires certain kinds of production conditions. And H&M, as other TNCs, are continually shifting production sites as it chases the cheapest production. Yet here this information is presented under ‘facts’, as if proof of ethical practices.

#### 6.1.2.2 *What the factory owners/bosses are doing*

The factory owners are presented as the agents in the supply transaction:

- (10) Chinese-owned textile factories that supply to H&M, among others.

In this way the agency of the TNCs and their shifting use of suppliers are backgrounded. The supply side here is more salient and responsible for the situation.

As with the Swedish participants we are given access to the motivations and mental processes of the suppliers.

- (11) Anyone would feel bad about Chinese managers who do not at all think they need to talk to the workers, 30–40 degrees heat and not even permission to leave to drink some water, says Andersson.

Here, however, this presents a negative attitude and also one that is evaluated as mistaken, as we are told that the Chinese managers do not *think* ‘they need to talk to workers’. The problem here is formulated not as being about the nature

of global supply chains but as one of attitudes and communication. So ‘talking’ is part of the solution. Here too, the issue of lack of permission to drink water is about mistaken thinking rather a deliberate result of crushing ruthless paced work rates required to meet low cost production deadlines.

We also see how the factory owners will benefit from the activities of the Swedish participants:

- (12) Therefore, the project is now underway where the Cambodian parties will learn to relate to each other in a respectful way. Swedish negotiation methods, safety representatives and safety committees work, is Metall’s experience after running similar projects with Atlas Copco and SKF.

Here the two sides will “learn to respect each other”. So talking to each other will lead to a situation of mutual respect. And here we see the role of negotiation methods labelled as specifically ‘Swedish’. As we are told at the very start of the report

- (13) A glimpse of the Swedish model would help both the employees and the employers, says IF Metall’s international secretary Erik Andersson.

Here, in Extract 13 we see that such is the potency of the Swedish model that a mere glimpse will help both employees and employers, despite the nature of production situation.

### 6.1.2.3 *What the workers are doing*

In the first place those working in the factories are functionalised as “textile workers”:

- (14) About 100,000 textile workers in Cambodia work in Chinese-owned factories that supply to H&M, among others

Reports have shown that the people who work in these factories can comprise many women and in particular small children (Sweeney 2015). Yet this is excluded from this report, as the aspect of their identity which is foregrounded is ‘workers’.

We are told about the conditions experienced by these workers

- (15) Wages are low and conditions are often miserable with low wages, no food breaks and too much overtime. In recent years, workers have fainted in their hundreds and shown a number of other symptoms.

Here “Wages are low” is a passive verb. There is no agent and we are not told who instigates this situation. Such low wages are part of this system of supply relations and part of what makes suppliers attractive. In the same way conditions are simply ‘often miserable’, with no agent bringing about this situation.

In Extract 8 above we were told more about what the workers are suffering. H&M’s own investigation concludes that this is a kind of psychological problem

on behalf of workers due to lack of self-determination in the workplace. The actual nature of suffering becomes substituted and recontextualized in the discursive script, mirroring neoliberal workplace therapeutic style solutions to staff suffering from excessive workloads and burnout (Davies, 2016). So here, rather than taking action into their own hands by striking, the workers need to address their psychological feeling of lack of self-determination.

What is backgrounded in the report is that the workers had been striking. This is introduced only at the end of the report where the H&M representative says that “Recurring strikes do not benefit anyone”. Yet in the report the workers are represented as passive victims, who are in need of the Swedish model so that they can learn to relate to their bosses with respect. There is no sense of the anger, outrage, suffering, that lead to people living with very few resources, to go on strike. Nor is there the possibility for workers movements to bring about larger scale change. These must be backgrounded so that this can be represented basically as a cultural problem which the Swedish model can solve by teaching communication and respect.

## 6.2 Article 2: Now it's the time for Africa (Sydsvenskan 27/7/2013)

The next article we analyze is an editorial report from a liberal, center political, newspaper about the intentions of Swedish TNC's, including H&M, to open factories in African countries. This report begins by presenting two extreme points of view as to whether the move of Swedish TNCs into Africa is a good or bad thing:

- (16) Do a thought experiment. Imagine a big Swedish clothing chain will sew lots of clothes in one African country in sub-Saharan Africa. How do you react, to which of the following ideological extremes are you closest?
1. Typically, capitalism never denies itself. Unscrupulous business is constantly looking for new markets to exploit the workforce.
  2. Wow, promising that poor African countries can attract foreign investment and get out of poverty.

How these options are presented is important. These simplifications and caricatures of stances are presented as the only ones that might exist. The rest of the article then makes a case for the second of these, telling us that Asia has prospered through the presence of global corporations and now it is Africa's turn.

Of importance in this opening section is that we find a more personal style communicating openly with the reader as ‘you’ and with simulated conversations with questions: “Do a thought experiment”, “How do you react”, “Imagine”, “Wow”, all suggesting a kind of synthetic personalization and equal footing. These

are followed by two possible replies, as if the story presents an open interrogation of the case. As if 'we' are working it out together.

### 6.2.1 *The participants in the report*

The text presents a set of participants who provide evidence for number 2 above:

Development researchers, Swedish clothing giants like Kappahl and H&M; The Foreign Office's (UD's) African Unit; Sydsvenskan journalist Ann-Sofie Dahl; Professor Hans Rosling

Here, as well Swedish clothing TNCs, we find the authority of the African Unit of the Foreign Office, as well as a named and individualized journalist and professor and unspecified 'development researchers'. As with the previous report there is a sense of officialdom, ideological support from the Swedish government and Sweden as a whole.

'Development researchers', a generic term here used by the journalist which could include historians, geographers as well as corporate analysts, is a term which itself is deeply ideological. Kress (1985), carrying out an analysis of school-books for teaching geography, noted that 'development', in countries like Africa, was always seen as a good thing, and always suppresses the economic interests of those involved. And 'development', as in this report, is represented as a nominalisation, therefore concealing details of processes, places and times of what is actually developing (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The very idea that a region, where there is cattle herding and agriculture, is 'undeveloped' and needs 'developing', or that it presents untapped resources, minerals, metals, etc, is a deeply ideological view. Here 'lack of development' can itself be represented as the cause of problems, rather than colonialism or resulting economic relations with the international system including heavy debts.

The report presents a list of countries, regions and whole continents, which are collectivised as being of the same order, which are to be the beneficiaries of the TNCs:

Africa, African countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia.

No person nor government office is referred to here. They are collectivised as generic Global South locations. We find, therefore, that a list of highly distinctive countries, regions, and continents, are classified together. History and centuries of colonial exploitation in Africa, distinctive in each of these places, along with more recent upheavals, conflicts in which Western powers have been parties, and then the ongoing actions of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, are excluded.

The other participants are China and the whole continent of Asia which are used as evidence of how this model of development can work.

- (17) But what, in general, have trade and investment meant for Asia? A huge amount.

In China, the hourly wage for a textile worker has doubled in just six years. A middle class has emerged. As Ann-Sofie Dahl wrote in *Sydsvenskan* yesterday luxury stores in Copenhagen are full of happy Chinese shoppers.

In itself China's recent history, in regard to economic development, is unique, related to very specific government policies, in part which has allowed some control over their relationship with TNCs. It is highly problematic to make a simple comparison between the situation faced by countries in Africa, with those of China and others in Asia. Yet this representation of Sweden, official and individualized on the one hand and a generic, alien and passive generic Global South, run through these representations of the activities of Swedish TNCs in the corpus.

### 6.2.2 *What are these participants doing?*

What is salient from the Swedish perspective is that the TNC's are looking for 'opportunities':

- (18) Swedish clothing giants like Kappahl and H&M are looking for production opportunities in Africa.
- (19) At the Foreign Office's African unit, it is said there is "a wonderful growth opportunity" if the countries can only get peace. Perhaps importance should also be expanded to infrastructure – roads, railways, electricity, IT.

In Extract 18 we find "production opportunities" and in Extract 19 "a wonderful growth opportunity". These motivations are not represented in terms of the rationale as why TNC's relocate to new regions: to maintain minimum production costs to maximize profits. Here 'production' and 'growth' are presented as unproblematic and simply as positive and desirable things: as opportunities. At the very start of the report, setting the scene for this 'growth' as the solution, we are told:

- (20) For decades, development researchers have discussed Africa. Now a light can be seen – when foreign companies find it.

Researchers who analyse and write on African societies and their social and economic problems will include accounts of colonialism, of operating later as client states of western countries, of national debts, enforced neoliberal policies and the effects of Structural Adjustment Programs (Paczynska (2006). Yet here it is implied that formerly these researchers were simply stumped and now a light comes in the form of the TNCs: 'Now a light can be seen – when foreign companies find it.'



Here the companies, and not the development researchers appear to hold the key to finding this light.

In the report the ‘growth’ itself is personified, since it is represented as a nominalisation and as a thing:

- (21) In South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia growth is expected to shoot with even more momentum as the world textile and shoe industry finds benefits in Africa.

Here we see the use of the metaphor where growth ‘shoots’ with ‘momentum’. Here in the form of the nominalisation of ‘growth’ it is not clear what will be growing, where and when. But again growth, as with the nominalised ‘development’, are simply positive things. And here this will take place, not as a direct cause of TNCs, but in a kind of parallel manner ‘as the world textile and shoe industry finds benefits in Africa’. And here it is “the world textile and shoe industry” which finds the benefits rather than corporations. Here the use of the term ‘industry’ suggests something more positive related to production, jobs, a healthy economy.

‘Benefits’ is the term used in Extract 21 to generalise as to the nature of the advantages for the TNCs in Africa, the nature of which we have considered earlier. But it is added by comparison to Asia:

- (22) Here wage levels are lower than in Asia, the supply of cotton is great, customs rules are often beneficial.

What is meant by ‘low wages’ is not specified. This is diluted by other positive things such as ‘the supply of cotton is great, customs rules are often beneficial’. In the second case “customs rules” glosses over the favourable conditions created by the Structural Adjustment Programs and the International Monetary Fund and also suppresses the nature of the lack of regulation, terrible working conditions and lack of safety standards, which allow the wages to be kept so low.

Finally, the reader is told to:

- (23) Go to Professor Hans Rosling’s informative website [www.gapminder.org](http://www.gapminder.org) and consider the moving graphics. The whole world – almost – can today be said to be developed. However, one region has visibly slipped behind in prosperity and health. Africa south of the Sahara. It is not only funny to be an advocate of optimism, there are good reasons for that too.  
Let it be Africa’s turn now.

We do not have the space to address the contestable issue of whether the whole world can now be said to be developed. What is of direct relevance here is how Africa is said to have ‘visibly slipped behind in prosperity and health’. Here this is represented as something for which Africa itself is the agent of ‘slipping behind’ –

a complete abstraction of the actual processes which lead to the current situation in many African countries, removing the direct agency of the western institutions and corporations in the region over recent decades.

Finally, the report ends that these are good reasons for optimism and “Let it be Africa’s turn now”. Here we return to Africa as a whole, as if it can be so unproblematically conflated. And ‘its turn’, suggests that after China and Asia’s turn in a sequence of ‘development’ is now Africa’s turn. Those opposing may be seen as getting in the way of ‘letting’ it be their turn.

## 7. Conclusion

What we learned from our corpus, illustrated in this paper through the close analysis of two representative texts, is how Swedish nationalism is one discourse which converges with other discourses used to represent the Global South as part of legitimizing exploitation and aggressive free market capitalism riding on structural adjustment loan programs. Swedish TNCs and Swedish institutions, simply can be trusted to act in the name of justice, prosperity for all, for the ideas and values of democracy, equality, transparency and consensus. These contrast with the irrational, uncivilized, backward and inhumane nature of capitalists and officials in the Global South.

The Swedish news reader is presented, not with a view of a rampant global capitalism chewing up the world, either through corporate greed, through the ambition of nationally based corporations, but are comforted that ‘we’ carry out a form of ‘manufacturing’ that plays a civilizing, peace-keeping and even developmental role – helping the vulnerable, passive and victimized local populations. As other authors have argued, the civilizing ideas of the nation, have been deployed for many ideological purposes, to go to war against an evil other, to turn people against what are represented and uncivilized, primitive migrants and ethnic minorities who form a risk to national culture.

Scholars such as Wodak (2017) note that while some see globalization as bringing an end to nationalism, to the contrary, we have seen its resurgence. And this nationalism, with its myths about national dispositions, successes and glories, is hugely flexible. And in the Swedish case here we see something else, observed by Wodak and Forchtner (2014), in regard to how this nationalism can be deployed as part of identity politics. These authors draw attention to nationalism and the notion of a pure or nativist people who can be positioned against others such as ethnic minorities and migrants who can be blamed for all kinds of social and economic problems. But what we see in our corpus is how Swedish nationalism becomes a kind of identity politics which claims left wing ideas and

values. But while on the one hand this may appear more positive, we see how this idea of the homogenous 'us' with its myths grounded in a former model of Sweden, an imaginary of equality and openness, like other forms of nationalism, can be equally as dangerous. Like nationalism deployed by the populist right, this myth of collective culture, ideas and values, glosses over difference, over complexity and actual realities of social contexts. And in the end, what we find is also a kind of racism – the construction of generic others and the legitimization of the maintenance of incredible social and economic inequalities. All nationalisms can be used to justify and conceal actions which will lead to social and economic inequalities. The danger for the Swedish newsreader is how this nationalistic imaginary of goodness can act as a barrier to seeing the extent to which their country, how it is organized both internally and in regard to the global economy, is something entirely different. All nationalisms, it seems, bring about a kind of blindness.

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- o *Publication history*

Date received: 4 February 2020

Date accepted: 5 October 2020

Published online: 10 November 2020

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