

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

VOLUME 21
SPRING 2021



DEMOCRACY EVER AFTER?

PERSPECTIVES ON POWER AND REPRESENTATION



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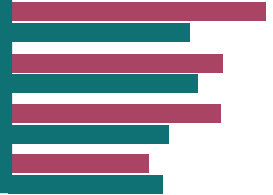
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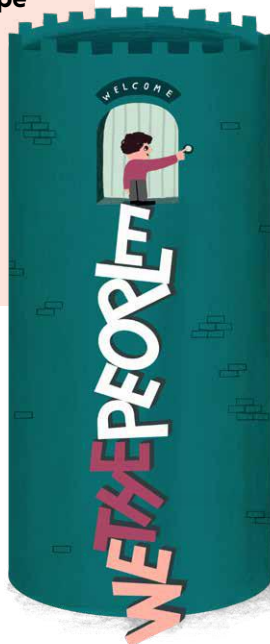
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EDITORIAL

TURNING THE TIDE

JAMIE KENDRICK FOR THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong, far-right militia storming the US Capitol, French generals talking openly of civil war: the vital signs of democracy around the world do not look good. In many countries, public faith in democracy is waning. Dissatisfaction with democracy has been rising globally since the early 1990s, especially after the 2008 financial crisis.¹ Whether it is about attacks on its integrity or simply about navigating the distortions of electoral systems, democracy and its organising principles require constant protection, maintenance, and repair.

The global trend towards populism in recent years prompted many debates about a “crisis of democracy”. That it closely followed the financial crisis suggests that inequality and economic downturn are essential parts of the story. But the roots go back further and economics does not explain everything. Societies are changing with culture an increasingly central battleground, and technology is rewiring how we live, work, and communicate. With the pandemic, the steady shift online of everything from the media ecosystem to community meetings has accelerated. All together, these factors play into how democracies function and malfunction.

¹ Roberto Stefan Foa et al. (2020). *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

D R I A L

The upsurge in calls for better representation and democratic rights in established democracies forces a reflection on how our political systems are far from perfect. The *gilets jaunes* protests were about forcing a distant metropolitan politics to consider the realities of rural towns and suburbs when setting climate policy. The Black Lives Matter movement is about basic rights such as equal treatment under the law as well as overturning persistent injustices. Who, what, and how politics represents is up for discussion – and rightly so. It was a non-voter (then-15-year-old Greta Thunberg) sitting outside the Swedish Parliament demanding that her generation's interests be taken seriously that sparked the 2019 descent of the global climate movement into the streets. But the experiences of Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and many other countries offer clear warnings. If democracy is perceived not to be working, there are more and less democratic ways of fixing it.

Democrats therefore face the dual challenge of preserving what we have got while also deepening democracy and representation to include all people meaningfully and equally. In some countries, the first is more urgent but the two are invariably linked. This dual task has always been at the heart of the green political project. With democratic principles at their core, Greens unambiguously defend human rights everywhere and the fresh, often-female face of green politics is on the front line of opposition to right-wing authoritarianism. But more than that, from representing future generations to recovering the commons, green politics pushes democracy further and provides a new axis about which to ground our institutions.

What can Greens bring to the struggle over democracy's future? First, creativity and willingness to challenge established ways of doing politics through driving equal representation, active citizenship, and participation. The success of representative democracy depends on its representativeness. Guaranteeing real diversity and inclusion in politics is therefore central to bridging the gulf that exists between political institutions and society at large. The experiments in citizens' assemblies

EDITO

and other innovations mushrooming across the world are only part of the answer. Long supported by Greens, they promise ways to revitalise politics and include sidelined perspectives and interests. But, as critics point out, these are imperfect exercises. Increasingly influential Green parties cannot afford to throw the baby of representative democracy (and their role as parties) out with the bathwater. Innovations alone will not suffice to fend off an alternative, exclusionary version of democracy that is on the rise.

Second, Greens have a crucial role to play in defining a new common good that all society can rally around. More than anything, democracy is the story of a community determining its future. In Europe, universal suffrage has been the shared (though not always joint) achievement of the labour, women's, and democratic movements. But the achievements of 20th-century social democracy were bound up with a fossil economy that is necessarily in retreat. As ecological crisis redefines the conditions for prosperity in the 21st century, it is up to the green movement to protect democracy by leading the progressive vision of a sustainable, socially just future. Distinct from its social democratic and neoliberal predecessors, it promises to both restore the social fabric on which any political community depends while allowing people to flourish as individuals.

Third, the need for greater democracy in the European Union itself cannot be ignored. The EU's actions are often democratically and constitutionally fraught – as popular votes and court rulings regularly demonstrate. The result is that its achievements are fragile and deadlock is never far away. European democracy will only be built slowly but increased transparency in decision-making, a more representative EU-level politics, and greater support for European media and civil society can all contribute. With federalist visions in retreat, the most promising avenues for building genuinely transnational forms of democratic politics may be found in strengthening connections between different levels of political power across Europe.

DRIAL

The stakes are high, but there are grounds for hope. Democracy is not an endpoint; it is resilient and flexible. How it evolves matters and will depend on the forces that steer it. For Greens and progressives, there is no better time to put forward a broad, positive vision of democracy and representation built on freedom, equality, and inclusion. As the movement that politicised the relationship between society and nature in the West, green politics is at the forefront of not just democracy's defence, but its reinvention.

The editorial board and team pay tribute to the contribution of Laurent Standaert, who served as editor-in-chief of the Green European Journal from late 2015 until January 2020. He oversaw a bold expansion of the Journal, consolidating its identity and building its readership. We thank him for the energy he dedicated to carrying forward the founding vision of the project and wish him all the best for the future.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY FOR A SOVEREIGN EUROPE

AN INTERVIEW WITH
FRANZISKA BRANTNER
& **SHAHIN VALLÉE**
BY **EDOUARD GAUDOT**

The European Union's democratic deficits – both real and perceived – have long been its Achilles heel. As the Union's role expands, debates around its democratic and constitutional mandates will only grow. Is there an emerging sense of political community, vital to any democracy?

Given the deep-rooted differences among countries in terms not only of political traditions and processes but also conceptions of sovereignty and democracy, forging a common vision remains a delicate exercise.

EDOUARD GAUDOT: With rising turnout at European elections and Europe-wide debates on issues such as migration and the recovery fund, there are tentative signs that our politics is becoming more European. What does this mean for the future of the European Union and its democratisation?

FR

This article is available in French
on the *Green European*
Journal website.

**PENSER LA
DÉMOCRATIE
POUR UNE EUROPE
SOVERAINE**

Comment articuler la
politique transnationale
et les réclamations de
souveraineté afin de
construire la démocratie
européenne ?

SHAHIN VALLÉE: Strange as it might sound, the recent crises have actually made me optimistic. Not just the Eurozone crisis, but also the migration crisis that followed, as well as the recent geopolitical problems, have heightened awareness of transnational issues. It's the first time that people across Europe have been as interested in a referendum in Greece as they are a German election or the possibility that Marine Le Pen might win the presidency in France.

This awareness is emerging even though Europe has neither media outlets nor political parties that are fit for this new reality. It's rather surprising that the last European elections saw so few attempts to create new transnational political experiences other than DiEM and Volt, which,

incidentally, don't seem to have been particularly successful. So, I see a glimmer of hope because politics really is becoming more transnational. It's why turnout at the 2019 European elections jumped by almost 10 per cent.

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: I agree that there has been an improvement, but have things really come that far? The US elections dominated the German media for six or seven months, with stories on Ohio or Texas every day, whereas we hear very little about the formation of a new Italian government or the Dutch elections, and even less about the political issues in these countries. Terrible things are happening in Slovenia but there's very little attention paid to this, even though the country will hold the EU presidency in late 2021. I don't really see a major step forward towards a European approach to news. On the other hand, the same disinformation is spreading across Europe through social networks. It shapes an alternative European public opinion based on erroneous or false information. During the pandemic, vaccine conspiracy theories turned up everywhere at incredible speed. There may well be European public opinion, but if this is how it looks, it scares me.

As for a European media space and political parties, I don't think we're there yet. That's why we're fighting for much closer cooperation between public broadcasters, to support and reform them. With the Digital Services Act,

the future of the media space in Europe will become a very important issue. If we're unable to manage that together, we'll be lost.

The second lesson from recent years is what Luuk van Middelaar calls "events politics", whereby crises cemented the European Council's emergence as the key player in the EU, while the European Parliament was often sidelined and the Commission struggled to find an independent role. Is this a worrying trend for European democracy?

SHAHIN VALLÉE: An accident of history transformed institutional theory into a practice that was different to the original intention. When the Lisbon Treaty came into force at the beginning of the Eurozone crisis, the European Council entered the scene with clear powers for the first time, notably through the permanent presidency. During the crisis, the Council played a decisive role and replaced the Commission as the European executive. This shift was somewhat fortuitous. If the Lisbon Treaty had come into force at a different time, we would not have seen so much of this "executivisation" of the European Council.

This drift was then reinforced through a succession of crises and set a precedent that will be hard to undo. The genie is out of the bottle and, to be honest, even with a Green chancellor in Germany and a Green president in France, this would still be the case. The only way to overhaul

this institutional arrangement is through treaty change; not a cosmetic change, but a profound change that would give stronger executive prerogatives to the Commission and, above all, reinforced democratic oversight to the European Parliament. But that seems quite far off.

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: We see the same effect in member states. Throughout the pandemic in Germany, Merkel and the 16 heads of *Länder* (states) have met every two or three days to make decisions. It's the same logic as the European Council. We need to ask ourselves why. One reason is that the way our national governments are organised, divided into traditional ministries in a classical liberal democracy, is simply not fit for dealing with complex international crises. Today, we can no longer say: "The environment ministry does this, the health ministry does that." The system is no longer suitable for the crises that we're facing. The issues have become much too complex, going way beyond what our institutional approaches were designed for, and require a speed of response that is lacking today. It's the same in parliaments: the Bundestag's European affairs committee, the health committee, and so on, bicker over who has the right to summon the European Health Commissioner. How can parliaments act quickly and effectively when they too are prisoners of these structures?

There are broad calls to strengthen the powers of the European Parliament – and national parliaments too. Is this the key to strengthening European democracy?

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: Both levels are necessary. For example, it's clear that in France the parliament should be strengthened. In cooperation between the *Assemblée nationale* and the Bundestag, I regularly see how weak the *Assemblée nationale* is. "We can't make proposals to the president," is a common refrain when speaking to my French counterparts. They don't even dare make joint decisions because, according to their interpretation, the constitution doesn't give the parliament that role. So, we definitely need to strengthen and modernise the national level. The same goes for the European level. We must also reinvent our parliaments with dynamics like citizens' assemblies and make committees more interdisciplinary.

SHAHIN VALLÉE: It's true that this weakness is partly written into the French Constitution, but it's also partly a historical tendency of the Fifth Republic. France could have a more active parliament without changing the constitution. What's more, every president promises constitutional reform, or at least electoral reform that would strengthen both the parliament's representativeness and its powers. But we're let down every time. It's one of the reasons the political crisis in France is so acute.

THE WAY OUR NATIONAL
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ORGANISED IS SIMPLY
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WITH COMPLEX
INTERNATIONAL CRISES
– F. BRANTNER

While no political system is perfect, one of the fundamental strengths of German political stability

is its parliamentarianism and its largely proportional voting system. For French Greens, that remains an ambition, though I understand that for a German Green it isn't the be-all and end-all. Indeed, the French Greens were fighting hard for a sixth parliamentary republic for quite some time, but you don't hear much talk about it anymore; it's quite strange.

What about at the European level?

SHAHIN VALLÉE: If the treaties can't be changed – and I think that we can and should change them – there are also practices that are important to establish or re-establish, like electing the president of the Commission. In 2014, the procedure for appointing the president of the Commission, the so-called “Spitzenkandidat” process, which gave the European Parliament a leading role, was somewhat cobbled together because it isn't written into the treaties. But this practice was pretty much unilaterally challenged by Macron in 2019. I think it's something that should be revisited. There ought to have been a more careful reading of the Spitzenkandidat process. In an Italian-style system, for example, winning the election isn't enough to become prime minister, but coming first gives you the first go at trying to form

a government. Such a principle could reinforce the importance of the European Parliament

in appointing the head of the European executive and allow it to better scrutinise their actions.

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: We should remember, though, that in 2019 the European Parliament wasn't united around a candidate, neither was it in 2014. But returning to the question, I think that the European Parliament already does a good job. Of course, it should have more power over the budget and foreign policy, for example. But in the meantime, the most important thing is that it speaks to the issues of the future and shows that, collectively, we can meet citizens' expectations. In this respect, the European Parliament does a better job than the Bundestag. From Germany, the European Parliament appears highly proactive and also under-utilised; it's a force for the future, even with too few powers.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has now been launched. Should this be seen as an opportunity for public debate? What can we expect to come of it? Transnational lists, institutional change, or another element of the “future” Franziska mentions?

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: I hope that it won't simply boil down to institutional questions

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or transnational lists. Of course they are important, but if we do all this debating to end up there it would be a pity because this isn't citizens' main concern. It would be very important, for example, to address health and questions of competence in this area. Everyone now understands the limitations, advantages, and disadvantages of the EU in this health crisis. A second urgent issue is the role of borders in a crisis. How do we manage cross-border regions? There are plenty of worthy subjects that we should try to tackle: climate, justice, protecting our freedoms...

SHAHIN VALLÉE: I was quite optimistic about the conference initially. I thought that this political object invented at the time of the European elections was useful. But now, exactly two years later, it's clear that this conference is largely pointless. We don't know precisely what its goal is and its bizarre governance seriously undermines its ability to deliver anything. The more time passes, the more it reminds me of another fairly miserable failure: the European Citizens' Consultations set up in 2017 after the French presidential election – run by the European Commission and France's diplomatic service – which produced pretty much nothing.

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: Other than frustration...

SHAHIN VALLÉE: I fear that the Conference on the Future of Europe will be the same. That said, despite everything, I try to remain optimistic. Since

2019, the profound upheaval in Europe – the health crisis and questions about competences, the economic response, and new political questions such as the ability to issue debt – means that we no longer need this artificial forum to talk about the future of the EU. My stance is to let the conference die a quiet death in a corridor in Brussels or Luxembourg, and then let's work on putting politics back into the institutional and constitutional questions that have emerged over the pandemic. What is the future for the EU's own resources? What is the future for European budgetary rules? What is the future for the ability to issue common debt? These are the subjects that should be driving European public and political debate.

But even if we admit that this conference has not met our expectations, there's still a process behind it for involving citizens.

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: I'm not so negative about the conference: if there are real debates on the climate, the euro, foreign policy, health – that could generate some impetus. Can we then manage to incorporate these into the political debate? It's on us to prove that we're up to the task. The process is new, too: the

participants will be citizens chosen at random, alongside experts. It's a novel approach and we'll see if it leads anywhere.

SHAHIN VALLÉE: On the face of it, the only innovative aspect of this conference is a stated desire for citizen involvement. I'm still not convinced that this will be anything but symbolic, so I'll believe it when I see it, but in any case, involving citizens is a good thing in principle. But, for it to work, we should agree to give real power to these bodies, which doesn't seem to be the case. I think back to the disappointments of the Citizens' Convention on Climate in France, when participants were promised that their proposals would be adopted in full, but this didn't happen. Worse than no deliberative democracy is false deliberative democracy. I fear that this conference is just that, but I hope I'm wrong.

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: It's a new method and we should give it a chance. For example, in Baden-Württemberg we want to hold a convention of Franco-German citizens from the shared cross-border region to provide input for the main conference, with citizens chosen at random on the Alsace side and the Baden-Württemberg side. In this current period where we're asking "what is Europe?", I think it could help. I hope that the Grand Est region will be willing to work with us. If we manage to go beyond simply holding a conference towards a real process over several

months with experts and randomly chosen citizens, we can make progress. If lots of other stakeholders do the same, all the better. Launching initiatives and dynamics that help us makes sense. Otherwise, Shahin, I don't see where the political drive would come from for the reforms that you were talking about.

SHAHIN VALLÉE: From you (laughs).

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: In any case, we need these debates to come to life.

That's just it, we often bank on a change in the political situation in Germany. Is the idea of a Europe driven by the Franco-German engine still relevant?

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: In Germany, everyone says that the Franco-German relationship is very important, including Greens. But beyond that, are people willing to prioritise this? Not everyone. Even among the Greens, there is some distrust of French policy in general. What's the real goal of France's European policy? Is it really Europe, or just France? How do we balance a sovereign Europe with a strong alliance with the US? Today the Franco-German relationship is still necessary, but it's not enough.

SHAHIN VALLÉE: I agree that the Franco-German relationship is a necessary condition for European progress, but by no means

enough. France's mistake has too often been to prioritise the Franco-German relationship at all costs, sometimes at the cost of unsatisfactory agreements, or the abandonment and even rejection of other possible alliances. In Germany, it isn't clear to everyone, including the Greens, that the Franco-German relationship remains the engine of the EU. It's an important lesson. Remember that the European agreement reached in Sibiu in 2019, which set a goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, was achieved by a group of states led by France against the wishes of Germany, who had to come round to it a few months later.

German suspicions about France's European policy are understandable. Macron and his predecessors have for too long and too often given the impression that France's policy is to use Europe as a springboard for its own interests. I completely understand that our German friends don't want to be the lever or springboard for France's geopolitical interests. That's where real dialogue needs to be rebuilt and trust restored. I think it can be restored, especially between French and German Greens. Yes, we have genuine European ambition and it isn't to make Europe "a big version of France".

You're both saying that one of the paths to building European democracy is to do politics transnationally. At the same time, there are repeated calls for sovereignty – European and national. Can we envisage a sovereign European democracy, despite relatively shaky institutions and the absence of a continental demos?

SHAHIN VALLÉE: It's true that, for the Germans, there can't be sovereignty without democracy. Whereas for the French, who are used to a strong executive, sovereignty is fundamentally the ability to decide. So, we envisage a "sovereign Europe" that could decide on a military intervention, a 1000-billion-euro debt issue, or a new vaccination campaign. For our German friends, these types of existential decisions cannot be taken without a democratic framework and the associated parliamentary oversight.

The only way to bring together both visions is to strengthen Europe's executive powers, increase its powers in health matters, for example, but also – to allay French anxieties – powers in military matters. But alongside this, we must strengthen the democratic oversight that goes with these powers. This is where the French are still unclear about their ability to transfer executive powers and associate them with parliamentary oversight. Fundamentally, the French envision a Europe that would decide as France does, which is to say by

the will of Jupiter. And I don't think that's acceptable for the 26 other countries France shares Europe with.

FRANZISKA BRANTNER: The question of sovereignty comes back to the redefinition of national interests – and really managing to define them as European interests. I often struggle to see how we will achieve European sovereignty, with European interests, if we are unable to better define our common interests so we can place them on a higher level than national economic interests. To do so, we should refocus on citizens' fundamental rights. The Charter of Fundamental Rights must be the basis of this European sovereignty, so that these rights become applicable under national law. It's about more than just enhancing the European Parliament. Sovereignty is based on defending interests. If these aren't territorial, in the historical sense of defending national territory, what are the interests that sovereignty defends? These must be other, greater interests. And, in my opinion, these interests are the fundamental rights of Europeans. But there's still a long way to go, and if we limit ourselves to the question of defence, we've already lost.



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THERE'S LIFE IN THE PARTY YET

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JAN-WERNER MÜLLER

No profession is less trustworthy than politicians, global polls have found. Even bankers and advertising executives inspire more faith, and journalists scarcely perform better. Some think we are better off without them – and technology seems to suggest that this is becoming increasingly feasible. While some populist politicians have embraced the distrust, political philosopher Jan-Werner Müller warns this is fundamentally corrosive for democracy. The key to a healthy democracy is not getting rid of politicians and journalists but building and maintaining an open, creative, and dynamic civil society.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: You have called political parties and the media “democracy's critical infrastructure”. What do you mean by that?

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: The critical infrastructure of democracy is about basic political rights – the right to assembly, to free speech, to association – and the role that intermediary powers such as political parties and the media have in facilitating their use and, especially, in amplifying their impact. It is like a physical infrastructure in that it is about citizens reaching others and being reached by them.

So how do parties contribute?

Political parties offer a representation of society, especially its underlying conflicts and cleavages. They do not mechanically reproduce something that is already out there; it is a much more dynamic and creative

process. Parties, as the political theorist Nancy Rosenblum has put it, consciously stage the conflict. Now, you could argue that social movements do this too; in fact, so do many other actors. The difference is that parties also aim to get hold of the levers of power.

The dynamics are not mutually exclusive – social movements influence and sometimes even become parties – but parties remain more important than we often assume. Many academics, often on the Left, have a strong anti-party attitude. They think that parties are inherently unrepresentative and potentially oligarchic, increasing inequality, and so on. In some countries, many people share this anti-party animus, sometimes justifiably. But modern representative democracy cannot work without proper parties.

What does “proper” mean? Parties should offer pluralism, both internally and externally. Ideally, parties would be regulated to ensure they contain a meaningful level of internal pluralism. Not infinite pluralism, because after all, someone becomes a partisan precisely because they believe in certain principles. But no principle ever applies itself: even with a commitment to a particular understanding of freedom or environmental protection, for instance, there is always more to be discussed in terms of how to apply principles in particular contexts, how different principles coincide, and what kinds of compromises are acceptable.

The advantage of these processes is that their participants get used to the notion that those who find themselves on the losing side can still accept the outcome. Because the right procedures were undertaken and everybody had a chance to express themselves, they can accept that the other side could be right. Donald Trump’s refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election, and what followed, is a reminder of the important role played by losers in a democracy. What’s more, internal debates produce new perspectives, bring forward empirical evidence, and allow more people to talk about their lived experiences. None of this can happen in one-person parties.

Many party landscapes have been shaken up in the last decade. Political forces, perhaps most notably the Five Star Movement in Italy, increasingly declare themselves to be movements. What does the rise of movement parties say about democracy today?

The appearance of new actors and institutions is a good thing in principle. Some people like to complain that there are too many old parties, that the system is ossified, and that we are faced with a “crisis of representation”. But then again, people also called it a crisis when parties like Podemos or SYRIZA emerged in Spain and Greece, accusing them of being “dangerous insurgents”. You start to wonder, what is not a crisis of representation?

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If nothing changes, it's a crisis, and if something changes, then it's also a crisis. In theory, it is positive if the system is sufficiently open to new political actors. While there has been a certain amount of whining about the decline of people's parties, it is not a sign of anything going wrong with democracy.

However, some so-called movement parties lack internal pluralistic structures and transparency. Some believe in what political sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo refers to as "participationism". This stresses members' active involvement and engagement, especially online, but it is very difficult to assess how decisions are actually made, and what the clicks really mean: it can be unclear what the role of supporters is beyond occasionally clicking on something and going along with what the "great leader" says.

In other cases, calling yourself a movement is just PR. When Sebastian Kurz refashioned the Austrian People's Party, he called it a movement but it's the same old party, only more subservient to a highly power-conscious leader. Macron's *La République En Marche* is still a party; there's nothing to justify considering it a movement. Italy's Five Star Movement is probably the most radical attempt to break with both the party form and the professional media (which their figurehead, Beppe Grillo, always denounced as corrupt), yet it increasingly resembles a traditional party. You can find the good or the bad in that, but it confirms that those that make a great fanfare about being movements often end up like conventional parties.

The social bonds that used to tie parties together are not as strong as they used to be. Can the party form still reflect the diversity of modern society?

It is clear that a fundamental set of changes within society will have consequences for parties and party systems, and the general institutional form that parties take. Pining for a return to the 1950s

or 1960s, when people's social identities were often more immediately translated into the large people's parties, is not productive. This is not coming back.

Forms of engagement might change and people might not have life-long memberships like they used to, but it would be premature to declare that "there's no life left in the party". If you had told someone 15 years ago that [Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing party] La France Insoumise would gain half a million supporters (though what that means is debatable), or that Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the UK would reach half a million members, it would have been hard to believe. People are still willing to join parties and become engaged in one way or another.

Going back to the idea of critical infrastructure, do political systems need to think harder about regulating parties to maintain healthy, pluralistic democracies?

A lot starts with party financing. Europeans like to turn up their noses at the United States because spending 14 billion dollars on federal election campaigns is so obscene. But looking closely at how different European countries regulate their own systems, from a normative point of view, it is not much better. The numbers are smaller but there is still inequality, unfairness, and dark money. Think about how tax deductions mean that the poor

effectively subsidise the political preferences of the wealthy. My suggestion – following the lead of a number of academics and politicians – is that everyone should have a voucher of equal worth to spend on democracy's critical infrastructure.

What is the role of the media, particularly traditional media, in political life?

Media systems operate differently, so not all critical infrastructures are the same. In the UK, the BBC is of course different from a highly commercialised infrastructure, which is again different from the media landscapes in countries where pluralism has been drastically reduced, such as Hungary and, to some extent, Poland. That said, one of journalism's primary obligations is to inform citizens about the representations offered by political parties and, to a degree, to judge these.

Beyond that, there is nothing inherently wrong with journalists or media institutions taking a stance. We tend to forget that many socialist parties used to have their own newspapers, and many leaders emerged not from the trade union movement but out of journalism. Taking a stance doesn't mean inventing falsehoods like Fox News in the US but interpreting and reporting on the world from a particular point of view. As long as everybody roughly knows what they're getting, where it's coming from, and why it looks the way it does, there's

nothing wrong with that. There is still plenty of room for regulation – in terms of not inciting violence, not spreading misinformation or disinformation, and not denigrating certain groups (in the way right-wing populists do) – that can coexist with an open system that brings out the creative and dynamic dimension of democracy much more clearly than today.

Unlike traditional media, social media offers a direct connection between users and politicians, pundits, and influencers. How does social media change our democratic politics?

Social media is still mediated, just in very untransparent ways. It may seem like a direct relation, which encourages the conclusion that there is an affinity between social media and populism, but this directness is an illusion. Social media companies, like traditional media, are intermediaries – they are also part of the critical infrastructure of our democracies.

Of course, social media companies are the first to say that they are only in the business of “connecting people”, that they take no stance, and that deleting the account of the president of the United States makes them very uncomfortable. But social media technology, just like physical infrastructure, could be set up in different ways. The business models and the underlying algorithms which influence how these systems work can have highly pernicious effects on democratic debate. Currently, they are black boxes. While total transparency is an illusion, researchers must be able to understand these systems to assess their likely effects and what could, and should, be changed.

At the same time, I am reluctant to say that social media is bound to be harmful to democracy. It brings creativity and openness, and there is a lot to be said about the access it offers. It also allows self-appointed representatives to hit upon issues that would otherwise be overlooked.

THE PURPOSE
OF ELECTIONS
REMAINS TO
SHOW
THE RELATIVE
STRENGTH OF
DIFFERENT
GROUPS IN
SOCIETY IN A
PEACEFUL WAY

#MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter could only have grown in the way they did through social media.

The hard question is moving from having more representations out there through social media to structured debate. With parties and traditional media, we know roughly how debate works: exchanging claims, pushing back, saying when an attack is unjust, and so forth. This kind of structured debate is much more difficult on social media.

The question about the link between media technologies and democracy was also raised during previous media revolutions. In the 1930s, the philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin famously argued that just as cinema had replaced the traditional actor with the film star, the traditional politician had been replaced by the dictator. I would reject any technological determinism, but questions about the link between social media and democracy are legitimate.

What do you make of the growing calls for democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies?

Citizens' assemblies are especially useful where there is reason to believe that parties will make poor decisions or none at all. When it comes to shrinking the size of parliament or changing the electoral system, parties may be reluctant to take decisions against their interests, so different forms of decision-making make sense. To take two examples from Ireland, the 2016 to 2017 Citizens' Assembly and the 2018 referendum on abortion also show how collective decisions that have a strong ethical element but don't require great expertise can be tackled effectively through comprehensive debate.

However, some want to go much further and replace party politics altogether. This is another sign of the anti-party impetus, and I have two major reservations. First, democracy depends on losers knowing what to do. When a party-political struggle is lost, the party uses the

time until the next election to mobilise more people and refine its arguments before trying again. If randomly selected citizens make a decision, it is unclear how that decision could be revised. What should the losers do, and which institutions could they draw on to strengthen their side? Some hard-nosed political scientists argue that elections happen in the shadow of civil war. Thankfully, this is not the case in Europe today. The purpose of elections remains to show the relative strength of different groups in society in a peaceful way. Parties remain particularly good at this, but that function disappears with groups of randomly selected citizens.

Second, the evidence on participation and citizens' assemblies is not clear cut. Some findings show that they further benefit the advantaged. Yes, the selection criteria can be tweaked, and it is not true that only the privileged will show up, but any form that moves away from traditional parties does tend to privilege well-educated, well-off people with more time and resources. Citizens' assemblies might have a place, but they are no replacement for party politics.



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FEMINIST FINLAND

FROM REPRESENTATION TO EQUALITY

ARTICLE BY
SILJA KUDEL

For over a century, Finland has pioneered women's representation in politics. The world's first nation to grant women both voting and parliamentary rights is today governed by a young, female-led coalition that has drafted an ambitious equality programme whilst fighting the pandemic. But discrimination still casts a long shadow over Europe's alleged feminist haven. Against a global resurgence of authoritarianism and right-wing populism, it is more vital than ever to understand the critical link between democracy and gender equality.

Finland made global headlines in December 2019 when the then 34-year-old Sanna Marin was sworn in as the world's youngest prime minister and the youngest premier in Finnish history. She heads a centre-left-green coalition government of five parties that are all led by women. Leader of the Social Democratic Party, Marin shares power with Maria Ohisalo of the Greens, Li Andersson of the Left Alliance, Annika Saarikko of the Centre Party, and Anna-Maja Henriksson of the Swedish People's Party of Finland. Like Marin, Ohisalo, Andersson, and Saarikko are all under 40. Women won a record-breaking 93 seats in the 2019 parliamentary elections, representing 47 per cent of the 200-seat parliament.

Eye-catching photographs of the smiling premier and her female-led cabinet quickly went viral, and Finland basked in its glowing reputation as a gender equality trailblazer. The global attention was not undeserved, for the cabinet members are indeed compelling ambassadors for female leadership – particularly Marin, who for many women symbolises feminism's coming of age. Raised by same-sex parents, she is the working mother of a toddler and an

experienced politician who is widely respected for her unflappable decisiveness. Noted for her progressive ideas on climate, healthcare, and the normalisation of rainbow families, she recently made the cover of the American *TIME* magazine and ranked on its annual list of leaders who are shaping the future.

When the coalition entered government, few could have predicted the tumultuous times ahead. Less than three months after the inauguration, the outbreak of the pandemic was announced. The government rose to the challenge promptly, imposing a two-month lockdown that slowed the virus's spread to one fifth of the European Union average.

The Finnish premier has been praised for her firm action, as have other female leaders such as Germany's Angela Merkel, Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen, and New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, prompting some commentators to ask whether female leaders are instinctively better at handling crises than men. True to her plain-speaking style, Marin has dismissed such essentialising plaudits: "There are countries led by men that have also done well. I don't think it's a gender-based issue," she told the BBC.¹

However, the issue may not be entirely gender neutral. Praising women leaders for the successes of their "naturally empathetic"

leadership style can be seen as a backhanded form of stereotyping, argues journalist Helen Lewis.² It might be more relevant to ponder how the macho bravado of male leaders like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro contributed to their poor handling of the crisis.

POLICIES OF SUBSTANCE

Johanna Kantola, gender studies professor at Tampere University, finds that Marin's cabinet is overturning stereotypes rather than perpetuating essentialising ideas of women as "born carers". "Marin enjoys wide support because she is a competent politician and an efficient communicator. She has listened to the experts and based her decisions on science," states Kantola.

While the pandemic has inevitably monopolised the government's attention, the female-led cabinet has also found time to take significant steps toward implementing progressive gender policies. As its first order of business, the government reinstated the statutory right of all parents to receive public care for children under seven. This right was discontinued in 2016 by the previous right-wing populist cabinet. "It was a massive shock when the previous male-dominated government took away this basic pillar of the women-friendly welfare state," notes Kantola.

1 Megha Mohan and Yousef Eldin (2020). "Sanna Marin: The Feminist PM Leading a Coalition of Women". *BBC*, 24 November 2020.

2 Helen Lewis (2020). "The Pandemic Has Revealed the Weakness of Strongmen". *The Atlantic*, 6 May 2020.

**A HIGH EXISTING LEVEL
OF GENDER EQUALITY
IRONICALLY FOSTERS
THE ILLUSION THAT SPECIFIC
ANTI-VIOLENCE POLICIES
ARE SUPERFLUOUS**

In addition to championing family-oriented policies such as new legislation granting mothers and fathers equal parental leave, the government is also moving forward with longstanding issues such as the redefinition of rape in terms of consent rather than the threat of violence. The scope of what legally constitutes sexual harassment is also being broadened to include verbal abuse and offensive images.

GREEN FEMINISM

The Finnish Greens have been instrumental in recent work to implement feminist policies such as full observance of the recommendations of the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women. The Greens are also vocal on the topic of intersectional feminism.

“Green feminism is intersectional by definition. Our agenda strives to address how economic and racial inequalities affect different women differently. Green feminism offers a way of repairing the structures of society to make them fairer and free of discrimination. This intersects with the goal of a clean environment for future generations,” states Green MP Emma Kari, who chairs the Green Women’s Association, the official women’s wing of the Green League of Finland.

“Although intersectionality is not mainstreamed throughout the government programme, it is an issue that we Greens are striving to give more visibility,” she says.

In the substance of its policy, the actions of the current government affirm that increased female political representation does indeed translate into women-friendly social change. But there is one area in which progress is too slow, in Kantola’s opinion: Finland’s “backward” transgender legislation. Under current law, Finland requires enforced sterilisation of transgender people after they change gender, a practice denounced as “torture” by the UN.

While the government has announced its intent to reform this law, the issue has stalled. “It’s not clear to me why. Maybe because of the pandemic. There has been a lot of talk but no progress,” Kantola laments. Overall, however, she commends the current cabinet for its progress on advancing gender equality, which is an overarching theme woven through the “Inclusive and Competent Finland” government programme. “And, importantly,” adds Kantola, “we have a PM who is willing to talk about feminism. Marin is showing real commitment to putting gender equality on the national agenda.”

MEN'S CLUB MENTALITY

The strong role of Finnish female leaders stems from a historical legacy of gender diversity. Finland was the first country in Europe to grant women suffrage, a full decade before most other Western nations. That same year, 1906, Finland also became the world's first nation to allow women to run for office. In the interim, there have been three female prime ministers and a highly popular female president who served for 12 years.

At face value, Finland looks like a haven of female empowerment. But scratch the surface and a darker reality emerges, argues Kantola: "Having women in positions of power is of course an achievement to be celebrated, but the deeper structures of society are slow to change."

For starters, political culture retains vestiges of "men's club" exclusivity, as evidenced by what Kantola terms a "gendered division of labour" in politics. "Hard" issues such as foreign policy and economic policy are stereotypically looked upon as "male" fields of expertise, while women are relegated to healthcare, culture, and other "softer" spheres of policy.

"The division is evident in the way politicians are treated by the media, such as which

politicians are chosen to be interviewed as experts," Kantola illustrates. An analysis of the gender gap in Finnish news journalism revealed that public expertise continues to be male-dominated, with women representing less than 30 per cent of the experts interviewed.³

SECOND SHIFT

The welfare state's most glaring structural inequality, however, is Finland's "deeply gendered" labour market, as Kantola puts it. Although Finland has a long tradition of advocating subsidised childcare and flexible working hours, many Finnish women struggle to balance the demands of work and family, and they continue to lag far behind men in pay, economic status, and corporate ownership.

Finnish fathers take more parental leave than elsewhere in the world, but they still account for only about 11 per cent of the total.⁴ Women are thus left caring for young children, with lifelong impacts on their career advancement, income, and pensions. Women also do most of the housework in Finnish families. According to a recent report by business think tank EVA, Finnish women do at least an hour's more housework than men daily across incomes and education levels.⁵

3 Mari Niemi and Ville Pitkänen (2017). "Gendered use of experts in the media: Analysis of the gender gap in Finnish news journalism". *Public Understanding of Science*, 26(3), pp. 355-368.

4 Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK) (2019). *The Nordic Gender Effect at Work*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers.

5 Sanna Kurronen (2020). "Kotityön Kahleet". *EVA Arvio* (No. 24, 28 August 2020). Helsinki: EVA Finnish Business and Policy Forum.

Finland has a 16 per cent gender pay gap, compared to the EU average of around 14 per cent. Furthermore, its labour market is among the most gender-segregated in Europe, with men and women clustered into specific professions. Women typically work in service and care sectors. In particular, migrant women in Finland work in low-paid, precarious jobs or are not in paid work at all because staying at home is as financially advantageous as employment, according to an OECD report.⁶

Kantola believes the segregation of the labour market stems from social conditioning: “Only about 10 per cent of the Finnish working-age population are employed in occupations where men and women are equally represented. The remaining 90 per cent work in male or female-dominated jobs. This pattern starts in kindergarten and is reproduced through to working life.”

VIOLENCE AND VITRIOL

Another dark shadow in feminist utopia is the high rate of domestic violence in Finland. Rates of physical abuse and intimate partner killings rank among the highest in Europe, and the problem of domestic violence has been exacerbated by the pandemic, reports the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.

According to a survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Finland is the EU’s second most violent country for women.⁷

“This has definitely been a major blind spot in our women-friendly welfare state. We’ve lagged far behind other European countries in terms of legislation and the resourcing of shelters,” states Kantola. She theorises that the women-friendly welfare state may paradoxically work against women who suffer physical abuse. A high existing level of gender equality ironically fosters the illusion that specific anti-violence policies are superfluous.

“We have a long history of framing domestic violence in a gender-neutral way, often as being alcohol-related. In our gender discourse, women are perceived as workers alongside men, as strong, equal, and able to fend for themselves, so there has been a historical lack of understanding of this topic,” she posits.

Another alarmingly prevalent form of misogyny is verbal abuse directed at women, especially female politicians, who are subjected to everything from sexist memes to anonymous hate speech. A 2021 NATO report investigating Twitter attacks directed

⁶ OECD (2018). *Working Together: Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Finland*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

⁷ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2015). *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

at Finnish female ministers claims that coordinated online harassment poses an outright threat to democracy in Finland.⁸

“This trend is not unique to Finland. It’s part of the transnational rhetoric of the far right,” argues Tuija Saresma, a senior researcher in contemporary culture at the University of Jyväskylä. In her recent study of hate speech in social media, she found that Green and leftist women are the target of the most malicious vilification.⁹ “Female politicians receive a barrage of anonymous comments about their age, their appearance, and their alleged incompetence. They are also abused with violent, sexualised rhetoric. This might be part of an organised campaign, or a simple case of dogpiling. One whistles and others join the lynch mob,” she explains.

The perpetrators of this hate speech are mostly white, middle-aged or older men whose motivation is fear of losing their white male privilege, theorises Saresma: “The women they are attacking represent progressive values. It’s about power, control, and who has visibility in public discourse. The abusers are trying to silence liberal women that threaten to destabilise the patriarchy.”

The only way to deal with the problem is to bring legislation in line with the evolution of technology, Saresma argues. “Some people claim that legislation against hate speech poses a threat to free speech, but that’s not true. Hate speech is political violence and it must be condemned by the top echelons of society.”

NO MATTER
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⁸ Kristina Van Sant, Rolf Fredheim & Gundars Bergmanis-Korats (2021). *Abuse of power: coordinated online harassment of Finnish government ministers*. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

⁹ Tuija Saresma, Sanna Karkulehto & Piia Varis (2020). “Gendered Violence Online: Hate Speech as an Intersection of Misogyny and Racism”, in M. Husso et al. (eds). *Violence, Gender and Affect. Palgrave Studies in Victims and Victimology*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

IF DEMOCRACY
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POPULIST BACKLASH

While recent polls reveal that most of the Finnish population are satisfied with Marin's female-led government, the fact remains that Finland is a deeply polarised country. No matter how progressive the current government's policies are, there is an imminent risk of backlash in the next elections.

The far-right Finns Party has continued to rise and dominate media attention since the 2019 elections, topping the polls with over 20 per cent support in spring 2021. Analysis of voter profiles in the 2019 elections reveals that the populist Finns are a "male" party, receiving 27 per cent of men's votes, while the Greens enjoy widespread female support, with 19 per cent of Finnish women voting for the pro-environment party.¹⁰

Professor Kantola sees the popularity of the Finns Party mirroring a wider global trend of intensifying political polarisation, with populist, right-wing leaders touting misogynistic values and demonising or stereotyping their opponents. She sees feminists as an "easy target" for the oppositional logic of populism. "Ridiculing feminism – rather than talking about the content of gender equality policy – is part of the Finns Party's rhetoric, and it's worrying to think that they might return to power. Last time they were, feminist issues were immediately dropped from the agenda," cautions Kantola.

The rise of anti-feminist populism is among the troubling reasons why even the world's "most equal" nation still needs a party dedicated specifically to advancing feminism, contends Katju Aro, leader of the Finnish Feminist Party. "For now, we have a female PM and a record number of young, female MPs, but this is new to us. It's not the norm, but hopefully we can make it the new normal. There's still a lot of work to be done to challenge the status quo and bring forth new, radical ideas for the future," she states.

¹⁰ Aleksi Suuronen, Kimmo Grönlund & Rasmus Siré (2019). "Puolueiden äänestäjät". *Eduskuntavaalitutkimus* 2019. Helsinki: FNES. Available at <bit.ly/3ny2LsQ>.

Aro commends the current government for bringing feminist issues into the national spotlight. “This is the first time that intersectionality has been mentioned on the government’s gender equality programme, which is of course a big change. Yet the programme still lacks many important perspectives. For example, there is no mention of racism in connection with feminism. You shouldn’t separate these perspectives from gender equality work, as different women face different issues,” notes Aro.

WHY DEMOCRACY NEEDS FEMINISM

The battle for gender equality continues to rage on. Finland has inarguably come a long way, and it may be light-years ahead of many other countries in terms of female political empowerment, but is it a feminist utopia? Not yet.

The policies pursued by the female-led government – from new rape and harassment laws to gender-equal parental leave – suggest that the increased representation of women in politics does indeed push social change in a feminist direction. However, discrimination persists. The road ahead is long, the pace of societal change is slow, and there is a perpetual risk of back-peddalling. With the global anti-feminist movement gaining traction in the Finnish far right, the pendulum could swing

back, and the progress of recent years could stall after the next parliamentary elections in 2023.

Amid the current resurgence of authoritarianism and the proliferation of right-wing populist movements across the globe, it is perhaps more vital than ever to understand the critical link between democracy and gender equality. If democracy signifies equality between all members of society, then advocating feminism is nothing more than a basic act of defending fundamental democratic values.

Today, more than a century after Finnish women gained parliamentary rights, full female equality remains a surprisingly elusive goal in the progressive Nordic welfare state. As the case of Finland shows, feminism still has work to do – and far further to go – for every voice to be heard, even in the most inclusive of democracies.



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A State of Disrepair

Democracy in the United Kingdom

The UK government's handling of Brexit and the health crisis has been undeniably chaotic and venal. In a bid to distract the public and shore up its own power, the government has sought to exploit cultural issues to the detriment of democratic rights and norms, putting already vulnerable groups further at risk. This has led to an increasingly authoritarian turn against minority rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law.

The battle over Brexit has reshaped British politics. Multiple studies have shown that voters now identify more as "Leavers" or "Remainers" than they do with a particular party, building on a long-term shift away from rigid party affiliation.¹ The Conservative (or Tory) Party, traditionally the party of the wealthy and established, has become the Leave party. The move was key to smashing the "red wall" – Labour's heartland in northern England, including many former mining and industrial seats – in the 2019 general election. To appeal to these voters, who share little of the economic interests of traditional Tories, the government has doubled down on "culture war" policies, throwing out traditional constraints from the rule of law and human rights.

Targeting Gypsy and Traveller communities, further eroding migrant rights, and criminalising protest – its actions can only be described as those of a far-right government.

Successive British governments have fuelled the flames of deeply embedded anti-Gypsy and anti-Traveller racism while doing their best to destroy a traditional nomadic way of life by forcing communities into settled homes. In 2021, new policing legislation could take the official targeting of Traveller communities to new heights, criminalising trespass and allowing for the seizure of family homes. By removing spaces for travelling families to stop and live, a centuries-old way of life could be ended – discrimination of a most obvious and pointed kind, against a community long targeted around the world, to the depths of genocide.

The same legislation also aims to destroy the right to protest. Explicitly aimed at the Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Black Lives Matter movements, it gives police powers to set noise limits, break up "static protests", impose a start and finish time, and move on solo protesters. It also gives the home secretary the power to

1 Timothy Oliver (2020). "British people now define themselves as 'Leavers' or 'Remainers' – so what happens after Brexit?" *The Conversation*. 31 January 2020.



NATALIE BENNETT

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determine which acts constitute “serious disruption”, which could lead to demonstrators facing up to 10 years in jail. Home Secretary Priti Patel has described XR as “a shameful attack on our way of life, our economy, and the livelihoods of the hard-working majority”.²

The moves come in a wider context of government demonisation and abuse of asylum-seekers, particularly those risking their lives to cross the Channel. The number of people making the crossing has been steadily growing since 2018. Those intercepted are detained in horrendous conditions and, in some cases, prosecuted and jailed without just cause. In future, permanent settlement may be denied even to those reluctantly acknowledged as entitled to refugee status. In proposals published in March 2021, the government seeks to restrict people who arrive by boat, even if accepted as refugees, to limited temporary leave to remain and to deny them most welfare benefits.

Together, the proposals represent the persecution of the most vulnerable minority groups in society and the repression of democratic rights. Meanwhile, government ministers compete to see who

can appear on Zoom in front of the largest Union Jack – a kind of flag-waving nationalism that once seemed entirely foreign to the British character, and the teaching of “British values”, as defined by ministers, has been imposed on schools, taking up time that might otherwise be used to encourage political engagement and critical thinking.

Yet while senior government ministers seem to relish these actions and appear to hold extreme views, this is not a government made

The idea is to rev up a relatively small number of voters (and particularly social media users). These supporters then do the campaigning work for the government – spreading its message – while many moderate voters turn away from politics in disgust. The strategy aims to sustain the Leave coalition from the 2016 Brexit referendum and divert public attention away from the UK’s disastrous, tragic pandemic death toll by focusing not on economics but culture.

THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC, HIGH-LEVEL CRONYISM HAS BEEN EVIDENT AT THE TOP OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

up primarily of people of a far-right persuasion. Prime Minister Boris Johnson was once seen as a relatively liberal mayor of London. So why is the government pushing at the boundaries of what has been considered acceptable mainstream political action in a democracy?

The obvious answer is that it sees this as the best way to hold up its vote in the current political landscape. The Tory party is pursuing a Trump-style core vote strategy.

The moves against Gypsy and Traveller communities, migrants, and protestors are only part of a wider far-right shift, also seen in a mooted increase in Britain’s nuclear weapons cap, cutting spending on international development (a potentially unlawful move long advocated by parties such as the UK Independence Party), and passing an intelligence bill that would allow official agents to commit hideous crimes with impunity and use child spies.

² Emma Snaith (2021). “A serious annoyance? How the policing bill could stifle climate protests”. *The Independent*. 24 March 2021.

ORBÁN IN NUMBER 10?

The agenda is matched by dangerous erosions of respect for due process and the rule of law, regulatory independence and oversight, and media freedom.

Throughout the pandemic, high-level cronyism has been evident at the top of the British government. Friends and allies of government ministers enjoyed fast-track access to lucrative contracts, breaking the law in the process. The *New York Times* noted the scale of the looting, reporting how “politically connected companies reaped billions”.³

The Commissioner for Public Appointments was scathing about the perversion of appointments to public bodies, pointing to “packing the composition of interview panels with allies”. Former editor of the *Daily Mail* Paul Dacre is being lined up to be the new head of Ofcom, the broadcast regulator.⁴ Under Dacre, the paper had a clear xenophobic and far-right editorial line, famously running a front page emblazoned with the faces of three high court judges and the headline “Enemies of the

People” amid a court battle linked to the Brexit process in 2016.

The broadcast regulator will oversee a period in which the UK faces the arrival of two new media players. Foreign hedge funds are backing a new Fox News-style channel, *GB News*, with one of its planned highlights being

a regular “Wokewatch” segment. *Times Radio* is a new, well-funded Rupert Murdoch vehicle. This while the BBC is visibly wilting under intense government and right-wing pressure, with academics concluding that Boris Johnson is “the most hostile prime minister the BBC has ever faced”.⁵

Nor is the political system itself spared. US-style voter suppression tactics are being imported into plans for the widespread use of voter identification. Britain has never had an ID card system and an estimated 3.5 million Britons –

BRITAIN'S UNWRITTEN, ACCIDENTALLY
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3 Jane Bradley, Selam Gebrekidan & Allison McCann (2020). “Waste, Negligence and Cronyism: Inside Britain’s Pandemic Spending”, *The New York Times*. 17 December 2020.

4 Brian Cathcart (2021). “10 Reasons Why Paul Dacre is Unfit to Be the New Ofcom Chair”. *Byline Times*. 4 February 2021

5 “Three-quarters of BBC comedians are liberals”. *Chortle*. 13 December 2020.

THE STATUS
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overwhelmingly the poor and the young – lack photographic identification. The gerrymandering of electoral boundaries due in 2023 is further expected to give the Tories an extra 10 seats at the next election.

A BROKEN NON-CONSTITUTION

Back in 2019, no less an establishment source than *The Economist* concluded that the UK's "good chap" model of government was falling apart.⁶ Britain's unwritten, accidentally accreted constitution has always relied on politicians doing the right thing rather than rules seeking to ensure it. Rules for operations in parliament and in relations between government and civil service rely on understood practices and culture, rather than written guides. This good chap model rests comfortably on the nature of the British political class, which has reverted overwhelmingly to private-school and Oxbridge-educated men from wealthy backgrounds. It has been suggested that Boris Johnson is "too posh to fail", with his appearance of amateurism and bumbling humour a cover for ruthless ambition.⁷

In much of the rest of the world, the nature and face of political leadership are changing. From the 38-year-old Kosovan president Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu to the widely admired New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern, leadership looks, sounds, and is different to that of the past. But in the UK there is not – in government or the official Labour opposition – any kind of vision to deliver the change that is so evidently needed in a society crushingly divided by inequality, particularly regional inequality, and in a deeply degraded environment (the UK is ranked 189th of 218 countries for its biodiversity).⁸

Britain's crumbling democratic institutions are mirrored in a neoliberal economic model that has clearly failed. The government's vague and unvidenced promise to "level up" the country and address regional inequality is

a recognition of that fact. Even traditionally neo-Thatcherite outlets like *The Financial Times* and *The Economist* are increasingly questioning neoliberalism's tenets. But without an alternative direction, the field is left to people (largely men) of rampant ambition, without the conviction or desire to deliver for the common good, but simply aiming to enjoy power and to deliver returns to themselves and their friends.

HOW DO WE OPPOSE?

In the struggle against an increasingly authoritarian government, there is a risk that the wrong lesson will be drawn from the success of Joe Biden's Democrats in – very narrowly – defeating Donald Trump's Republicans. In the US, victory came from lying low. It was enough to defeat the chaotic, discordant Trump campaign, but only just. In the UK, the Conservatives are more ruthless about winning. Some opponents are tempted to sidestep the "culture war", arguing that challenging the government on its own turf by speaking up for Black Lives Matter or the right to protest simply allows it to control the agenda. The Labour Party in

⁶ "Britain's good-chap model of government is coming apart". *The Economist*, 22 December 2018.

⁷ Emilio Casalichio (2021). "Boris Johnson's hair shows he's too posh to fail". *Politico*, 9 April 2021.

⁸ Daniel Hayhow et al. (2016). *State of Nature 2016*. The State of Nature partnership. Available at <bit.ly/3e8ziCH>.

BRITAIN'S
CRUMBLING
DEMOCRATIC
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IN A NEOLIBERAL
ECONOMIC
MODEL THAT HAS
CLEARLY FAILED

particular is keeping its head down. But if we do not call out the far-right nature of this programme and stand up for the vulnerable, Martin Niemöller's "First They Came..." unavoidably comes to mind.⁹

What Greens are doing, with increasing effectiveness, is both challenging the far-right, authoritarian positions, and directing equal or greater efforts at developing an alternative, positive vision of the common good based around stopping the looting of public and natural resources, while delivering a better life and a more equal society. It is a direction that looks forward, acknowledging through support for a universal basic income that contributions come in many forms outside paid employment, focusing on the need for a just transition to a carbon-neutral society, and highlighting the tight link between public and natural health.

Part of that vision is also about fulfilling the promise of British democracy. Today a government that won 44 per cent of votes wields 100 per cent of the power. Making the UK a true democracy means introducing a proportional voting system for the Commons – a key Green

demand that is shared by highly effective, relatively new grassroots organisation Make Votes Matter; a proportionally elected House of Lords (rather than the current mix of feudal aristocracy and 18th-century-style patronage); and curing the disease of centralism. Local governments in England and even recently established city region mayors have little power, authority, or – crucially – money.

How this will be delivered, step by step, is hard to map out, but constitutional turbulence is a certainty. Scotland looks set for a new independence referendum – something the Greens are pushing hard for. Wales is now highly "indy-curious", with the Welsh Greens deciding to campaign for that status in any referendum there. Northern Ireland faces serious instability – and significant violence – as it struggles to deal with the broken promise that is its new status post-Brexit with a "border down the Irish Sea".

The status quo – not significantly changed in Westminster since women won the vote a century ago – is profoundly unstable. Devolution to Scotland and Wales and constitutional arrangements (combined with Brexit impacts) in Northern Ireland are clearly unfinished business. Leavers, split heavily towards older votes, become more outnumbered every year. With this instability, the risk of culture wars, far-right politics, and authoritarianism racks higher.

In the last days of neoliberalism, looking back to the political philosophies of the 19th century will not deliver the change that so many people, wracked by poverty and insecurity, threatened by environment-linked disasters such as Covid-19, and fearful of the future, are seeking. Offering something new, different, inspiring, and hopeful is the key. ■

9 Martin Niemöller (Date unknown). "First They Came". *Amnesty International*. Available at <bit.ly/2QHS4rt>.



BACKS AGAINST THE WALL

BRINGING THE FIGHT BACK

AN INTERVIEW WITH
ECE TEMELKURAN
BY **BEATRICE WHITE**

After losing her job as a journalist in Turkey following her outspoken criticism of an increasingly undemocratic regime, writer Ece Temelkuran set out to alert those in other countries to the signs of creeping authoritarianism. Though there are some rays of light, she warns that many Western democracies are on shaky ground as politics moves rightwards. The road back is long and requires citizens to reclaim their dignity and rediscover faith in themselves, their democracies, and each other.

BEATRICE WHITE: In your book *How to Lose a Country*, you diagnose a form of contemporary authoritarianism that doesn't roll in with tanks but rather takes hold incrementally. What are the main features of this phenomenon? How do you see it embodied most strikingly in Europe today?

ECE TEMELKURAN: This book, somewhat ironically, is written as a manual for would-be dictators. But it also provides glimpses of what could happen in Europe. It was actually a call for global solidarity, but it was mostly directed at European countries, and the United States, because countries like India, Turkey, and Pakistan know all about this maddening process of a democratic country sliding down the slope towards authoritarian politics. But Western countries have long taken democracy for granted. They have too much trust in their institutions and their so-called "democratic" culture.

The main message is that authoritarianism is a global phenomenon, and these authoritarian leaders are learning from each other. It does not arrive in uniforms, but rather with funny hairstyles, like Boris

Johnson and Donald Trump. People are quite puzzled if this is identified as fascism. But we should call it fascism, rather than populism or authoritarianism. People often think that fascism was completely erased in Europe by the end of World War II. In fact, it was just beaten on the battlefield. Few countries, other than Germany, have faced their own histories of fascism.

I was attempting to issue a warning and spur these societies into action, because in countries like Turkey, we are exhausted. Authoritarianism is not only about politics – it creates moral corruption and disrupts the basic consensus within societies. We still need the stamina of the opposing, concerned masses in the West. It is about trying to find a way to build a common language – a shared narrative – so we can oppose this new form of fascism together. It cannot be defeated by the people of a single country alone. It requires global solidarity.

When the book came out two years ago, with its warnings about what was likely to come, many dismissed it out of a sense of exceptionalism. But now people in places like the UK, France, Germany, and the US have returned to it. This shows how, in the space of two years, all these institutions, all these so-called mature democracies, have begun to lose faith in themselves. It is happening extremely quickly, in front of our eyes.

Leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Donald Trump are adept at appropriating the rhetoric of democracy: only their victories are truly democratic outcomes. How did those defending democratic principles against authoritarians find that even the concepts they defend have been usurped?

What they are saying is not completely wrong. Yes, they win elections, they win at the ballot box, but this just illustrates the crisis of representation we are currently experiencing. Because, over a long period, democracy has become diminished to ballot boxes. The campaign to stop the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a striking example. The streets were full of people saying no to war, yet their leaders went ahead anyway.

The process can be traced back much further – to the end of the 1970s, when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan declared that “there is no alternative”. After that, especially after the Cold War, democracy became something administrative, something that someone else should take care of for us. Running a country was about numbers – numbers talking to numbers. The people didn’t count anymore. If there is no alternative, what do people do? They get on with their lives. That’s what was expected of them. But this didn’t happen by accident. The Left was suppressed in every country, whether by military coup, as happened in Turkey, or by Thatcher and Reagan waging war on the unions.

THE ENTIRE
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THIS

The entire political sphere has moved to the right. We have to confront this. Without progressive elements in politics and society, there are no checks and balances in terms of morality and politics. We are left living with the mutant child of neoliberal politics. Without real democracy that includes social justice, you end up in a situation in which everybody can be a self-proclaimed “real democrat”.

This kind of “democracy”, which is still our current state of democracy, requires apoliticised masses. So they produce an ideal citizen who avoids politics, one who thinks that democracy is only about the ballot box, that identity politics is all that matters, and that freedom is only a matter for the individual, and so on. The result of all these concepts being diminished is people who think that if they get rid of the European Union (especially in the UK) they will be free, and they will be “great”. This paradigm still lingers today. But people want to ignore the period in history when the politics of the Right grew so dominant that it became our natural state. Several other crises are playing out at the same time – the crises of capitalism, democracy, the climate, and so on – and these fears can easily be politicised and mobilised by right-wing populist leaders if people do not have real, solid choices.

Yet there are still people on the streets today – the pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong, Russia, Belarus, and Myanmar, for example. But also in the West, with young people in particular demanding social, racial, and environmental justice. How do you see these movements?

There is great diversity among these movements – in terms of the people on the streets and their demands, backgrounds, and languages. But I do see a global commonality: they are all asking for human dignity, in several different ways. This is part of the answer to the crisis of representation and other crises we face. There is something very hopeful about these protests and demonstrations that have popped up, even during a pandemic. All around the world, people’s desire for dignity is even stronger than their fear of dying. This shows that humankind still

has some faith in itself. I hope that all these demonstrations can be held in solidarity with one another under the banner of human dignity.

This new generation is so angry with previous generations. Why wouldn't they be? They have had all these crises dropped in their laps. They feel like they have nothing to lose. They see the hypocrisy; they are cynical, they are sarcastic, and they are angry. But they are still bargaining – they still want something, and they are clear about what they want. If they are not listened to, however, the next waves of protest will not be as eloquent.

People are also on the streets in democracies that are backsliding, particularly marginalised groups whose fundamental rights are now threatened, such as women. How do you see their role in resistance movements?

It isn't a coincidence that today's most vigorous resistance comes from the women's movement. When you fight for your life – literally – you fight hardest. This might sound like a distant problem to women in the West. But think about everything that has changed in the past few years that seemed previously unthinkable.

In countries like Turkey, there is an all-out war on women. But this is predictable because we know that misogyny is the wingman of fascism. Women are the canaries in the coal mine when it comes to fascism. This is not because their

political and moral sensors are more sensitive than men's, but because fascism always attacks the female first, and here I am talking not only about women themselves but rather all that is female. And fascism will be, I think, defeated by dismantling misogyny. That's up to women, and they are now becoming aware all around the world. In my opinion, the only inspiring thing about politics today is the young people, particularly the women.

Protest movements often develop new ways of doing politics. One of the legacies of the Gezi Park protests were the bottom-up people's assemblies that popped up around the city. Are there signs that conventional politics may open up to some of these practices, as social movements increase their power?

Yes, I think the political establishment is realising that unless it welcomes these movements, it is going to be outdated, passé, and ultimately defunct. We have seen new political organisms emerge from the movements in Hong Kong, Istanbul, and Cairo. But they are not compatible with our current representative democracy.

The only way I see out of this impasse is local politics. Progressive mayors, municipalities, and local politicians who are eager to find new ways of doing politics are more willing to interact with these political movements. If the Gezi protests had not happened, [centre-left

**WOMEN ARE THE CANARIES
IN THE COAL MINE WHEN
IT COMES TO FASCISM,
BECAUSE FASCISM ALWAYS
ATTACKS THE FEMALE FIRST**

opposition CHP candidate] Ekrem İmamoğlu would

not have won again when the Istanbul mayoral election was re-run in 2019. It was those people that organised and mobilised themselves and others to vote again. I think those political movements are teaching us through their actions. The determination, stubbornness, and mischievousness which makes them so invigorating can refresh our political institutions – if they are open to being refreshed.

How can Greens and progressives reach out beyond their own circles to wider society, whilst avoiding the type of populist rhetoric and strategies deployed by their opponents?

We are living in an age of fear and disintegration. Fascists play with emotions and monopolise them in their discourse. I think the Left in general, but Greens in particular, has to think about its political relationship to emotions, as well as values. To stop being afraid of emotions, and learn how to talk to people again, as well as amongst ourselves, about love, anger, fear, and even faith. What is faith for us? What do we have faith in? What can we say about love as leftist people? Or about pride? I see a learned distance from emotions within progressive politics. Yet this is what new political organisms are trying to do; they are trying to express emotions. That's why they are so dynamic and so completely different to institutionalised and established politics.

As a novelist, you explore the complexity of human

nature and motives. What role can fiction play in changing our politics and our societies, and helping us to understand one another?

Words, be they political or non-political, do not change the world; it is only the people who believe in these words who can. It is therefore impossible to compare writing about politics with writing fiction in terms of the moral judgement of our contribution to the world. If you ask me, my novel *Women Who Blow on Knots* has been far more politically transformative than *How to Lose A Country*. The advantage of fiction is that the story is a more compassionate and embracing form of communication; the reader finds it easier to approach the seemingly apolitical writer. Then, within the realm of fiction, the writer can talk about the most controversial ideas and truth in the absolute.

As a journalist who continually spoke out, you were often confronted with those behind Turkey's democratic decline. Your new book *Together* asks the reader to choose to have faith in the people we share this planet with. How would you say that we can now build bridges, to have this faith in one another?

I think the question of “how to build bridges” is not the right one to ask. Sometimes there are no bridges. Politics is not all about peace

and harmony, it's about confrontation. Yet we have banished this way of thinking from our political sphere. The political system doesn't like confrontation, it doesn't want antagonism. That's why people need to believe that there is no alternative; there is nothing to fight for anymore. Without even noticing, we normalised this idea. We took the fight out of our vocabulary in a bid to survive. We accepted our diminished space for existing. But if we instead realise that they have beaten us, and that we are angry, this can be a starting point from which to do something. Politics is about fighting, unfortunately. It would be nice if this fight only involved words, but sometimes it doesn't.

That's why I go back to this defeat; once you are defeated you somehow legitimise, normalise the defeat, and then you start asking how we can build bridges. We're going to defeat them. They have to be stopped. How did we come to the point of asking this question about living together with fascism? No, that is the wrong question! These are the enabling questions of the dominant ideology.



ECE TEMELKURAN

is an award-winning Turkish novelist and political commentator. She won the Edinburgh International Book Festival First Book Award for her novel *Women Who Blow on Knots* (Parthian Books, 2017). She is the author of the internationally acclaimed book *How to Lose a Country* (Fourth Estate, 2019). Her latest book is *Together* (HarperCollins, 2021).



BEATRICE WHITE

is the deputy editor of the *Green European Journal*. Previously, she worked in Istanbul for a national newspaper.

DEMOCRACY IN THE PANDEMIC

THE STATE OF PLAY

— The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly affected all aspects of life, and politics are no exception. Curtailment of basic liberties, states of emergency, and clear authoritarian power grabs in some countries – the experience poses serious questions on the robustness of democracies in a crisis. Social distancing has also emptied the shared spaces that bring people together and give life to communities. However, the health crisis remains a genuine emergency and, at some point, it will pass. What will the pandemic mean for the future of democracy? It is too early to tell. Avoiding alarmism and complacency, these infographics show us how democracies have coped under crisis. While there are grounds to be concerned for democracy’s future, there are also reasons to celebrate its resilience.



**EMANUELA
BARBIROGLIO**

is an Italian data journalist. Based in Brussels, she focuses on data, the environment, and EU politics. She contributes to the *European Data Journalism Network*, *The Beam Magazine*, *Forbes*, and the Italian news agency ANSA.

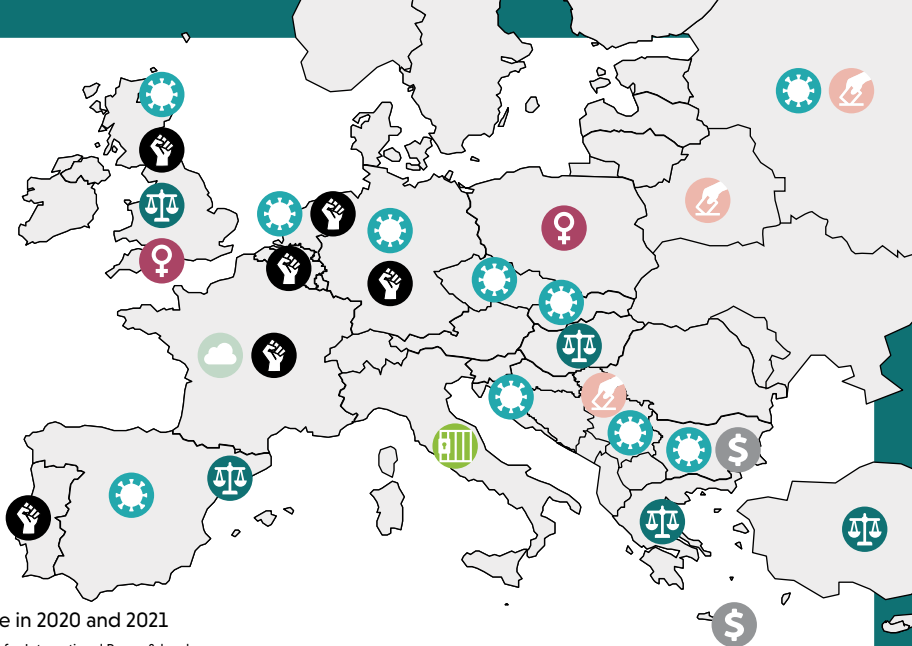
Number of countries where democracy improved minus the number where it declined

Source: Freedom House

- Democracy gap
- Number of countries that declined
- Number of countries that improved

THE DEMOCRACY GAP GROWS

The Freedom House index looks at civil liberties and political rights around the world to take the temperature of democracy globally. Since 2006, the global picture has deteriorated without fail. 2020 was the worst year yet.



Protests across Europe in 2020 and 2021

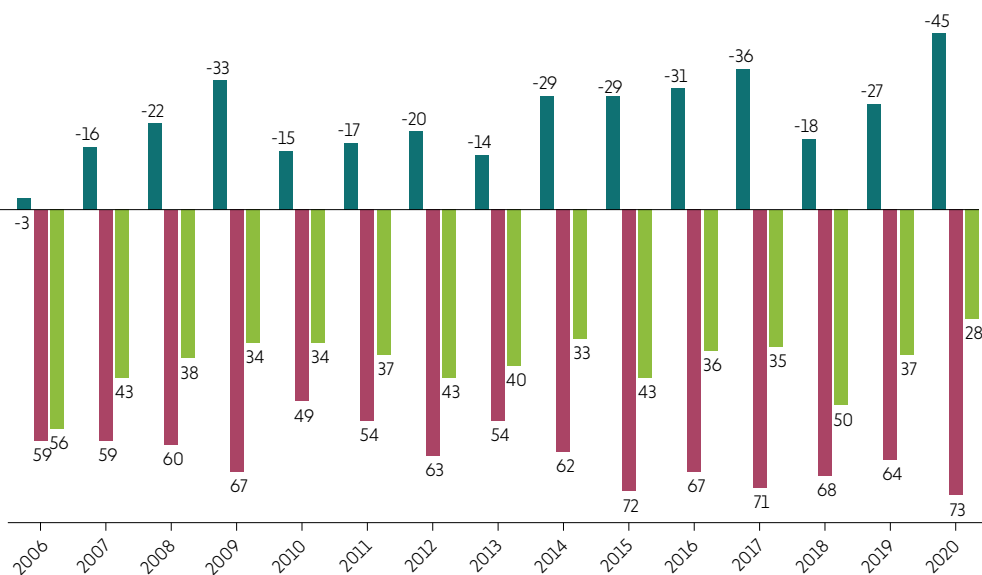
Sources: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace & local news

- Women's rights (gender-based violence and reproductive rights)
- Democracy
- Civil liberties (includes education and freedom of assembly)
- Covid-19 (includes Covid-19 scepticism and social anti-lockdown protests)
- Anti-corruption
- Prison conditions
- Racial equality and police brutality
- Climate

Note: This map covers larger and more sustained protests. Data on protests is never complete and grievances often overlap.

THE PROTESTS MUST GO ON

Despite the health situation and legal restrictions, the right to protest was exercised throughout 2020 and 2021. While some demonstrations focused on lockdowns, the largest called for racial equality, reproductive rights, and honest government.



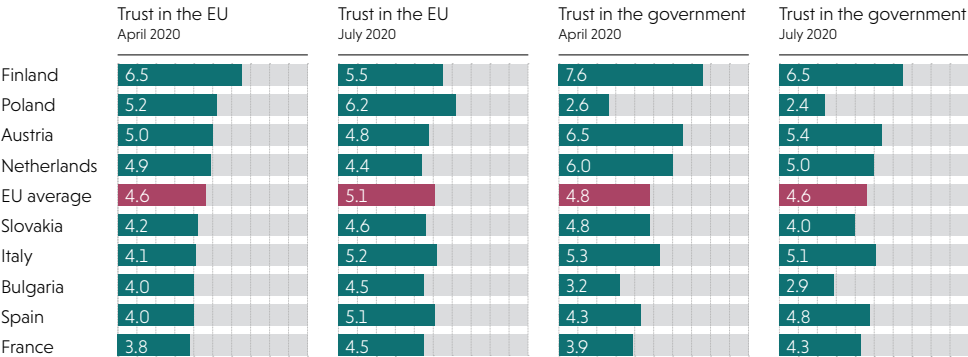
A SHOCK TO PUBLIC CONFIDENCE?

The pandemic was a shock that few expected. While the hard stop that the world lived through may have been expected to undermine people’s faith in their institutions, in 2020, particularly after the first wave, the picture spoke more to togetherness in a moment of crisis.

Confidence in institutions

How much do you personally trust the following institutions? 1 not at all - 10 completely.

Source: Eurofound

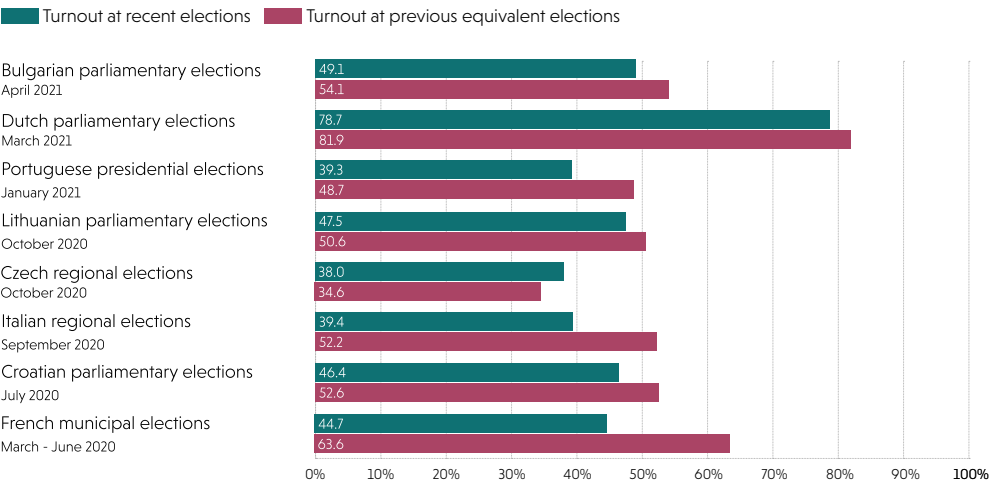


LOSING THE HABIT

Almost every major election held in Europe since the pandemic began has seen a drop in voter turnout, for understandable reasons. In French municipal elections, the difference was stark. In the Netherlands, a special three-day-long election helped keep the numbers exceptionally high.

Turnout in elections since the pandemic

Sources: International Foundation for Electoral Systems & local news



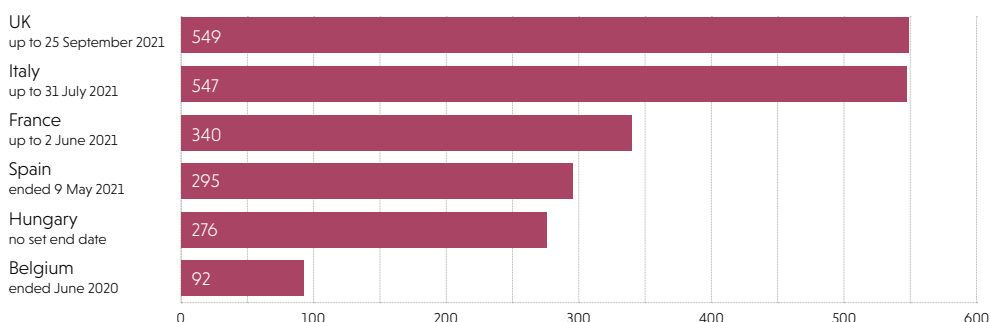
RING THE ALARM

States of emergency are meant to be the last resort in moments of crisis. As executive action brings risks and temptations, they should be temporary and subject to checks and balances. Even in a pandemic, open channels for deliberation, debate, and disagreement are crucial to democracy.

Number of days under a state of emergency

Names of measures adopted may vary. Data from 30 April 2021.

Sources: Openpolis & local news



REMOTE DEMOCRACY

Many are predicting that deforestation and industrial animal farming will make pandemics more likely throughout the 21st century. But resilience does not only demand that we reform our food systems and supply chains; it means pandemic-proofing our parliamentary systems too.

	EU Parliament	Italy	France	Germany	Spain
Was remote participation of representatives permitted?	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Was the number of participants reduced?	✗	Only in the first phase and with an informal agreement	✓	The quorum was reduced by a quarter	✗
Was the agenda shortened?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Were sittings for debates and votes modified?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Was remote voting authorised?	✓	✗	✗	Only in committees and as a last resort	✓
Was proxy voting authorised?	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗
Were special commissions set up?	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Were restricted commissions set up?	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗

Sources: Openpolis & EDJNet

Indirect Democracy: Referendums in Europe

Referendums are a touchy topic nowadays. Some praise them as a form of direct democracy, enabling the people to get around entrenched political oligarchies that tend to ignore or distort the popular will. Others are more suspicious. Referendums are seen by their critics as an opportunity for demagogues: a threat rather than a chance for democracy.

Instead of trying to resolve this dilemma, let us better reframe it. A referendum is not a universal solution, nor is it a universal threat. To be for or against referendums per se is to miss the point, as there is no single “referendum” in the real world. There are merely differently designed institutional arrangements in different countries.

Speaking of “design” points to the fact that, contrary to the prevailing view, referendums are not and cannot be a form of “direct democracy”. The popular will is always mediated in one way or another. This is as true of referendums as it is of elections. In an election, there are electoral laws that set out the rules regarding constituencies (their size, borders, and number of seats), ballot access requirements, how votes will translate into seats, and electoral thresholds. In a referendum, rules determine who may (or must) trigger the vote, what sort of questions are allowed, whether the result is binding, and the threshold for the vote’s validity (if any). A referendum result is thus *a certain representation* of the popular will rather than a direct expression thereof.

Regulations regarding referendums vary between different countries. The first major distinction is between countries where referendums are a permanent and frequent feature of political life and those where they happen on an ad hoc basis, often triggered by political leaders seeking to resolve a divisive issue (independence, EU membership, nuclear power) or simply to certify their own legitimacy. It is tempting to dub the former “referendums” and the latter “plebiscites”. This is not a good versus bad distinction. Both referendums and plebiscites may be legitimate and useful, if well designed and properly applied. One-off plebiscites are probably riskier and more vulnerable to demagogic manipulation, and usually do not leave space for a second occasion to fix the damage.

Let’s look briefly at three different models. In Switzerland, a referendum may be triggered

when a sufficient number of citizens sign a motion. There is parliamentary control, however, and the motion may be rejected if the proposed referendum might result in an outcome that contradicts the country's international obligations, or if the wording amalgamates a general and a concrete issue into a single question. In Ireland, a referendum is required whenever the constitution is amended. The issue may be divisive or uncontroversial, but the rule is clear: you cannot change a single word in the constitution without a referendum. In Iceland, referendums are triggered if the president refuses to sign a parliamentary act into law. If the president and the Alþingi (Icelandic Parliament) disagree, the people are summoned to resolve the argument.

Different as these solutions may be, in all the above cases, referendums are a well-defined institution. Citizens know what their vote means and how it counts. They are not the ultimate source of power; rather, they provide a different balance of powers. Whether we are discussing the introduction or expansion of referendums as a permanent institution in a given country or the calling of a one-off plebiscite to resolve an issue, we are not dealing with the question of how to apply a range of universal principles. It is rather a matter of finding a proper arrangement for a given polity, taking into account its path dependence and history.

There are no universal guidelines, but there is one pragmatic rule of thumb: if you are going to hold referendums, it is better to hold them often. This will help citizens to learn how it all works, live with the results of their choices, and change their minds if needed. Accumulated experience will make wiser choices more probable. In any case, it helps to demystify the vision that "the general will" expressed in a referendum is somehow more authentic and more definitive than that expressed at a general election. Referendums, as much as parliamentary elections, may bring different results – welcome, unwelcome, or mixed. If we believe that the right to vote a bad government out of office is a part of democracy, it would be absurd to claim that a referendum result should be irrevocable.

This series explores the role of referendums throughout Europe. Beyond abstract notions of direct democracy, these cases illustrate the tangible impact of referendums: how they drive change, whether progressive or reactionary, structure public debate, and foster common understandings crucial for functioning democracies. ■



ADAM OSTOLSKI

is a sociologist, columnist, and activist. He works at the University of Warsaw and is a member of *Krytyka Polityczna*. He was co-editor-in-chief of the *Zielone Wiadomości* from 2009 to 2013 and co-chair of the Polish Green Party from 2013 to 2016.

HUNGARY

CONFIRMATION BIAS

"Do you want to allow the European Union to mandate the resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly?" In 2016, the Hungarian far-right Fidesz-KDNP government called an infamous referendum on EU proposals for a quota-based refugee relocation system. The referendum was flawed for two reasons. For a start, it did not comply with Hungarian law: it is unconstitutional to call a referendum on a matter that is beyond the legislature's competence, such as obligations arising from an international treaty. Furthermore, the EU had already abandoned the idea of quotas by the time of the referendum. Thus, the question had no clear goal, apart from serving as a predetermined symbolic milestone in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's long-running racist and anti-EU populist propaganda campaign. Despite voter turnout remaining under the legally required threshold of 50 per cent, the government insisted that the referendum was "politically valid". Fidesz used the results to strengthen the party's position in both domestic and international politics.

Referendums and referendum initiatives are used for various policy goals and political ends in Hungary. Since Orbán's 2010 election victory, across the political spectrum, direct democracy primarily subserves party interests. Referendums are less about asking what voters want than accentuating the messages of political parties.

Since 2010, Fidesz has obstructed dozens of referendum proposals from opposition political actors or citizens, often by raising legal arguments or simply backing off from contested decisions, but sometimes with more heavy-handed methods. In a remarkable incident in 2016, a Socialist Party (MSZP) representative was physically blocked from submitting his referendum question on the lifting of the 2015 ban on Sunday opening in the retail sector. While the socialist politician was held back by shaven-headed, muscular men (who turned out to be tied to a Budapest sports club chaired by Fidesz vice-president Gábor Kubatov), the wife of a rural Fidesz mayor slipped past to submit a similar question as a civil initiative. Although the National Election Committee (NEC) eventually accepted MSZP's proposal, Fidesz subsequently repealed the original ban, thus preventing the referendum. This parody-like skirmish illustrates the lengths to which the government will go to avoid confronting the will of the electorate in a referendum that it did not call. A government that has based its legitimacy on a two-thirds mandate cannot afford a lawful referendum that

contradicts its goals. No wonder the NEC has been kept under strong governmental influence since 2010.

On the uneven political playing field that is Orbán's soft authoritarian regime, opposition actors have also recognised the potential gains of initiating and holding referendums. Hungary's youngest parliamentary party, the centrist Momentum Movement, used this strategy with great success. In January 2017, two months before the party was officially founded, Momentum initiated a local referendum in Budapest on Hungary's bid to host the 2024 Summer Olympic Games. Surveys had shown that at the end of 2016, a majority of Hungarians did not support the bid, especially in Budapest. The result was predictable, and there was nothing to lose, especially for an otherwise relatively unknown organisation. By emphasising the disproportionately high budget and the uncertain benefits, Momentum successfully mobilised Budapest's population, collecting twice the required number of signatures to call for the referendum. But Fidesz once again stepped in, withdrawing the bid. Following this triumph, Momentum became the country's strongest extra-parliamentary party and won two seats in the European Parliament.

Fidesz has also employed a more direct agenda-setting method in the form of plebiscites. Over the past decade, a new form of pseudo-referendum has become institutionalised in governmental communication: the so-called national consultation surveys. Fidesz sent out up to 8 million of these political surveys to Hungarian households on selected issues, supported by publicly funded nationwide campaigns. Contrary to referendums or official surveys, the consultations are not regulated in any way in terms of their formulation, distribution, verification, or evaluation, and the results have no clear consequences. The phrasing is far from impartial, with leading questions and inflammatory language, such as a question on whether Hungary should support international organisations promoting illegal immigration and human trafficking.¹ Strategically selected results are then used to legitimise Orbán's criticised policies at home, as well as in the EU. Thus, despite the relatively low return rate, Fidesz greatly benefits from the consultations: not as a way of gathering opinion, but as a form of propaganda, a tool for political mobilisation. ■

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THE MESSAGES OF
POLITICAL PARTIES



KATA BENEDEK

is a Hungarian art historian and a PhD candidate at Berlin's Freie Universität. Her forthcoming dissertation revolves around geopolitical temporalities and modalities of socialist Central and Eastern European queer cultural history.

¹ Eszter Nova (2017). "National Consultation Campaigns in Hungary". *Friedrich Naumann Foundation Europe*. 23 November. Available at <bit.ly/2QK4G1g>.

IRELAND

TAKING CARE OF A REVERED CONSTITUTION

If democracy is a concept, it is made manifest in a country's constitution; in effect, its aspirations in legal form. Ireland's constitution was born out of war, out of the desire for independence after 700 years of British rule and occupation. It was written in 1922 by men and women who had succeeded in that struggle and was redrafted when Ireland became a fully independent republic in 1937. The battle for this status left an indelible mark on the Irish political system, which is only now, 100 years on, beginning to loosen its grip and change to reflect a 21st-century republic.

A side effect of the Irish nation's turbulent birth is a healthy respect for, and interest in, the constitution. Its very existence became a sign of that achievement, and of freedom; a living document in which neighbours, friends, and family had invested – quite literally – blood, sweat, and tears. As a result, since it was written, Irish citizens, no longer subjects of a foreign crown, have had genuine reason to be proud of their constitution and to feel some ownership of and investment in it.

It is therefore hardly surprising that this document, as a declaration of our "fundamental law", would, over time, require updating and amending, especially as it was created and written in the 1930s with the invited influence of the then all-powerful Catholic Church. That influence proved over time to be stifling and ultimately out of step with a modern state taking its place in the world.

Since 1937, there have been 42 referendums on which citizens have voted. Not surprisingly, the number of referendums has accelerated in this century. Nineteen have taken place since 2000, with the last one in 2019. In my five-year term as a senator in the Seanad, between 2011 and 2016, there were eight referendums. The highest turnout in this period was 62.1 per cent for the marriage equality amendment in 2015, which was carried. This was later trumped by the referendum on an amendment to provide for abortion in 2018, which had a 64.1 per cent turnout. Amendments with a clear social impact have always been the most febrile and have the capacity to connect directly with the lives of voters, ensuring lengthy and heated debates on doorsteps and in TV and radio studios.

And, by 2015, social media had emerged as a strong influencer, activating and connecting younger voters. The hashtag campaign #HomeToVote resulted in thousands of young Irish people making extraordinary journeys across the globe to cast their vote for marriage equality.

This was the first time in Irish history that younger voters



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were, as one group, determined to make their voices heard. It proved immediately how the power of participation enhances a democracy, and how vital it is for governments that propose constitutional amendments to make genuine efforts to reach all age and gender groups. In the future, this inclusion effort must see postal voting introduced in Ireland, as it remains the single biggest bar to access to voting.

In addition, the current independent Referendum Commission, which works to explain the meaning of referendums and to advertise them, should become permanent, be a bastion for best practice, and have a role in advising on the wording of amendments that are put forward. The current commission is not permanent and is limited to providing advice about what the referendum means, as well as circulating non-partisan information.

The increasing number of referendums in recent years has provoked much discussion on whether a "Super Tuesday"-style approach should be adopted, allowing voting on many

referendums on the same day. Given the confusion that arose on the few occasions multiple amendments were offered on the same day, this would appear to serve little purpose apart from saving money. In fact, such an approach could devalue the entire process and disrupt the existing respect which voters have for the right to amend the constitution – carefully and with time to consider the options.

The model of revitalising the constitution through careful consideration by the people via a referendum offers the best choice to allow change and progress in how a country shapes its own legal framework. And already, the value of the Citizens' Assembly and the earlier Convention on the Constitution in providing recommendations to the government on potential changes to the constitution has given citizens a more direct role in shaping that framework. Ireland, in this new century, has benefited overall by continuing to include citizens in such key decisions. ■

ITALY

DIRECT DEMOCRACY UNDER CONTROLLED CONDITIONS

Italy is a constitutional order based on fundamental rights, the rule of law, and a parliamentary form of government. In recent years, a feeling of being "at the periphery" has become widespread among Italians – finding expression in social and political unease, and feeding populist movements. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the direct relationship between leader and people. For Italy, this has meant the resurfacing of dangerous memories of the past, rather than being any sign of contemporary democracy.

After World War II, the Constituent Assembly tasked with writing the constitution for the new republic clearly defined the idea of democracy on which the Italian constitution is built. Democracy is anchored to a representative system, limiting not only every branch of government, but also the people. For fear of the return of authoritarianism even under a popular guise, the Italian parliamentary form of government leaves only a narrow margin to direct democracy, and referendums may only be held

under certain strictly defined circumstances as listed in the constitution. Nevertheless, a significant number of referendums have taken place in Italy since the 1970s. The majority of these have been abrogative referendums, designed to translate progressive change into the country's legal and institutional framework.

In 1970, the Italian Parliament adopted a statute law by a large majority which introduced divorce proceedings into the legal system. Prior to this, marriages in Italy could only be dissolved by ecclesiastical courts. Immediately afterwards, a group (consisting mainly of Catholics) called for a referendum to repeal the new rules. In the subsequent referendum on divorce that took place in 1974, nearly 60 per cent of Italians voted against repealing the divorce provisions, a result that clearly gave voice to an important part of civil society.

Did this result vindicate the fears of the Constituent Assembly? Given specific *lato sensu* political conditions, a civil law system (anchored in a parliamentary form of government) may sometimes need referendums to transpose social progress into the legal sphere. Without the 1974 referendum, family law and women's rights in Italy may have faced a very different story. Nevertheless, other examples show how double-edged the issue may be.

In 1993, an abrogative referendum proposing to alter the electoral system of the Italian Senate was called. More than 80 per cent of voters approved the changes, but was this a "victory of the people" as in 1974? Of course, the vote succeeded in changing the electoral system into a completely different one (moving from an extremely proportional to a more majoritarian mixed-member system). Nonetheless, it did not simply eliminate existing provisions; it introduced new legal provisions by rewriting the legislative text, and in doing so went far beyond the constitutional architecture regarding direct democracy.

In September 2020, a different sort of referendum was called: a constitutional one. Laws amending the constitution may be submitted to popular vote when requested by political minorities within three months of their publication. A 2019 constitutional law reducing the number of members of both houses of parliament could enter into force only after such a constitutional referendum had taken place. Nearly 70 per cent of voters approved the reduction in the number of representatives. Italians voted in the hope that the decrease in MPs would increase the "quality" of representation in the future, which had become severely weakened. However, constitutional scholars have cast doubt on whether constitutional amendments can achieve such a goal. The only certain result may be the altering of the equilibrium between voters and representatives, the inner functioning of both houses, and several mechanisms concerning the form of government. Thus, in these circumstances, the power of the referendum represents more an illusion than a decision leading to concrete changes.



Referendums do give a voice to the people, involving citizens in political decisions. But these examples – the final one in particular – invite us to reflect on the link between referendums and genuine democratic participation in Italy.

Direct democracy must challenge representative democracy when and if it represents a peaceful way to introduce progressive changes into the legal system. If it becomes the weapon of people feeling pushed to the periphery of the political system, it simply puts the constitutional architecture at risk. In this light, referendums seem to not (always) be a truly inclusive vector of democracy. Is there a solution? Of course, but not one that can easily be achieved in times like the present. Long ago, one of the most enlightened Italian intellectuals, Piero Calamandrei, never stopped recalling that true democracy can only live hand in hand with social rights. Even today, social inclusion seems to be the democratic way of giving the people a sovereign voice. ■



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ROMANIA REFERENDUMS AS A ROUTE TO POLITICAL CAPITAL

Over the past five years, Romania has organised two national-level referendums: a constitutional one on the definition of family in 2018 and a consultative one on anti-corruption measures in 2019. These two initiatives are the latest in a succession of eight referendums held since the fall of communism.

Although in theory a tool for direct democracy, referendums in Romania have been instrumentalised by various political actors as strategies to increase legitimacy and popularity.¹ Moreover, a more dangerous trend is that plebiscites, particularly on polarising topics, could legitimise and provide a platform for far-right, extremist voices, with deep repercussions.

The referendum on family is a telling example. The initiative sought to replace the gender-neutral language of family as founded on consensual marriage “between spouses” to an explicit mention of marriage as the union between a man and a woman. In late 2017, the Romanian government declared its intention to hold a referendum on a change to the country’s constitution after a citizens’ initiative by an anti-same-sex-marriage group, the Coalition for Family, announced that it had gathered around 3 million signatures, far beyond the 500,000 required.

¹ Sergiu Gherghina (2019). “Hijacked direct democracy: the instrumental use of referendums in Romania.” *East European Politics and Societies*, 33(3).

Supported by the then-ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD), which had gained 46 per cent in the December 2016 parliamentary elections, the referendum was expected to be a shoo-in. Romania has a high number of self-declared religious individuals, with 55 per cent of the population claiming to be highly religious.² The high number of signatures gathered also seemed to indicate strong support. As a result, PSD saw the referendum as a chance to further consolidate its position. However, it failed to meet the quorum of 30 per cent, with only 21 per cent of voters participating, and was thus declared invalid.

Various reasons for this have been suggested. First, same-sex marriage was not perceived as a salient issue by many Romanians, with other, more immediate problems, such as poverty, poor infrastructure, and insufficient funds for healthcare and education considered to be of higher priority. At a cost of 40 million euros, the plebiscite was criticised by the opposition as an absurd waste of money.

The referendum was also perceived as a government attempt to deflect attention from the significant corruption-related turmoil in Romania at that time. In January 2017, the country's largest protests since the fall of communism were sparked by an attempt to pass two bills regarding the pardoning of crimes and the amendment of the penal code.

While the government claimed that these measures would solve prison overcrowding, opposition parties and civil society viewed them as a way to let corrupt politicians go unpunished. Some voters boycotted the 2018 referendum to express their discontent.

Although the referendum failed, a worrying outcome was that it gave "far-right individuals and organisations more visibility and a platform to coalesce on".³ The anti-same-sex-marriage rhetoric deployed around the referendum prepared the ground for the creation of a right-wing nationalist party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), in 2019.

In a shocking turn of events, AUR entered the Romanian Parliament by winning 9 per cent of the vote in the 2020 elections. Unsurprisingly, a key programme pledge is the protection of the traditional family, "made of one man and one woman", a direct nod to the language of the campaign. Support for the party was shown to be highest in the regions where people had participated in the 2018 referendum.

Its entry into parliament as the fourth largest group marks a dangerous turning point for Romania, one of the few Eastern European countries that did not have a prominent far-right party. ■



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2 Sergiu Gherghina et al. (2019). "Non-voting in the 2018 Romanian referendum: the importance of initiators, campaigning and issue saliency." *Political Science*, 71(3), pp. 193–213.

3 Ramona Dima (2020). "Trends of Homophobic Activism in Romania, or 'How to Turn Religious Convictions into a Referendum and Still Fail'", in Radzhana Buyantueva & Maryna Shevtsova (eds). *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

SWITZERLAND

A UNIQUE YOUNG DEMOCRACY

Switzerland has now been a “full democracy” for 50 years. On 7 February 1971, 65.7 per cent of male citizens and a majority of the cantons voted in favour of giving women political rights at the federal level. As we celebrate 50 years of women’s political rights in the confederation, there is still no better illustration of Swiss direct democracy. The 1971 referendum highlights an oft-overlooked aspect of the Swiss system: the constitution plays a central role in political life, in addition to its tangible function in the legal system.

Unlike in other systems, the 27 constitutions in Switzerland (one at the federal level and one for each of the 26 cantons) outline the state’s duties and the rights of the people; they form the bedrock of politics.

A change to any part of the constitution requires a double majority of the people and cantons, as occurred in 1971. Within this framework, a proposal for a constitutional amendment or a parliamentary motion is the only scenario under which a popular vote is triggered “from above”.

Far more typical of direct democracy is the citizens’ initiative – a tool that can be employed by citizens to amend the constitution. Proposals for a partial amendment of the constitution must collect the signatures of 100,000 eligible citizens within 18 months. No subject is off-limits, from banning nuclear power, stricter gun control, or abolishing the Swiss army, to a universal basic income, animal rights, or a green economy. There have also been many initiatives aimed at curbing immigration, as well as targeting minorities, such as the successful proposal to ban the construction of minarets on mosques.

Changing the constitution is not the only way that citizens can influence federal political life. Another “bottom-up” tool is the ability to oppose laws passed by parliament; 50,000 citizens may, within 100 days of the publication of an act of parliament, demand that it be put to popular vote.

Introduced in 1874 to protect minorities, the optional referendum aims to “act as a check on the attribution of new powers to Confederation”.¹ Until the turn of the 20th century, right-wing and far-right parties frequently used this mechanism, as did the Social Democratic Party until it entered government in 1942.

1 Andreas Auer (2007). “La démocratie directe comme piège et comme chance pour l’Union européenne”, in Andreas Auer, Alexandre Flückiger & Michel Hottelier (eds). *Les droits de l’homme et la constitution : Études en l’honneur du professeur Giorgio Malinverni*. Genève: Schulthess Médias Juridiques SA.

Today, referendums are principally used by non-parliamentary forces to put pressure on the government. By convention, all parties represented in parliament should also have at least one seat on the seven-member council that comprises the federal government. The Swiss Green Party – the fourth largest political party since the 2019 federal elections – and the smaller Green Liberals are notable exceptions.

Swiss political parties campaign for a federal election every four years. They also campaign four times a year, with one or more referendums to fight (for example, June 2021 will see two popular initiatives seeking to ban pesticides and a referendum on the CO₂ law). The year-round campaigning required for this direct democracy, along with the canton system and the federation's 27 constitutions, means that the logic of Swiss politics is quite different to that of its European neighbours.

Another fundamental distinction, one which threatens the credibility of the Swiss political system, is the lack of regulation and transparency regarding money in politics. With so many referendum campaigns and little state funding for politics, disparities are growing between campaigns that benefit business and financial interests, and those launched to protect the common good, typically on environmental issues.

Comparing Switzerland with EU member states – or the EU itself – is always tricky. From de Gaulle in 1949 to the Convention on the Future of the European Union in 2003, the idea of a European referendum is regularly floated and just as regularly rejected. It is possible to imagine ways to prevent referendums becoming “traps” for the EU, as the European Constitution referendums held in 2005 in France and the Netherlands proved to be. The real question, however, is whether the creation of Swiss citizenship through direct democracy, notably through the inclusion of women as full citizens, can serve as a model for the strengthening of European citizenship by the same means. ■



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MALTA UNDER A POSTCOLONIAL SHADOW

Since 2003, Malta has held three referendums. In March 2003, citizens voted on EU membership, in May 2011 on divorce, and a referendum on spring hunting was held in April 2015. All three referendums shared the common themes of national pride, identity, and sovereignty. National sovereignty holds special significance in the postcolonial state.

The split between for and against was rather narrow in each case, reflecting Malta's socio-political duopoly. The bipartisan landscape that emerged in the colonial era persists today. Two major forces – the Labour Party (PL) and the Nationalist Party (PN) – dominate public life. Both embrace economic liberalism; the PN, however, remains more conservative on reproductive rights, not least due to ties to the Catholic Church. Both parties maintain clientelistic networks that cut across social classes: patronage offers a stable source of income in exchange for loyalty. Voters therefore often simply align with their party's stance rather than voting on the matter at hand per se.

Malta's EU membership referendum saw the highest turnout (almost 91 per cent) and the lowest support for joining (54 per cent in favour) of the nine countries that voted on accession in 2003. Both the "yes" and "no" campaigns emphasised national interests. The governing PN argued that accession would boost tourism, while Malta's infrastructure would gain from EU funds. The Labour opposition cautioned against membership, suggesting it would undermine Malta's independence and neutrality.

In 2011, Malta was one of only three countries worldwide that did not permit divorce. Since legalising divorce did not feature in the PN's electoral manifesto, the initiative came from MPs. Two parliamentarians, one from each party, presented a joint private members' bill and the referendum was authorised through a separate resolution. Asked whether married couples, separated or living apart for at least four years, could divorce, 53.2 per cent of voters said "yes".

The campaign against divorce was supported by the PN, with then Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi casting a vote against the bill. The campaign *Kristu iiva, Divorzju le* (Yes to Christ, No to Divorce) – heavily promoted by the Church – affirmed that one "could not be a true Catholic" while backing a law clashing with "the clear teachings of Christ". The result attested to the Church's weakening influence on social life. National identity was becoming more secular.

The 2015 referendum on the spring hunting of turtle dove and quail was initiated by the Green Party, *Alternattiva Demokratika*, alongside several environmental NGOs. A petition, signed



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by 45,000 people, called for a ban. While in previous referendums, those supporting change had successfully campaigned on a “yes” platform, the formulation of the 2015 referendum question obliged those wishing to change the law to lead a “no” campaign.¹

The hunting debate transcended conservation, becoming “an emotionally-charged moment where a ‘nation’ chooses which values it wants to be seen as having.”² The anti-hunting lobby sought to assert Malta’s will to do away with such antics for the sake of EU integration, while to the thousands who voted in favour, being the only EU country to allow recreational spring hunting was a matter of national pride.

The referendums were landmarks in the ongoing debate between two camps loosely definable as “Eurocentric” and “authentic”.

The former, represented by the urban middle class and civil society groups, campaigns to bring Maltese legislation in line with the rest of Europe’s liberal democracies. The latter, encouraged by the governing PL, stirs pride in an authentic national identity, arguing that further integration is unnecessary since Malta is already “the best in Europe”.

As the hunting referendum proved, calls to safeguard national traditions from supposed foreign pressure can yield mass support. To those in power, conspiracies of foreign interference come in handy. At a time when the government is under international scrutiny in relation to the murder of journalist and activist Daphne Caruana Galizia and corruption scandals, patriotic rhetoric is an effective tool for retaining the electorate’s trust. ■

1 James Debono (2015). “From priest politicians to spring hunting: Malta’s six referenda.” *Malta Today*. 12 April 2015.

2 Brian Campbell and Diogo Verissimo (2018). “To Ban or Not to Ban: is That the Question?” *Isles of the Left*. 10 April 2018.

UNITED KINGDOM **CAVEAT EMPTOR**

On 23 June 2016, the European Union faced its greatest challenge, as the citizens of the United Kingdom went to the polls to vote in a referendum on EU membership. Facing a binary question of leave or remain, 51.9 per cent of those who voted indicated a desire to end the relationship with the EU – a move hailed as a triumph of democracy by those who had pushed for leave. But was this accurate?

Referendums are a very un-British political mechanism. The UK takes great pride in its status as the “mother of parliaments”, rooted in its long tradition of representative democracy and parliamentary sovereignty. Including the Brexit vote, only three referendums have ever been held on a UK-wide basis, all non-binding in nature. The tool has been used slightly more widely in regard to the UK’s constituent nations (most notably the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence) and local issues. In principle, however, they have been viewed not only as unsuitable for the British system, but indeed dangerous – with Margaret Thatcher famously describing referendums as

“a device of dictators and demagogues”, echoing the words of wartime Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee.

Yet, despite this traditional hostility, in recent years their use has picked up greater political drive. There appear to be three elements behind this. First, the use of a referendum to answer a significant constitutional question, principally around the future of the United Kingdom itself. As support for Scottish independence has surged during the pandemic (and following Scotland’s strong vote against leaving the EU), so too have calls for a second referendum on Scotland’s constitutional future. A referendum requires the support of the UK Government, backing that Prime Minister Boris Johnson has pledged to withhold, leaving the debate fractious and unclear. The 2014 independence referendum was framed by the Edinburgh Agreement, whereby the UK and Scottish Governments pledged to abide by the outcome. The absence of a second agreement would leave the Scottish Parliament having to consider whether to hold a referendum without a legal basis, with all the challenges that brings, as witnessed in Catalonia and elsewhere.

The second trend regarding referendums in Britain has been their use as a means to gain legitimacy and solve other political problems. The EU referendum took place because David Cameron, the Conservative prime minister at the time, was looking to stave off revolt from his party’s fractious pro-Brexit arm. Although Britain’s EU membership had been a long-term question, withdrawal did not appear to have significant public traction. The hope from Cameron and his team appeared to be that a referendum could defuse their challenges, without really needing to deliver on it. That gamble turned out to be wildly unsuccessful.

Finally, there has been clever use of the mechanism by those seeking to bring about seismic change. A binary referendum such as Brexit or Scottish independence reduces highly

complex and nuanced decisions to an either/or choice. Given the lack of historical precedent, referendums are not an approach embedded in the UK’s civic or political thinking and culture. Both referendums saw campaigns (both for and against) use fear tactics, misinformation, and reductive rhetoric to avoid the complexity of the issues at stake. Following the vote, Brexit in particular saw a significant level of buyer’s remorse from Leave voters, who felt they had not fully understood the proposal; or going further felt they had been lied to (e.g. the infamous quote “we send the EU £350 million a week, let’s fund our National Health Service instead” displayed on the side of the Vote Leave campaign bus).

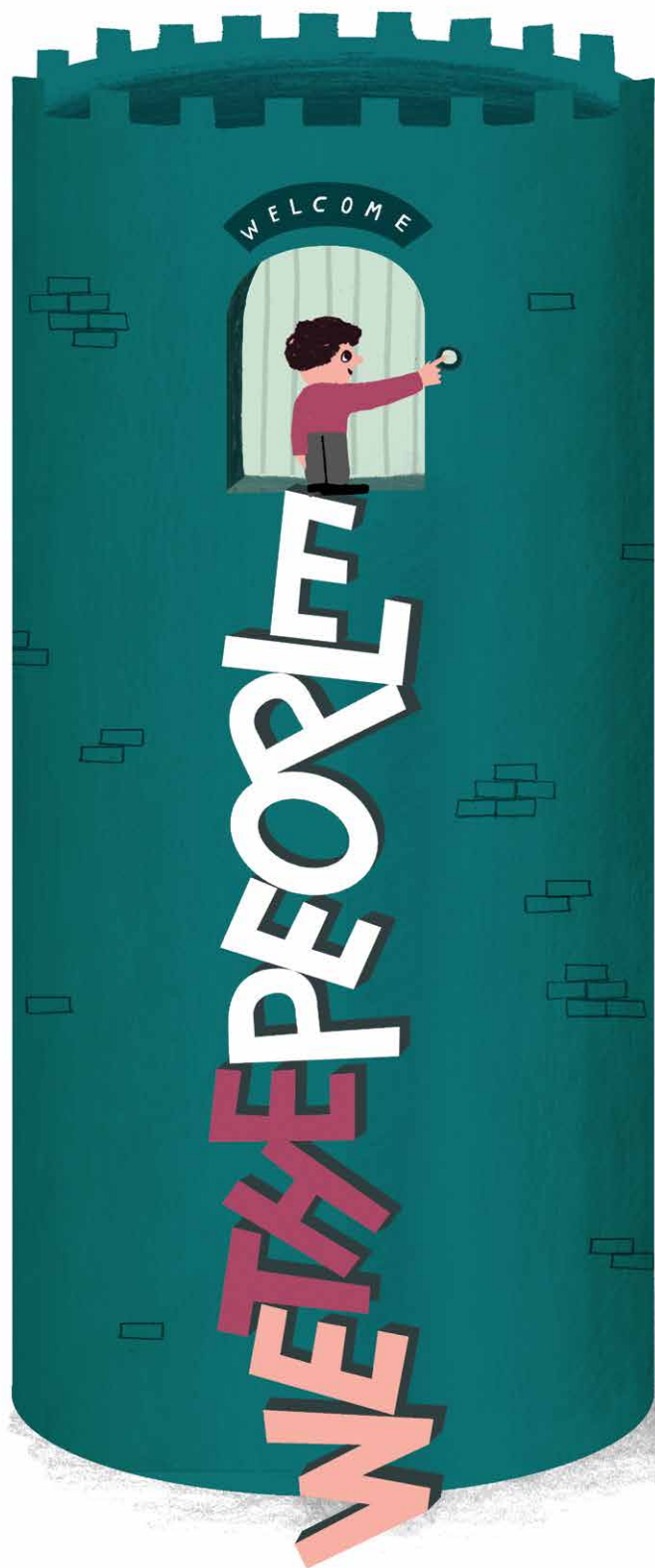
Britain’s limited experience with referendums has been disappointing, reinforcing elements of discontent that have been undermining democracy more widely. A reinvigorated democratic system in the UK will require the reconnecting of the public and those who represent them, and the embedding of new approaches that can enhance the political literacy of the general public. It’s time to build forward better. ■



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NO TIME FOR CASTLES

FROM CLOSED TO OPEN DEMOCRACY

AN INTERVIEW WITH
HÉLÈNE LANDEMORE

For proponents of deliberative democracy, today's representative regimes offer nothing more than illusion. Real democracy means people's power, and achieving it requires out-of-the-box thinking. We spoke to political theorist H       Landemore about her proposed alternative of open democracy and what this would look like at local, European, and global levels. As citizens' assemblies in France and Ireland offer valuable lessons, and with events from Brexit to the pandemic expanding the horizons of what is possible, there is no time like the present for utopian thinking.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: Voting, elections, and parliaments are universally considered symbols of democracy. But amid the wider debate on the crisis of democracy, you argue that the problem is the system of representative democracy itself. Can you explain?

H       LANDEMORE: It helps to go back to the history of representative regimes in Europe. They originate in what historians call "representative government": governments where the law is made by elected legislators. These forms of government only began to be called democracies as of circa 1830 in the US and France, and 1870 in Great Britain. But the reality is that they were designed as an alternative to democracy as much as to monarchy. For their founders, democracy meant mob rule. It was chaotic and overly direct. Fear of the people characterises representative democracies from the outset. Yes, they were built on principles of popular sovereignty and consent – but that isn't sufficient for them to qualify as democracies. The everyday law-making process was carried out by elected aristocracies with the best and most virtuous at the helm and the people as a silent sovereign occasionally nodding from afar.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the franchise was progressively expanded to include non-propertied males, black people, and women. The one person, one vote principle helped us convince ourselves that we live in democracies, but this is still only the democratisation of the right to choose our rulers. The people never get to actually rule. Democracy, people's power, is about exercising power, not just consenting to it. It is about deliberating, shaping the agenda, and deciding outcomes ourselves.

So the problem with representative democracy is that it excludes ordinary people from power?

The model is fundamentally flawed. It gives too much power to too few people by design – not by mistake or accident. Even if the problem of money in politics was fixed, the system would still select representatives in an insufficiently democratic way and fail to tap into the diversity and wisdom of the larger public. This system disincentivises most people from getting properly informed and voting in educated ways – in the end, it will be others doing all the work.

The solution is decentring electoral institutions. Even under ideal circumstances – a perfectly egalitarian society – elections rely on human choice which is inherently biased towards certain traits: charisma, social standing, height, and so on. Elections systematically cut off access to power for people who are too ordinary or

shy to stand up in front of others. No amount of periodic renewal of elected representatives can change this fundamental fact.

From what you describe as a closed system, you call for a paradigm shift for the 21st century: open democracy. What is open democracy?

Open democracy is a system in which power is equally distributed, or equally accessible at the very least, to ordinary citizens. Everyone gets a chance to directly exercise legislative power – to define the laws that govern ourselves and others. Not all at once, but by representing and being represented in turn. The key body in an open democracy would be the open mini-public: a large body of citizens gathered for agenda-setting and law-making. Random selection would distribute the chance of participating equally and reproduce the diversity of the larger group. The mini-public should be connected to the larger public, receptive to their input, and capable of engaging in deliberative exchange. If it is secretive and closed off, it reproduces the problems of the old system.

Five institutional principles guide the idea of an open democracy. First, participation rights: putting power in the hands of citizens. The right to vote, but also the ability (with enough signatures) to put items on the agenda of an open mini-public (a citizens' initiative) or to recall an unpopular law (the right of referral).

Second, deliberation. According to the theory of “deliberative democracy”, laws are only legitimate to the extent that they pass through a deliberative exchange of arguments among free and equal citizens. Deliberation gives people a voice and a chance to agree or disagree with a law, contributing to making better decisions by tapping into the collective intelligence.

Third, majority rule. When there is no consensus, the only democratic way to reach a decision is to go with the larger number. Fourth, democratic representation. Representative structures are necessary because we don’t know how to deliberate in the millions, and we can’t always make decisions en masse. Open democracy is structured around democratic representation through random selection or self-selected representation, both of which allow equal opportunity of participation. Finally, transparency. Any political system can tend towards closure and the formation of in-groups. As an essential accountability mechanism, transparency prevents this by allowing people to see what representatives are doing in their name.

What would open democracy look like in practice? It is not a case of abolishing all elected institutions, but some of them, such as upper chambers like senates, could eventually be replaced with randomly selected assemblies. Other reforms should aim to make our systems

more participatory, deliberative, majoritarian, and transparent. Open democracy is a constitutional reform agenda.

So this would be a gradual paradigm shift where representative and open democracy coexist as we move towards openness?

I don’t imagine any kind of revolution. Revolutions are bad in general; they are risky. The most probable way forward is a temporary cohabitation between electoral and open democracy until the latter becomes increasingly central. It would be a hybrid system for a while, which may be unstable or fail. But it could also lead to new, unpredictable institutional equilibria more favourable to the interests of ordinary citizens. In several countries, the power shift is already happening.

Take the Citizens’ Convention on Climate in France. At the beginning, it was a completely unknown body of 150 randomly selected citizens tasked with making proposals for curbing greenhouse gas emissions in a spirit of social justice. Little by little, those involved became empowered, organising local meetings, and the word began to spread. The French president met the Convention halfway through and towards the end ministers and parliamentarians were publicly engaging with its proposals. Within a year, the Convention had become a new political actor in the French system.

DEMOCRACY
IS ABOUT
EXERCISING
POWER, NOT JUST
CONSENTING
TO IT

How does the Convention sit with France's other political institutions?

The balance is still fragile. Initially, the Convention's legitimacy came mainly, but not exclusively, from the "will of the prince" – that is, President Macron. After the *gilets jaunes* protests of November 2018, a "Great National Debate" was organised throughout France in 2019. During this debate, 12 of the 18 randomly selected regional assemblies converged on the idea that a new form of democratic governance was needed on climate and environmental issues.

President Macron promised that the Convention's recommendations would be passed "with no filter": straight into regulation, a parliamentary debate, or a referendum. Parliament, already sidelined in France's hyper-presidential regime, felt that its prerogative to legislate was being further undermined and questioned the legitimacy of the Convention. Some parliamentarians even called it "anti-democratic".

This raised the question: who has the right to make the law on climate issues? The legitimacy of the elected chamber came into conflict with the fragile legitimacy of this group of 150 people nobody chose. I would argue that the Convention, being randomly selected, can claim to be more democratically representative. It can also claim procedural legitimacy because it was authorised by the president. But in a system where legitimacy is associated with elections, the Convention's proposals would probably only be granted full legitimacy if they were approved by French citizens in a referendum. And it might still happen – in the case of a proposed constitutional amendment, for example. Better still, however, would be a constitutional moment where the institutionalisation of recourse to random selection is debated and put to a referendum.

INSTEAD OF SEEING THE
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY AS
A THREAT, LIKE SOME
MEMBERS OF THE FRENCH
PARLIAMENT SAW THE
CONVENTION ON CLIMATE,
IRISH POLITICIANS VIEWED
IT AS AN OPPORTUNITY

For many, the Convention was a disappointment because some proposals – such as the mandatory deep renovation of buildings by 2040 – were not taken on board. Isn't it risky to tell people "you decide what needs to be done" and then ignore the parts of the answer you don't like?

the *gilets jaunes* protests and temporarily improved Macron's popularity. People are willing to give participatory experiments

a chance, but you cannot disappoint them repeatedly.

Have some places got it right?

The French case is a recent and promising example of what an open democracy could look like, but it's not the ideal. In practice, the old system will of course try to co-opt democratic innovations to keep things exactly the same. It recalls [the Italian writer] Lampedusa's famous line: "Everything needs to change, so everything can stay the same."

It is tempting for those in positions of power to use participatory experiments to legitimise the system while leaving the existing decision-making power structure untouched. It's a form of participation-washing whereby power tries to regain legitimacy in a period of crisis by appearing to listen to the people. This is a very dangerous move because the tacit or sometimes explicit promise of impact that goes with democratic participation cannot go unfulfilled for very long. It risks throwing frustrated people into the arms of the far right. Though not a very well-designed exercise with minimal uptake by government, the Great National Debate brought a moment of social peace after

Ireland moved towards more participation progressively, first trying a pilot citizens' assembly and then a hybrid format. In 2012, there was an assembly around marriage equality that was composed of 66 selected citizens and 33 politicians, plus a chair. For several months, politicians and ordinary citizens worked together. It reconciled politicians to the process and, after marriage equality was passed in 2015, they decided to hold another citizens' assembly on the decriminalisation of abortion. In this one, 99 citizens were chosen at random. Instead of seeing this assembly as a threat, as some members of the French Parliament saw the Convention on Climate, Irish parliamentarians and politicians viewed it as an opportunity. The referendum decriminalising abortion eventually passed in 2018 with 66.4 per cent approval.

Deliberative democracy is often criticised for focusing on rearranging the institutional furniture. Isn't the essence of democracy found in society? It's in the trade unions, the press, the

social movements, the political parties – not procedures and voting systems.

The associations that form civil society are essential. They are the software of democracy. But the hardware of democracy, which for me consists of the institutions structuring political power, is crucial because it shapes the incentives. Open democracy is about a set of institutional principles that, once implemented, form structures that can host this rich ecology of groups and social movements. Our democracies should be structured to be as open and porous as possible so that social movements can pour in, occupy the space, and express themselves.

Movements like Black Lives Matter have certainly managed to shape the agenda despite unrepresentative electoral politics, but look at the cost of doing things this way. Similarly, how many *gilets jaunes* had to be badly injured in protests for the government to listen? Rather than having social movements breaking democracy open by smashing things, we should make democracy open from the outset and invite people in. It is pre-emptive design: if you build a fortress, people must climb the walls and break windows to enter and exert influence, and bad things will happen at the margins. If you build a welcoming space, where people know they will be listened to, respected, and taken seriously, it's a completely different story.

There is a parallel with trade unionism. It's not uncommon to see French trade unionists rioting in the streets, but this doesn't tend to happen in Germany, because structurally they have a say.

I am convinced that open democracy is not meant to apply just to government, but also to the governance of firms. Instead of a conflict between bosses and workers, with unions fighting from the outside so to speak, it's better to have something closer to the German model that grants workers structural power. They can influence business and strategic decisions not just in an ad-hoc way or because they have enough strength to apply pressure at a particular conjuncture, but because they have an official, permanent seat at the table with representatives on the board of directors.

To return to the climate, does the scale of the ecological crisis demand this kind of open process for a democratic society to really take up the challenge?

I am not sure it is about the scale so much as how climate is currently a very prominent issue. I was actually sceptical when I first heard about the French climate convention. It seemed an odd choice of topic – climate change is a highly technical, scientific, and global issue, surely requiring international summits between big polluters like China, the US, India, and Brazil rather than at the level of France, which is responsible for 1 per cent of emissions.

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But no, climate issues are deeply connected to social justice locally and it's really important that people can tackle them at every level. Many of the Convention on Climate's discussions went beyond climate change: they talked about biodiversity loss, the disappearance of arable land, and the state of forests and the countryside. Essentially, environmental justice. From the global concept of climate change, the conversation moved to what this means personally, in terms of the air you breathe, the water you drink, and access to nature. Climate speaks to citizens' needs in a very fundamental way. The same could be done for other topics. Immigration is a taboo issue in many countries but in time, and through deliberation in mini-publics, the discussion would likely become much more practical, nuanced, and based on common-sense solutions than at present.

Across the world, globalisation has reduced the power of national governments. Part of the rationale for the EU is to reclaim that power. Could open democracy contribute beyond the national?

Absolutely. I recently wrote an essay having fun with the idea of a House of the People as a permanent institution of the European Union.¹ I imagine a body of 499 randomly selected citizens from all over Europe. Angeliki, a Greek woman who barely makes ends meet running a bed and breakfast in Athens, suddenly gets a letter inviting her to spend the next three years in Brussels. She is excited because it represents a chance to shape the future of the whole European Union together with people from all over the continent, to make connections, to develop new skills, and to discover something new.

The European Union must recognise that it needs to introduce more participatory rights in order to become more democratic. Because good luck trying to put something on the agenda of the EU institutions as they are now! There are citizens' initiatives, of course, but they have many technical restrictions and require a huge number of signatures.

1 Hélène Landemore (2021). "Open Democracy and Digital Technologies", in Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore & Rob Reich (eds). *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The EU also needs more deliberation – real and visible deliberation. That probably means giving much more power to the European Parliament, but it also means allocating resources for new forms of deliberative spaces.

In addition, the EU needs majoritarian decision-making. It is too often paralysed by unanimity requirements. If we are a European people, to solve disagreements, at some point we must go with the majority. Finally, the EU needs greater transparency. The European institutions are bureaucratic, opaque, and incomprehensible. For me, the Brexit vote was an explicit denunciation of the undemocratic nature of the European Union. I am not sure it was the right move, but I think that the diagnosis was correct.

How might open democracy work at the global level?

Imagine a random group of 1000 selected citizens from all over the world, gathered to deliberate issues such as climate change or global economic justice. Is it possible? Won't there be cultural misunderstandings? Should difficulties dissuade us from trying? I don't think so – we are only beginning to scratch the surface of what's doable. NGOs and academics are currently putting together the first global climate assembly to take place in the margins of the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow. It's already happening.

When I started writing my book *Open Democracy* a few years ago, some colleagues saw it as extremely radical, utopian, philosophical, and not tethered to reality. But a few years on, reality is catching up. The financial crisis, the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and now the pandemic have all exploded the status quo and expanded the realm of what is conceptually imaginable. We lived in an era of narrow-mindedness with very little thinking outside of the box. It was capitalist social democracy with elected representatives and globalisation as an unconditional, unquestionable constraint. But now, fiscal constraints, balanced budgets, minimal state interference – all that has gone out of the window. If we can do anything at this point, why not an open democracy?



HÉLÈNE LANDEMORE

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CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES WON'T SAVE US

ARTICLE BY
CALUM McGEOWN

Citizens' assemblies have emerged as a key climate movement demand in recent years. As Ireland's historic referendums on marriage equality and abortion show, citizens' assemblies can break political deadlock to deliver real change. But the fate of lesser-known citizens' recommendations on climate change in Ireland cautions against putting too much faith in participatory democracy, Calum McGeown argues. Rather than going beyond politics, the answer to ecological crisis lies in expanding democracy into new areas of the economy and the state.

Citizens' assemblies are receiving increased recognition as a way to ensure greater public participation in shaping government responses to the planetary crisis. The interest reflects a growing perception that the governments of representative democracies are either unwilling to or incapable of implementing the radical measures necessary to decarbonise their economies. Indeed, findings steadily report emissions trajectories in line with the worst-case scenarios set out by the 2015 Paris Agreement. After a year of record-breaking wildfires, droughts, and flooding, the evidence is tangible.

The calls for citizens' assemblies have come from climate activists and politicians alike. However, as transformative as they may be for decision-making, they are an insufficient fix for the democratic deficits that frustrate confronting the interconnected crises of climate breakdown, ecosystem collapse, and social inequality. To stand a chance of achieving a timely and just post-carbon transition, demands for democratisation must focus on the state and the economy.

WHAT ARE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES?

A citizens' assembly is a group of people brought together to learn about, deliberate, and make recommendations on specific issues or proposals. The assemblies are independent and established through a process of sortition whereby individuals are randomly selected to form mini-publics roughly reflective of the wider population according to various criteria (such as age, race, gender, region, and income).

Their conspicuous presence in the imaginary of contemporary climate politics is largely attributable to the activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR), which identifies going “beyond politics” through the creation of a citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice as one of its core demands. The rationale is not without merit, as placing ordinary citizens within decision-making structures can help mitigate against the influence of powerful lobbies, money, short-termism, and professional political ambition on the climate-inert “politics as usual”.

Much emphasis is placed on an initial learning phase made up of expert testimonials and presentations, Q&As, and supplementary resources. XR and the wider climate movement have homed in on this with good reason, given the potential to ensure that the incontrovertible science and gravity of climate breakdown can be communicated to an audience without

the distortion of mis- and disinformation. This learning phase aims to facilitate respectful and factually informed deliberation that incorporates members' various interests and perspectives. The assembly's final task is to agree on and present its recommendations for review, uptake, or dismissal.

LESSONS FROM IRELAND

The Irish case is often cited as an example of how citizens' assemblies can navigate contentious issues and clear pathways for transformation. Convened in 2016, Ireland's 99-member citizens' assembly was tasked with making recommendations on complex constitutional and political problems in five areas: abortion, ageing population, fixed-term parliaments, referendums, and climate change. The assembly was organised in large part in response to increasing domestic and international pressure related to Ireland's constitutional amendment on abortion. By granting equal rights to life to the mother and the unborn, Ireland's Eighth Amendment had banned termination under almost all circumstances for over 30 years. Caught between demands for women's rights and the “pro-life” social conservatism of a historically dominant Catholic Church, electoral politics had proved incapable of resolving the matter.

Climate change represented another – albeit very different – problem that Irish politicians

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had long preferred not to address. In failing to come close to emissions reduction targets, Ireland had been labelled one of the EU's worst performers on climate. The nature of Ireland's post-economic-crisis recovery made matters worse: from 2011, Ireland's agricultural and transport sectors were targeted as drivers of economic growth, and emissions grew in parallel.¹ Issues of political legitimacy were, and continue to be, exacerbated by Ireland's economic dependency on carbon-intensive agriculture, as well as the enduring cultural significance of farming in the country.

The decision to institutionalise participation in the Citizens' Assembly followed the perceived success of the 2012 Constitutional Convention. Indirectly the product of the independent "We the Citizens" initiative, the convention brought elected representatives and citizens together for 18 months to consider changes to Ireland's constitution. It is best known for its recommendation on marriage equality, which resulted in a historic popular vote in May 2015 to legalise same-sex marriage. The 2016 assembly was also to have important consequences for social justice: after its members recommended repealing the Eighth Amendment, a landmark national referendum endorsed the decision which marked a triumph for women's rights and a significant moment of detachment – both real and symbolic – of Irish society from entrenched religious moralism.

Despite these historic advances, both the 2012 convention and the 2016 assembly were constrained in other areas by the same political obstacles they were intended to circumvent. Although the assemblies made clear recommendations on other issues, the government did not act as quickly and decisively as it did on marriage equality and abortion.

Tasked with making proposals on how to make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change, the Citizens' Assembly proved more ambitious

¹ Diarmuid Torney (2020). "Ireland's Policy Response to Climate Change: An Historical Overview", in David Robbins, Diarmuid Torney & Pat Brereton (eds). *Ireland and the Climate Crisis*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

than expected. Its 13 recommendations ranged from steps to support the transition to electric vehicles and prioritise cycling and public transport infrastructure, to emissions taxes on agriculture and an end to state subsidies for peat extraction. Despite the high level of consensus, the government response was disappointing. A separate parliamentary committee was established to consider the report, with a lack of clarity on the overall uptake of the proposals. Ostensibly, this was due to the difficulty of translating the complex recommendations into the kinds of binary choices suited to referendums.

THE CLIMATE BIND

The level of climate action required to meet international emissions targets will necessarily disrupt the political and economic status quo. Any restrictions the government imposes on a climate assembly in terms of what is put on or kept off its agenda therefore matter a great deal. More than a question of feasibility, whether an assembly's recommendations are upheld, modified, or altogether ignored comes down to power. It is telling, for instance, that the Irish citizens' assembly was not mandated to give recommendations on political economy. This dynamic is somewhat at odds with achieving a just transition to a post-carbon economy: unseating the socially and ecologically exploitative capitalist model definitively means putting the status quo on the table.

The 2018 *gilets jaunes* protests in France demonstrate the risk of taking climate action without simultaneously addressing social justice. This experience offers an important lesson: any green political project with social justice at its core must take a holistic approach to ecological transition. The scale of change demands much more of political and social forces than might be achieved with policy reforms. No matter how radical an assembly's recommendations, if it does not or cannot address the institutions that endorse it (and of which it is an extension) then its efficacy is inevitably constrained. The citizens' assembly finds itself in an irreconcilable bind when it comes to climate: while it depends on state buy-in to wield political influence, to achieve the necessary changes the same state must open itself up to scrutiny, challenge, and transformation.

The crux of the problem lies in the status of the citizens' assembly as an advisory body. Lacking legislative capabilities, these assemblies are effectively toothless; their influence over decision-making is curtailed by the state, both in terms of its prescribed mandate and uptake of the recommendations. This is not to undervalue the functions these assemblies serve as forums for learning, deliberating, and, ultimately, deepening citizen engagement with the decisions that govern their lives. These virtues are observable in the ambitious recommendations made by Ireland's citizens'

assembly, which influenced the government's 2019 Climate Action Plan. However, while the plan endorses – to varying degrees – some of the measures proposed by the assembly (such as accelerating the uptake of electric vehicles and expanding renewable energy micro-generation), it notably passes over the more redistributive recommendations (in particular, taxes on Ireland's disproportionate agricultural emissions).² The outcome questions the capacity for citizens' assemblies to effectively counter the entrenched structures of political economy that shape the climate question in Ireland as elsewhere.

That is not to say that citizens' assemblies should simply be bestowed with national-level legislative responsibilities. It would prove difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile such responsibilities with the legitimacy of a small, randomly selected body of citizens. Neither is it to say that citizens' assemblies should not be used, full stop. It does, however, problematise citizens' assemblies as a mechanism to address the climate crisis.

FOCUSING ON THE STATE

The predicament of state power may be understood through two observations. First, the efficacy of citizens' assemblies depends on the degree to which governments buy into

them as a transformative process. This has significant implications throughout, from what is on the agenda to how the issues are framed to the uptake of recommendations. And second, despite their perceived autonomy, citizens' assemblies may be used strategically by those in positions of power to distance themselves from difficult decisions or to pacify discontent without committing to real change. Rather than offering a solution to the democratic deficit, citizens' assemblies may thus offer an alibi to governments that wish to appear to democratise climate action but are in fact reluctant to take meaningful steps.

Nation-states hold the power to drive radical decarbonisation, but currently, this change is nowhere in sight. The state must itself first transform to facilitate greater public scrutiny of and control over the economy and its post-carbon transition. Any project of democratisation presupposes a certain decentralisation to subordinate political authority and shape the economy according to the needs of individuals and communities. This is more likely to come as a result of pressure from large-scale social mobilisation than advisory deliberative forums.

In this sense, rather than positioning themselves as “beyond politics”, eco-social movements would be better advised to focus

² Clodagh Harris (2021). “Democratic innovations and policy analysis: climate policy and Ireland's Citizens' Assembly (2016-2018)”, in John Hogan and Mary Murphy (eds), *Policy Analysis in Ireland*. Bristol: Policy Press.

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on the necessarily messy occupation of *enlarging* politics. That means breaking down the institutional and ideological divides which keep capitalism beyond the reach of democratic control, and building support both within and outside of the state (though always with the goal of its ultimate transformation). Rather than shying away from politics, what is needed is an effective, persuasive alternative to exploitative and growth-centred neoliberal politics.

While citizens' assemblies represent a form of participatory capacity building which should not be underestimated, so long as they are not established to transform the logic of the state, their potential will remain limited. Ireland's citizens' assembly shows that an informed public would savour the opportunity to instigate real change. Despite their shortcomings as an instrument of democratic reform, they offer an instructive lesson for framing the political struggle of tackling the climate crisis.

The high levels of respectful deliberation and informed collective decision-making observed in citizens' assemblies speak to the importance of (approximate) equality as a precondition for effective participation.³ Regardless of factors such as race, gender, or class, all members are equally valued and given an equal opportunity to listen, speak, and participate. They have equal access to information, educational resources, and opportunities to interrogate experts. Every interest or opinion is considered. These are the necessary conditions for a fair and functioning participatory democracy, and they should inform the strategic objectives of any eco-social alternative.

The fight for a climate response must therefore prioritise the redistribution of income and wealth. Key utilities and public services as well as extractive, polluting, and carbon-intensive industries should be targeted for democratic control in order to secure equitable provision and

³ Matthew Flinders et al. (2016). *Democracy Matters: Lessons from the 2015 Citizens' Assemblies on English Devolution*. The Democracy Matters Project. Available at <bit.ly/3eIR12z>.

accelerate transition. This means demanding political decentralisation and economic re-localisation to empower communities to build their own versions of a just transition while diminishing their dependency on economic centres. Once this level of agency is achieved, local contexts represent the best opportunity for forums such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, and participatory budgeting. This could help counter the alienating elements of representative politics and address the democratic deficit by opening up political and economic institutions to effective participation.

First and foremost, this means building an intersectional movement committed to non-violent struggle against all forms of exploitation and inequality. It must be prepared to fight within and beyond the state. In this age of protest and pandemic, as injustices are increasingly laid bare, the opportunity to make inter-movement alliances should not be missed. Integral to that process is learning the lessons of respectful deliberation as the basis for effective collective action that addresses the root causes of the planetary crisis.



CALUM McGEOWN

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PROMISED LANDS IN MANFREDONIA

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

PHOTO ESSAY BY
**SOFFIA CHERICI &
FEDERICO AMBROSINI**

In Manfredonia, a small town on the Gargano peninsular in the southern Italian region of Puglia, deep scars have been left on the land and its inhabitants by cultural and industrial colonisation. This is a story of democratic exclusion that began with the building of a petrochemical plant on the edge of the town by state-run chemical giant EniChem in the early 1970s. Through a decades-long struggle for health and dignity, a political community was born. Now that the city's story is being told, democratic movements with a strong environmentalist streak are trying to wrest control of their land from exploitation by organised crime and polluting industries.

IT

This article is available in Italian
on the *Green European*
Journal website.

**TERRE PROMESSE :
MANFREDONIA,
REAZIONI DI
COMUNITÀ DA UNA
TERRA TOSSICA**

Sofia Cherici e Federico Ambrosini raccontano come, per una città italiana, democrazia sia sinonimo di una lotta continua per la giustizia e l'autodeterminazione.

In autumn 1988, a rumour spread through Manfredonia's streets that a ship carrying toxic waste was headed towards the city's port. It was whispered that the ship was to dump its load into the incinerator of the former Anic EniChem petrochemical plant, two kilometres from the city. The Deep Sea Carrier, which had already been turned away from the Nigerian coast, was laden with 2500 tonnes of toxic materials.

The "poison ship" looming on the horizon provoked a violent revolt among the local population. For four days people protested, taking to the streets and building barricades. Then, out of the disorganised protests, something different emerged. As the ship sailed away from the port, the city witnessed the appearance of street rallies, spaces for sharing, and places where people could find a sense of community and belonging.



The Gulf of Manfredonia seen from Monte Sant'Angelo. Jurisdiction over the industrial area next to Manfredonia belongs to the town, located almost 17 kilometres away.

Manfredonia's main square became an agora. Under the steady gaze of the San Lorenzo Maiorano Cathedral, tents were erected and an information hub set up. Between them, the teachers' tent and the fishermen's tent began raising awareness of what was happening in the Gulf of Manfredonia. Locals finally lifted the lid on the danger posed by the petrochemical plant, a state-run facility that had operated on the edge of the city since 1971.

Inside the tents, people talked about how the plant's production processes contaminated land and sea. They found out about the 1976 arsenic leak, long concealed from locals. They recalled the pungent smell of ammonia that, one day in August 1978, had seeped into people's homes, forcing the whole city to temporarily flee the area.

And so the vivid stories of Manfredonia's recent history began to make sense within the collective consciousness: they told of a loss of control of their own land, colonial industrialisation imposed from on high, and environmental injustice born from political exclusion.



Contrada Pace - Sheep grazing next to the industrial area.

BREAD, TOMATOES, AND DUST

When she was small, Raffaella used to sit on the balcony eating bread and tomatoes: from the seafront apartment building, she could see the Adriatic stretch to the horizon. On the Sunday morning in 1976 when the scrubbing tower exploded and a roar erupted from the EniChem plant, she was 12 years old. As the plume of white smoke and dust split the sky in two, Raffaella abandoned her plate and scrambled inside to get her parents. From parts of the city, a yellowish cloud was seen engulfing the landscape: it stuck to clothes, stained the streets, and coated the shoreline.

Arsenic is an adhesive, odourless powder that does not break down in the environment. It is carcinogenic, even in small doses. That day, at least 10 tonnes of arsenic fell on Manfredonia. After the explosion, the company said that the cloud was just water vapour and asked a team of workers to clean up the area; there are tales of men covered in residue, brushing arsenic off their skin and clothes with their bare hands.

For many, 1976 was year zero. That year, the make-up of the land changed; a spiral of events began that made the area toxic, increasing the cancer mortality rate and the number of birth defects in the local population. For 20 years, the plant's operations led to a series of toxic leaks, including the ammonia release of 1978. Subsequent

investigations also revealed that industrial waste was dumped illegally on land and at sea. During the years in which the plant was operational, Michele, the last in a line of fishermen, remembers a strange, stringy alga that appeared on the seabed. Excessive algae is a classic symptom of eutrophication, a sign of damage to an aquatic ecosystem, usually caused by the release of detergents. “I’d never seen anything like it: the algae wasted away in your hands [...] when the plant closed in 1994, the algae disappeared.”

Understanding of the plant’s impact on residents’ health and the environment grew slowly, and only in the years following the protests in 1988 and 1989. Too late it was realised that the many cases of lung cancer and cardiovascular disease, especially among plant workers, were symptomatic of a larger epidemic of ill health. As local people got sicker and sicker, the fraud that was the petrochemical plant, originally sold to residents as a cure for chronic economic deprivation, became ever clearer.

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ECONOMIC BLACKMAIL

Twelve years separated the 1976 arsenic leak and the 1988 protests. Twelve years in which locals “put up with the plant out of desperation for work”. Manfredonia’s story is also Italy’s story: when the plant opened in 1971, Italy’s economic miracle was still underway, as was its national industrialisation policy. Local people were denied a choice because the industrial plan was presented as the key to post-World War II economic recovery. To the residents of Manfredonia, there was no mention of health or environmental risks; the reality was hidden, robbing citizens of their right to make informed decisions.

“Like many stories of environmental injustice, the arrival of the plant was the result of democratic exclusion. The narrative was that of a big plant coming to a fragile land of misery and migration, and so it was accepted,” explains researcher Giulia Malavasi, who worked on a historical reconstruction of events as part of a 2015 epidemiological



Fisherman Michele Conoscitore explains the problems affecting the marine environment.

investigation conducted by the University of Pisa and commissioned by the municipality of Manfredonia. “The petrochemical plant was imposed from on high insofar as no information was provided on its danger. In 1970, there had been a grassroots fight against an oil-fired power station; the discovery that the Gulf of Manfredonia would be full of oil tankers provoked large-scale protests by residents.” But the petrochemical plant was a choice denied: residents did not react to its construction due to a lack of information and the same economic blackmail that would for many years ensure EniChem public forbearance.

When concerns began to spread, it was the late 1980s. At that point, the facility had already altered the area’s socio-economic structure. It fractured the nature of the local economy, moving it away from fishing and farming, and for the first time, Manfredonia saw the birth of a working class. The disconnect between how workers and activists saw the plant created deep divisions within the social fabric. Initially, some workers took part in the protests of 1988-1989, but when the movement called for the plant’s closure, their support fell away. Plant jobs offered a form of security, but in the end, the promised economic miracle never materialised. When the plant closed in 1994, local people were left with no jobs and toxic land.

INSTITUTIONS UNDER FIRE

At the age of 25, a young Italian teacher in Sardinia boarded a boat bound for “the Continent” – 1970s Italy. She was leaving the island of her childhood to settle on the Gargano peninsular. Ten years later, Rosa Porcu was one of the many women at the forefront of the 1988-1989 protests that laid the foundations for the grassroots movement to take back control of Manfredonia.

She explains that these years were not just about growing civic awareness, but women’s

Historical photos by Mimmo Guerra.

ABOVE: Celebrations during the protests.

BELOW: The Donne di Manfredonia marching towards the EniChem plant.



THE CULTURAL

LEGACY OF

THE PROTESTS

STILL LIVES

ON AMONG

THE LOCALS

awakening, too. Through activism, women stepped out of the traditional roles seen in a 1980s southern Italian town. At the time, Rosa was 35 and teaching in secondary schools. She and some of her comrades from the 1988 movement were part of a research collective on women's freedom and authority. Thanks to this established philosophy, the members of the Donne di Manfredonia (Women of Manfredonia) environmental movement became pioneers in Italian history. Malavasi traces a direct line to more recent women's movements, such as the protests led by mothers in Campania's "land of fires" (a vast area between Naples and Caserta plagued by illegal waste fires) and Taranto's Tamburi district (the neighbourhood that has borne the brunt of dioxin emissions from the Ilva steelworks).

In Manfredonia, Malavasi explains, women became a collective, cross-class political constituency. Rosa remembers women of all ages and social classes taking to the streets, from housewives to teachers. They passed around pieces of paper printed with talking points for starting discussions. Rosa describes it as "a knowledge movement".

For Malavasi, the environmental struggle of 1988-1989 became a democratic struggle when it started spreading information about the petrochemical plant. With the sharing of knowledge, people became aware of institutional collusion: "The movement was born out of a reaction against a politics of compromise and complete distrust in institutions, so we decided to experiment with 'another' politics."

Malavasi describes the manifold reasons why people in Manfredonia still talk of institutional betrayal today: because the plant was under the jurisdiction of neighbouring municipality Monte Sant'Angelo which, perched on the mountainside almost 17 kilometres away, was never interested in the situation; because, for eight years in the 1980s, EniChem dumped its waste in the sea with ministerial approval; because, in 1989, a parliamentary commission exposed



the complete absence of emissions checks by local authorities; and because, after the facility's closure in 1994, the sale of the concession led to the installation of new highly polluting redevelopments on contaminated areas.

Entrance gate to the former EniChem plant.

For two years, citizens organised, taking to the streets around the plant en masse. While rabble-rouser Pino, a technician with environmental and social issues at heart, was running around the city handing out reams of flyers and yelling through loudspeakers, the Women of Manfredonia took their protest to parliamentarians in Rome. Armed with 3000 signatures, they also sought justice for the 1976 accident at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Then, one day at five in the morning, the police cleared the tents out of the main square, and the protest began to run out of steam. Even when, reaching its verdict in 1998, the European court found Italy guilty of breaching the right to receive information, the news went almost unnoticed. Today, almost 30 years after the plant closed, the inhabitants of Manfredonia have been left with contaminated land that has yet to be cleaned up. However, the cultural legacy of the protests still lives on among the locals.



Historical photos by Mimmo Guerra.

LEFT: The protest marches towards the EniChem complex.

RIGHT: The petrochemical plant, now demolished.

THE LEGACY ENDURES

Where the old EniChem plant once stood, today there are only weeds and the white outlines of its foundations. Hidden beneath the concrete slabs and grass is chemical waste that was collected in the first partial clean-up of the 1976 environmental disaster. Malavasi describes how leftover arsenic and culled cattle lie within.

Only 400 metres separate the industrial estate from the Monticchio neighbourhood on Manfredonia's northeast edge. In 1998, the area was declared a "site of national interest" by ministerial decree: it is one of the 40 places in Italy considered potentially contaminated and awaiting clean-up. For years, residents have been trying to bring the danger presented by the area to the attention of the institutions. Rosa and her fellow activists are still fighting for the clean-up to be completed. They have founded Bianca Lancia, a successor to the Donne di Manfredonia. They are the city's living history, encouraging the transferral of collective memory between the generations.

Sociologist Silvio Cavicchia tells of how the struggle which started back in 1988 is not just a mass mobilisation, but also a movement made up of individual behaviour and awareness: "Environmental awareness is a legacy that lives on among the inhabitants of Manfredonia."

In 2016, when locals were asked to vote in a consultative referendum on the construction of a coastal gas storage depot by Energas S.p.A., almost 96 per cent of voters were opposed. In the run up to the referendum, debates on the Energas plant re-opened old wounds and made younger residents aware of the city's history.

In 2019, in the wake of the global Fridays for Future movement, the young people of Manfredonia also took to the streets. They were wearing masks printed with the face of Nicola Lovecchio, a former worker at the petrochemical plant who, with oncologist Maurizio Portaluri

View of the Cava Gramazio district, built on the former quarry of the same name.



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by his side, sued the company in 1996 for exposing him to arsenic leaks that were believed to have caused his lung cancer. Lovecchio died in 1997 but the lawsuit continued, only to be dismissed by the court a few years later. Lovecchio's story was seen as the latest in a long line of betrayals.

Meanwhile, a new environmental consciousness has begun to take hold down at the port. A group of fishermen is working with Legambiente, Italy's leading environmental NGO, to fight marine pollution: they talk of rubbish lining the seabed, microplastics in fish, and the myriad mussel farms clogging up the sea. They give Legambiente the loggerhead sea turtles that get accidentally caught in trawler nets. With their help, the organisation saves on average 150 turtles a year.

Yet despite all the organising and increased awareness, the collective conscience of local residents has been unable to turn the politics of the region around. The question remains: what went wrong?

Cavicchia explains how nepotistic power structures and clientelism are now endemic within institutions, preventing environmental awareness from gaining a foothold. The role played by the mafia in the EniChem affair, and the abusive use of industrial areas, remains little discussed: "Nobody talks about it, nobody wanted to know a thing, not even the prefect or police chiefs. And yet there are piles and piles of documents that prove mafia infiltration." The many threats and cars burned out at the time of the 1988 protests taught people that environmental interests are diametrically opposed to those of organised crime. In October 2019, wiretaps confirming the links between local government and the mafia led to the dissolution of the municipal council for racketeering.

With few alternatives, Cavicchia fears that the clan-based system of power is becoming even more firmly entrenched. Government institutions are mistrusted, and the death of political parties (the early 1990s' collapse of the two giants of postwar Italy, the Christian Democrats and the Communists, left an enduring vacuum in Italian



politics and society) brought a loss of direction for the community. Without a common goal into which its efforts can be channelled, the collective risks wasting its energy. In a land that has lost its bearings, strongholds of community resistance, such as schools or parish churches, can offer new possibilities for social and political change.

Giovanni Furi of the environmental NGO Legambiente releases a turtle saved from accidental capture into the sea.

HOMILIES AT THE GRASSROOTS

On the outermost edge of Manfredonia, Father Salvatore Miscio ministers in the Sacra Famiglia church, a modern building converted into a neighbourhood house of worship. A calm figure, Father Salvatore is a lynchpin of the local community. Together with the archbishop of Manfredonia, the Most Reverend Franco Moscone, he started the Manfredonia rialzati (Manfredonia, pick yourself up) movement. Drawing on the Church's strong roots in the region, they have created a space for discussion and grassroots democracy.

“It’s a bottom-up movement that tries to mobilise people, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, addressing the question of active citizenship to create a new awareness of the public good.” Father Salvatore sees the movement as a possible cure for all the historical and cultural damage that allowed *omertà* (code of silence) and clientelism to take root.



Holy Family Parish
– Archbishop Franco
Moscone in the internal
chapel of the parish.

Through the movement, Archbishop Franco and Father Salvatore talk to local people about the political and social rifts in the region, including the business of cleaning up the EniChem site and municipal collusion with the mafia. Father Salvatore explains that Puglia's Sacra Corona Unita – Italy's “fourth mafia” – is an organisation that feeds on social apathy and “the fear that these criminal mechanisms are unassailable”. The role of the movement is also to resist the creation of a culture in which clans are seen to be closer to the people than the state.

In many regions of southern Italy, Christianity is still a powerful force and places of worship also serve as spaces for communities to mobilise and collectively express themselves. But with their doors closed by the pandemic, the lack of spaces to gather risks favouring the atomisation of society, building walls between individuals and communities.

Environmental movements are also centripetal forces, restoring a sense of belonging and pushing the community to re-assert control over its territory. In Manfredonia, the unfinished business of the clean-up is holding the city back. It also exposes the weaknesses of a social system that residents are struggling to eradicate. After all, for local people, their environmental battle represents a form of liberation from a long-standing legacy of exploitation. For the Gargano region, a sustainable

local economy means taking back control of the land and wresting it away from misuse by organised crime and polluting industries.

In Manfredonia, the environment is first and foremost a political and social problem: it is born out of the mafia culture of *omertà*, indifference to the public good, and clientelist politics. In a context in which institutional forms of power are resistant to change, Manfredonia's civil society has developed new forms of grassroots democracy to fight back.

As they sought environmental justice, the people of Manfredonia were confronted with fundamental questions about their community, questions that went far beyond the EniChem environmental disaster – from the liberation of a group of women in late 1980s Puglia to grassroots democratic demands that continue to this day. A series of human stories tells us how, historically, even in different places and at different times, environmental injustice stems above all from democratic exclusion. In Manfredonia, everything started with the political disenfranchisement of a population forced to give up control over its land until the spectre of a poison ship on the horizon triggered a new, bottom-up democratic struggle – a movement to protect land and life that continues to be passed from one generation to the next.



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The People's Parliament

A Home for European Democracy

More than any other European institution, the European Parliament bears the responsibility for nurturing the development of a truly trans-European citizenry. The path to building this European political and public sphere is riddled with pitfalls, created by both the EU's political ecosystem and national political actors. Past, present, and potential future initiatives are promising, but they must be matched with sufficient political will and ambition.

Having sputtered since French and Dutch voters threw out the European Constitution in 2005, the EU's constitutional process is finally getting back into gear. Joining the fray, the European Parliament is preparing yet another report on the "democratisation of the EU". The report is based on a valid if somewhat obvious diagnosis, according to which the EU's democratic deficit is fuelled by four shortcomings. First, a lack of intelligibility in decision-making, as political responsibilities are diffuse, numerous, and rarely owned. Second, the absence of a common European public sphere. Third, a lack of community spirit and a

common European approach, exacerbated by an assertive European Council and increasingly intergovernmental approaches. And finally, a lack of legislative power for the Parliament, impeding its capacity to steer the political direction of the Union.

The European Parliament's usual efforts to deepen European democracy consist of enhancing its powers of initiative, budget control, and oversight. These have been the underlying themes of its reports over the years, and are likely to remain so. Like every institution, the European Parliament fights for increased centrality within its political ecosystem.

If its solutions for more democracy at the European level

sound repetitive, it is because the European Parliament has always been an "agent of federalism", driving for a more political and integrated Europe.¹ Until the late 1980s, most of its members were committed federalists, epitomised by Altiero Spinelli and the "draft treaty" for a politically integrated Europe adopted in 1984. Even after proportional and direct elections denied the federalists their cultural majority, this detailed blueprint and its author remained a source of federalist inspiration, as seen in the 2010 cross-group Spinelli Group initiative.²

POLITICS TAKES OVER

Ever since its inception and particularly after gaining a direct democratic mandate, the European Parliament has continuously fought for a larger share of the European decision-making process. Throughout the 1970s, like any young parliament it focused on budgetary matters, gradually carving out the right to oversee, amend, and reject part and eventually all of the then-European Community's expenditure. Prepared to confront impervious member states, the European Parliament rejected the budget as a whole in 1979 and 1984. Since then, the procedure has grown more sophisticated and less prone to deadlock, but the Parliament's will to oppose member states has also lost some of its sharpness.

1 Martin Westlake (1994). *A modern guide to the European Parliament*. London: Frances Pinter.

2 Named after one of the EU's founding figures, Altiero Spinelli, the Spinelli Group brings together politicians and citizens who support a federal future for the European Union.



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From the 1986 Single European Act to the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, the Parliament grew to become a fully-fledged co-legislator across all common policies, on equal footing with the European Council. Moreover, European law-making evolved to emphasise its procedural role, to the extent that it now attracts growing droves of Brussels lobbyists. But while its powers were increased, its political legitimacy remained uncertain, dented by three major historical trends. First, until an upswing in 2019, turnout at European elections was steadily declining.³ Participation in many of the EU's newer Eastern members was particularly low. Second, national parliaments continued to enjoy higher status in political and career terms. Third, the culminating crises of the 2010s (financial, migration, Ukraine, Brexit) saw the Council inexorably rise to dominance in the EU institutional order.

The European Parliament's status as a political oddity within an unfamiliar institutional order that is barely understood, let alone covered, by national media outlets makes its task of establishing political legitimacy even more difficult. In addition, the poor behaviour of certain members has repeatedly

damaged its reputation, from the outright corruption of the 2011 "cash for influence" scandal to its general permeability to corporate interest representatives (lobbyists). Certain political animals did thrive in this environment, succeeding in raising the Parliament's political profile with their charismatic presence, pan-European appeal, and impassioned plenary speeches. But when it came to politically decisive moments, particularly moments of crisis, even its figureheads were unable to move the Parliament centre-stage.

marker of the slow erosion of the Parliament's political centre. The traditional ruling bloc of the centre-left and centre-right operating in concert is now challenged internally by the Liberals, to the left by the Greens, and to the right by a new strand of the nationalist radical right. This has paved the way for a potential reintroduction of a Left-Right divide that the grand coalitions had completely watered down.

However, a more political European Parliament will not necessarily be a stronger one. At the peak of its institutional influence, when it imposed

EUROPE IS STILL ABOUT POLICIES, YET IT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY ABOUT POLITICS

Things are changing for the better, however. The crises of the 2010s (and early 2020s) may have cast a shadow over the Parliament, but they also made national political debates more European. This was clearly demonstrated by the 2019 elections – fought more on European issues, and with a turnout not seen since 1999. Of course, Europe is still about policies, yet it is becoming increasingly about politics. The 2019 elections were also a clear

the "Spitzenkandidat" system – the requirement that the Commission president have an electoral mandate of sorts – on a defiant Council, the Parliament was governed by a stable and disciplined majority coalition tied to supporting the Commission. Left/Right or government/opposition-style divides might help make the European Parliament more intelligible to the public and the media – and therefore enhance its democratic legitimacy –

³ Paul Craig and Gráinne de Búrca (2015). *EU Law: Text, Cases, and Materials* (6th ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

but, paradoxically, they could weaken its hand in the European institutional balance.

BRINGING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY TO LIFE

This apparent trade-off between democratic legitimacy and institutional clout should encourage us to think outside of the box when it comes to European democracy. If the EU is a *sui generis* political construction, as is often argued, do we really want the same kind of politics at the European level as we have at the national level? Should we seek a transformation of the EU into a more recognisable parliamentary system? Would that not risk weakening or

EU politics aficionados. It is likely that elements of these reforms will also find their way into European electoral law. But whatever the future of these institutional fixes, making our political system more European depends, above all, on making our political lives more European, too. Here, practices are more important than legal provisions.

A unique trait of the European Parliament is that it creates Europeans. Through an interesting phenomenon of acculturation, its members, even the most rabid Eurosceptics, truly become more European. Of course, European does not necessarily mean pro-EU but, significantly, even the

The first proposal – political – would be to strengthen the connection between the Parliament and the Commission. Currently, in order to flex the powers afforded it by the Lisbon Treaty, the European Parliament ritually sacrifices one Commissioner-nominee every five years during intense and dramatic hearing procedures. But it could go much further. Next time around, the European Parliament could reject nominees if they do not hail from its ranks. Rather than have Commissioners owing their jobs to their personal and political ties with the capitals, it would force governments to send their potential nominees to face the voters. For politicians, parties, and voters, there would then be more at stake come the European elections.

The second idea – institutional – would be to find a creative way to reinstate the European Council into the democratic order of checks and balances. The ambivalent role of a body assuming both political leadership and legislative prerogatives has blurred the separation of powers at the EU level. National governments alone have any level of control over the Council, and this only applies in countries where parliaments play a central role. If German, Dutch, Danish, or Finnish leaders are tightly bound by their parliamentary mandates when negotiating at a European level, elsewhere this control is much looser.

IN A MANNER UNIQUE AMONG THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS, THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT IS THE PLACE WHERE EUROPE IS MADE

even losing the originality of the European Parliament?

At some point, treaty changes will most likely grant the Parliament much-needed rights to legislative initiative and greater budgetary powers, so it makes sense to keep demanding them. Another well-established debate surrounds making European elections more European in outlook. The merits and demerits of transnational lists, continental constituencies, the dual proportionality system, and European parties have been discussed at length among

nationalists have adopted a transnational dimension to their views and strategies. The ongoing reorganisation of Europe's radical right in the wake of Viktor Orbán's departure from the centre-right European People's Party is proof of this trend. This is a key strength of the European Parliament: it is a factory for Europeanisation.

In this spirit, there are three avenues to explore to bolster both the democratic legitimacy of the EU as a whole and the political relevance of the European Parliament in particular.

*MAKING OUR
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DEPENDS, ABOVE
ALL, ON MAKING
OUR POLITICAL
LIVES MORE
EUROPEAN, TOO*

In some cases, it is absent: in presidential France or illiberal Hungary, European policy is conducted more or less unchecked.

What is needed is oversight of the Council that upholds the interests of Europe as a whole. Here, the European Parliament could invest more time and energy in cooperation with national parliaments. This has so far proven disappointing, but one option to explore would be giving the specific organ common to the European Parliament and the parliamentary chambers of EU member states (currently known as COSAC) a joint mandate for overseeing the European interest within the Council. The European Parliament would thus become the place where national and European democratic legitimacies, instead of competing, converge and inform each other – bringing a European perspective to national parliaments while reminding MEPs that they cannot claim a monopoly on European affairs.

The third and final reflection – citizen-based – would be to make the European Parliament a real home for Europeans. In one of his last interviews before his tragic accidental death in 2008, the distinguished European and Polish historian Bronisław Geremek, who sat as an MEP from 2004, confessed that it had taken him a few years to grasp the specificities of the parliament he was sitting in. While at first glance

it had appeared to be a somewhat limited oddity when compared to its national counterparts, Geremek eventually found the European Parliament to be the place in which citizens actually and physically form the European civic body.

To reconnect with this function of channelling the European spirit, the European Parliament should do its utmost to organise European debates and embody the much-needed yet sorely lacking European public sphere. The now extinct Agora initiative that the Parliament ran from 2008 to 2013 was a pioneering experiment in European direct democracy that developed recommendations on pressing issues such as poverty, youth unemployment, and the climate crisis. And the growing number of citizens' assemblies across Europe provide many more lessons to draw from. The European Parliament could set about making these experiences more systemic by organising forums all over the continent – gathering European citizens and giving them the chance to devise the policies that they wish to see

take shape, without the usual mediation of party politics. In this spirit, the Conference on the Future of Europe – an EU initiative running from 2021 to 2022 that promises to directly involve citizens – could become the first of many exercises in participatory democracy.

Democracy is but a conversation between citizens. More than just institutions and electoral rituals, it is the feeling of sharing the same space; a sociological process bringing together the many into one shared community. In the absence of a continental demos and “democratic infrastructure” to use Jan-Werner Müller's terms, namely a European public sphere and European political parties, what more adequate place than the Parliament to have this conversation?

Stepping into its fifth decade as a democratically elected body, the European Parliament may well be feeling the bite of a midlife crisis. Instead of simply complaining about the powers it lacks, it should take inspiration from its achievements so far. In a manner unique among the European institutions, the European Parliament is the place where Europe is made. This might be its most important contribution to the history of the European project: providing the conditions to foster, nurture, and deliver nascent European democracy. By inviting the citizens in. ■

DEEPENING DEMOCRACY

THREE THINKERS

There is a prevalent understanding of democracy that narrowly equates the idea with elections and civil liberties. Green politics has always sought to raise that bar, pushing the limits of the way we think about and do democracy. What is the role of the individual in politics? What do we perceive as political (and therefore open to change)? If democracy is indeed the best way to organise politics, could its principles guide other areas of life too? These are among the many questions that three thinkers – Hannah Arendt, Elinor Ostrom, and David Graeber – sought to answer. While by no means all “green”, they have each inspired political ecology thinking and practice, providing vital clues on how to build a more democratic future.

HANNAH ARENDT

The Political Animal in the 21st Century

ARTICLE BY **JORGE PINTO**

Disillusioned with the representative democracy that had allowed the rise of national socialism, and inspired by the Ancient Greek polis, political theorist Hannah Arendt firmly believed in the power of direct democracy to enable true political freedom. While this model seems a far cry from reality today, her work can shed light on the reinvigoration of democracy at a time of corroded trust in political institutions, an emboldened far right, and ecological breakdown.

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was undoubtedly one of the most interesting thinkers of the 20th century. Born into a German-Jewish family, Nazi terror forced Arendt to flee her home country in 1933, and she went on to apply her philosophical knowledge to understanding the political and historical events of her time. By no means a green philosopher, or even a forebear of ecological thought, Arendt has nonetheless influenced many Greens. Her work on civic participation and civil disobedience – important to both ecological thinking and practice – may inspire the urgently needed discussion on the future of democracy on an ecologically sustainable planet.

Arendt saw in civic participation an essential condition not only for the safeguarding and promotion of the common good, but for one's fulfilment as a human being. The preservation of democracy was therefore based on the preservation of civil liberty, which could only be ensured by direct participation in common matters – the human being transformed into the political animal it must be in order to fulfil itself.

It is important to distinguish the Aristotelian branch of republicanism followed by Arendt from the more popular neo-Roman branch. While the former sees participation as intrinsically good and is, consequently, sceptical of representative democracy and the state, the latter argues that civic participation is important but only as a way to secure independence from arbitrary or uncontrolled power, whether this lies with others (individual citizens, groups, or companies) or the state. Applications of Arendt's approach to life today thus meet the additional challenge of having to reckon with how far current societies find themselves from the Ancient Greek polis she so deeply admired.

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Another area of Arendt's philosophy on democracy is civil disobedience. For Arendt, civil disobedience was a matter of politics, not of conscience or morality. She was critical of Henry David Thoreau, a prominent 19th-century essayist and proponent of civil disobedience: despite potentially having good reasons for refusing to pay his taxes, and thus disobeying the law, he did so on the grounds of morality and conscience. As Thoreau put it, a citizen shall not "resign his conscience to the legislator". Arendt rejected this approach as individualistic. Conscience is "unpolitical", reflecting one's own beliefs rather than a concern for common justice. By prioritising individual conscience, Thoreau made civil disobedience an individual matter; Arendt, in contrast, claimed that civil disobedience must be a collective matter.

Rather than conflicting, these two approaches to civil disobedience can in fact be complementary. This indeed seems to be the case in present acts of civil disobedience with an ecological dimension, such as the ZAD (Zone to Defend, from the French, *zone à défendre*) occupations, where conscientious disobedience meets political disobedience. Objection, either as a matter of conscience or as a common political action, becomes a way to bring together citizens with the same end goal.

However, as Arendt herself acknowledges, civil disobedience alone is not enough. Defending and promoting liberty and democracy demands positive action in favour of (and not just against) something. This kind of civic participation would serve two purposes. The first: the realisation of the citizen as political animal, or *zoon politikon*, to use the Aristotelian term. And the second: an expression of concern for the common good, ensuring shared freedom and a democratic society. Participation is, then, both intrinsically important for oneself and instrumentally important for ensuring democracy and freedom.

Citizens, according to Arendt, should go beyond private interests to act together in favour of the common good. They express their citizenship by being part of *vita activa* (active life) and through involvement in deliberations about what is best for their society. Participation can take multiple forms, such as being active within civil society organisations or NGOs. While Arendt was perhaps too strict in her separation of public and private spheres, and of course preferred direct to representative democracy, her theory nevertheless offers clues about improving democracy and representation.

What can be gleaned from Arendt's work in the 2020s, marked as it is by overlapping ecological, social, health, and democratic crises? Arendt esteemed the Greek polis and its

direct democracy, but is abandoning the state and representative democracy really necessary? At present, such a scenario seems little more than an academic exercise in imagination. But that is not to say that we should shy away from reviewing how representation operates, and how citizen participation can be improved and extended.

Despite Arendt's scepticism, the state plays an important role in addressing the need for more democracy and participation. This becomes particularly crucial in times of ecological breakdown, where coordination at a level above the local is imperative. The state is also essential for dismantling the structural barriers to participation and empowering citizens by creating forums and providing education and resources.

There is at least one path which offers a way to reconcile both direct and representative democracy, and public and private concerns: citizens' assemblies. These assemblies can be either a permanent body working with the chamber of elected representatives or a one-off exercise tasked with specific objectives. Their participants are selected at random, akin to the sortition that was common practice in Arendt's cherished Ancient Greece.

A number of questions emerge when defining citizens' assemblies: if permanent, what should be the duration of the mandate? If temporary with a fixed objective, who can call for the creation of an assembly – the state alone or citizens too? And, most important of all, what degree of power should be awarded to the assemblies? Should they be able to legislate, nominate or reject ministers, or manage part of the public budget? All these questions speak to the flexibility of the concept. Citizens' assemblies offer a means to bring citizens together in deliberation. Essentially, they are a deeply republican tool and promise to foster democracy, participation, and a sense of civic duty. Going beyond Arendt's public-private separation, such assemblies could give citizens a space in which to discover that private concerns can also be communal, and devise ways to address them that respect both their private and public nature.

While citizens' assemblies would not fully respond to Arendt's desire for direct democracy, they have the potential to powerfully deepen participation. Arendt is not a guide to be followed blindly, but her republicanism can serve as inspiration to address the multiple challenges of the 21st century. Faced with struggling democratic systems and ecological collapse, increasing participation and empowering citizens could be a crucial way to preserve liberty and defend the common good. ■



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ELINOR OSTROM

The Case for a Messy Federalism

ARTICLE BY **ADAM OSTOLSKI**

An inspiration to green thinking, the political economist Elinor Ostrom's work is dedicated to understanding how to manage resources and institutions democratically. In studying real-world alternatives to state control and organisation via the market, she urges us to expand the notion of what democracy means.

If we want to avert catastrophic climate change, who should act first: governments, corporations, or individual consumers? Does it make sense to move forward with emissions cuts if others do not also make haste? How best to encourage the healthy circulation of information with so many threats looming large, from "fake news" and the decline of professional journalism to state and corporate censorship and the threat to privacy posed by surveillance capitalism? How best to unite Europe? Should we transfer more power to the federal level or be flexible and accept more opt-outs, be this a necessary evil or an unwelcome blessing?

In facing such questions, central to the political skirmish of our times, there is much to be learnt from Elinor Ostrom (1933-2012). In 2009, the American scholar was famously the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences "for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons". Elinor, together with her husband, Vincent Ostrom, one of the central figures of new institutionalism, would describe herself as a "political economist". As Derek Wall, the author who helped establish Ostrom as a green thinker, points out in *Elinor Ostrom's Rules for Radicals*, political economy as practised by Ostrom differs from the usual understanding of the term. Rather than studying economic growth, monetary policy, or state budgets, she focused on how shepherds in a Swiss village protected their grazing lands, or how villagers on the Turkish coast resolved their fishing conflicts. (This is not about scale – Ostrom was also interested in global commons, such as the climate or the internet.)

A distinctive feature of Ostrom's scholarship was uncompromising empiricism. What is true in practice should not be declared impossible by theory, she claimed. When she started researching the commons, the dominant theory was that commons are doomed to fail. Humans are intrinsically egoistic, driven by self-interest even at the expense of others. If cheating goes unpunished, they are certain to cheat.

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To ensure compliance, one needs either the fear of punishment (state control) or the promise of profit (market incentives). And yet, as Ostrom noticed, there were numerous cases of commons that worked and were sustained over long periods of time. How was it possible?

By studying dozens of communities built around different commons, Ostrom revealed a set of eight (provisional) rules that were in place in most cases of successful commons and absent where efforts failed. Humans are indeed egoistic, but they can also communicate, negotiate, build trust – and, most importantly, learn from their mistakes. Commons can be subject to “social dilemmas”, but they are not condemned by them. Ignoring the risk of free riding when designing a policy or an institution would be myopic, but neglecting the potential for cooperation could be even more disastrous in the long run. Several decades of reforms based on simplistic assumptions about people as “rational actors” who only care for themselves have left us with institutions that are anything but rational.

The climate, the future of Europe, and the digital world are some of the central topics for green politics today. Both in their consequences and dynamics, they are in different ways dilemmas for and about democracy. Where Ostrom’s approach may be most useful is in offering ways of thinking that can help solve them, collectively.

In the realm of climate policy, Ostrom offered a polycentric approach. Polycentrism is a form of society that is not dependent on unity of power for its coherence. There are many “units”, autonomous, but taking others into account, joined by relations of cooperation, competition, conflict, and conflict resolution. When compared to its opposite, monocentric hierarchy, polycentric systems may seem a bit “messy”. According to Ostrom, however, such messy structures are better suited for public utilities, democratic legal orders, and the production of scientific knowledge.

What does this mean for climate policy-making? Coping with the climate crisis is not an either-or situation: either governments or individuals, either companies or consumers, either a global deal or mushrooming urban-level experiments. Any global solution needs to be backed by changes in local policies and individual behaviour; any local or national change needs to be embedded in global cooperation to prevent “leakage”.

Her research on successful commons led Ostrom to suggest an important point: that the focus should be not on the costs but the shared benefits of transition at any given level. For a household, going greener can mean lower heating bills; for a city, cleaner air and healthier people; for a nation-state, lower dependence on energy imports and an impulse for innovation; for the European Union,

an opportunity to reinvent its regional cohesion policy and further integration between its members. Far from distractions, such collateral gains are at the heart of making climate policies feasible – and more democratic. Otherwise, climate transition would be construed simply in terms of costs and the apparent inaction of “free riders” could thwart any incentive for change.

Polycentric systems are also more flexible and thus better able to adapt to changing circumstances. They have been at the core of American federalism. And although, as Ostrom herself repeatedly warned, designing sustainable institutions is more about attuning to the context at hand than imitating what has worked elsewhere, the idea of polycentrism can also help us illuminate – and better appreciate – the European experience of integration.

Ostrom’s approach can be applied to knowledge and information, central challenges for democracies today. Conclusions are not as clear as for climate policy, but the analytical frameworks created to make sense of natural commons and polycentric systems provide a fresh perspective. Knowledge as a commons is, writes Ostrom in a text co-authored with Charlotte Hess, prone to the very same threats as natural commons: commodification and enclosure, pollution and degradation, as well as unsustainability. It is, moreover, vulnerable to what they call the “tragedy of anti-commons”, the yoke of excessive intellectual property rights. Since the 1990s, the internet discourse has shifted remarkably. Once seen as the cornerstone of democracy in a networked world, today the internet is more often perceived as jeopardising the democratic process. For Ostrom, however, the digital commons may be the democratic alternative to monocentric hierarchies (what we now call surveillance capitalism). Digital commons need to be well designed and properly protected, with good attention to detail. There is no ready-made solution. One hint, though, seems obvious: better to institute a workable system of conflict resolution than seek to resolve all conflicts with one set of rules.

For Ostrom, commons are no silver bullet. In some cases, the state or the market may indeed be more fit for purpose. Moreover, the outcome of commons may be good or bad, sustainable or unsustainable. But all of us who believe that the renewal of democracy starts with the way we organise labour and economic activity will find in her research something more precious than uplifting stories. We will find a set of tools to understand how commons can work and why they sometimes fail. ■



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DAVID GRAEBER

The Power of the Imagination

ARTICLE BY

AARON VANSINTJAN

David Graeber (1961-2020) was an American anthropologist, activist, and social movement intellectual. His insights on the imagination and the practice of democracy have inspired many not just to see the world differently, but to seek to change it.

For almost every important political moment in Western Europe and North America over the past 20 years, there was an article or book by David Graeber that could be said to have helped define it.

Written in the early 2000s, Graeber's essays on the alter-globalisation movements circulated so widely in activist circles that they had been made into a clandestine compilation and translated into several different languages before he was able to print them as a book. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, published in 2011 while Graeber was active in the Occupy movement, has since become a touchstone for anyone interested in learning about economics. And almost everyone seems to have heard of "bullshit jobs" without necessarily being able to name Graeber as the author of the 2013 essay that coined the term.

How did he do it? What insight allowed Graeber to capture the moment and articulate what so many felt but were afraid to think, let alone say? How did his work lead readers to a new understanding of democracy and the possibility of working together to change the world?

Graeber's commitment to the power of the imagination was a driving force behind his work and one of the reasons why it resonated with so many people. It was his sense of wonder and intimate knowledge of how the imagination operates that helped shape his insights on topics as diverse as the nature of democracy, the origins of civilisation, and the meaning of value.

For Graeber, there were two kinds of imagination. The first was "imaginative identification". This refers to the capacity to imagine another's point of view – the foundation of all caring and supportive social relations. The ability to put oneself in another's shoes is necessary for a functioning democratic system: without it, there would be no compromise, no working together towards common goals. Another term he used to describe this was "interpretive labour".

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The second kind of imagination was “immanent imagination”: the capacity to imagine, and to bring about, new social and political ways of being. Graeber asserted that it is this imagination that constitutes the human ability to be political: to decide collectively what we want to do with our lives.

One way to think of immanent imagination is by considering its opposite, “ideological naturalisation”. This refers to the deadening effect of hierarchy and domination, where the mutable social convention is misconstrued as the natural, immutable order of being. Social Darwinism is a classic example. Its proponents assume that “survival of the fittest” is a universal order rather than a recent ideology that serves to justify a political and economic system in which individuals must compete in order to survive.

Graeber was especially interested in the place where ideological naturalisation is manifested in daily lives: alienation. Echoing Karl Marx, he suggested that “if there is anything essentially human, it’s the capacity to imagine things and bring them into being [...] alienation occurs when we lose control over the process”. Working, as so many of us do, “mind-numbing, boring, mechanical jobs” invariably squashes the desire to do things differently. Graeber argued that the problem with capitalism is not just that it is exploitative, environmentally destructive, or unjust – which he agreed it is – but that it depends on immense bureaucracy, which in turn requires a hierarchical social order. It is in this sense, then, that Graeber argued that what may define the Left, and distinguish it from the Right, is its insistence that “creativity and imagination were the fundamental ontological principles” – that is, we can (and should) creatively produce the world and remake it as we wish.

It was also this insight that drove Graeber’s anthropological work. He understood anthropology as a discipline that studied social difference in order to arrive at the politically possible, and he was especially interested in the political structures of Native American groups. Many Indigenous peoples, such as the Plains Indians and Amazonian tribes, had a cultural memory of centralised, hierarchical societies and had intentionally built democratic structures that would prevent a return to these. On many occasions, Graeber pointed out that the encounter

with democratic and egalitarian peoples in the New World encouraged the Enlightenment, deconstructing the myth of democracy as a European export.

His more recent work with archaeologist David Wengrow looks back at the historical and ethnographic research on Indigenous peoples to show that many societies intentionally vacillated between democratic, non-hierarchical structures and hierarchical ones. In so doing, Wengrow and Graeber debunked another myth that characterised pre-modern peoples as “noble savages” who were only democratic because their societies were insufficiently advanced or complex not to be.

For many people, Graeber turned the concept of democracy on its head. Rather than a bureaucratic process that must be engaged in every few years, democracy for Graeber was imaginative, active, and intensely personal. There is no inevitable arc of progress towards more or deeper democracy. Rather, democracy must be fought for, actively built into institutions, protected, and constantly renewed. Seeing how the political and economic system inhibits the imagination can foster a desire for democracy.

Though Graeber rarely touched on ecological concerns, he has without a doubt influenced thinking in political ecology. His work on direct democracy informed the shift towards municipalism, especially in the wake of the 2011 Spanish anti-austerity movement, 15-M. His writing on bullshit jobs breathed new life into the movement for basic income and the radical critique of work, paving the way for proposals such as a reduced workweek, now part of several versions of the Green New Deal. His work on debt and the origin of money spurred interest in radical fiscal policy and modern monetary theory. Democratisation, rethinking work, and transforming the monetary system are now central to post-growth policy platforms.

David Graeber is no longer with us, but his insights into the power of the human imagination continue to inspire us to dismantle and reconfigure the building blocks of reality. In decades to come, we may find that his work has helped us to imagine, and build, a better world. As Graeber wrote: “The ultimate, hidden truth of the world, is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.” ■



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BELARUS'S STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

AN INTERVIEW WITH
PAVEL LATUSHKA
BY **RODERICK
KEFFERPÜTZ**

A former high-ranking government official in Belarus, Pavel Latushka has witnessed President Lukashenko's system of power from the inside. After a sham election triggered widespread protests, he joined the ranks of the resistance to the regime. Now in political exile, Latushka discusses the struggle to keep the Belarusian pro-democracy movement alive, what makes this movement so unique, and the pressing need for Europe to take a stand in solidarity.

RODERICK KEFFERPÜTZ: The Belarusian protests began before the contested August 2020 election but exploded in size after it became clear that Lukashenko had rigged the results in his favour. Can you explain how the democracy movement emerged and gathered momentum?

PAVEL LATUSHKA: Artem Sakov, Dzmitry Popau, Pavel Seviarynets, Aliaksandr Shabalin, Uladzimir Tsyganovich. [pause]

I want to start with these five names. Today, we have 362 political prisoners in Belarus. And as of today, I have decided to begin all my interviews acknowledging their struggle by naming five of them. Europe should know their names.

The rigged election was the first protest trigger. The second was the ensuing mass violence. I remember when the internet was switched off and we had a three-day information blackout. When the internet came back on, I remember receiving all these messages on my phone, showing me videos and photos of massive police brutality. It was horrible.

That's when all of Minsk, all of Belarus decided to take to the streets. The government met these protests with even greater violence. Nine people are estimated to have been murdered over the past eight months. 35,000 people have been arrested and detained. The United Nations has recognised 4600 cases of torture. 500 journalists have been arrested. The list goes on.

Belarusians are angry and feel betrayed. We want our freedom. We are the only country in Europe that has continued to live under a dictatorship.

The movement for democracy in Belarus stands out for two reasons: the prominent participation of women and the involvement of people from the cultural world. Can you explain these two dynamics and what they brought to the struggle?

This is unique for our movement. Three women are the leaders of our protest. They dared to stand up for their husbands, their families, and people close to them. They were the spark that gave others the courage to do the same. I remember seeing these women on TV and I thought to myself: as a man, if my wife is fighting for me, would I fight for her as well? Of course! So, they came to be an example for many men as well.

And as a former minister of culture and director of the National Theatre of Belarus,

I am proud of the people from the cultural arena. More than 600 cultural workers have been repressed [arrested, forced out of their jobs, banned from cultural activities]. Several dozen of them are in jail as we speak. Cultural professionals have been leaders in this protest alongside so many others – students, academics, sportspeople, workers, old and young. They all came together for our nation.

Social media has played a particularly important role in your protest movement too.

Yes. Social media has been our tool for freedom. It has allowed us to reach all kinds of Belarusians, be it via Telegram, Youtube, Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. And the regime understands this. We are in an information war right now. At first, we were winning. Now the regime is fighting back. They have blocked Telegram channels. Today they've taken down our Instagram site, almost all regional media is blocked, and since May any mass media can be taken down by decision of the minister for information. There is no need for a court decision. Any media can also be accused of extremism by decision of the general prosecutor.

I want your readers to understand that civil society has ceased to exist in Belarus. There is no free press, no free speech, no right to protest, no right to start a political party. There is only repression. Belarus is cut off from everything.

9 August Alexander Lukashenko claims a landslide victory, taking him to a sixth term in office.	10 August Protestors denouncing repression and electoral fraud gather in cities across the country. They are violently dispersed by security forces.	14 August From Lithuania, Tsikhanouskaya appeals to the international community to recognise her as the winner and establishes the Coordination Council.	17 August Around 50 journalists are detained in a single day for covering the ongoing protests.	19 August EU leaders discuss the situation in Belarus at the European Council, amid calls for sanctions from international rights organisations.	29 August Around 10,000 women march through the capital Minsk waving flags, flowers, and balloons.	13 September 100,000 people join a rally in Minsk marching to the president's residence, a day before Lukashenko is due to meet Vladimir Putin.	15 September Human Rights Watch exposes the torture and systematic beatings inflicted on hundreds of protestors.	17 September The European Parliament recognises the Coordination Council as the "interim representation of the people demanding democratic change" in Belarus.	2 October EU sanctions target high-level government officials and prominent business backers of the regime.
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Back in September, all of Europe's mass media was covering our huge demonstrations. Today, no information can be found about Belarus.

Indeed, we are still in the middle of a pandemic, news cycles change, and attention is a limited resource. How do you keep this movement alive?

That's the heart of the question. I think the shock factor remains and needs to galvanise action amongst European politicians. This repression on a massive scale and this brutal violence is unprecedented for Europe. Lukashenko has crossed all imaginable lines and standards. He has even given the state a license to kill. He has changed the law to give police the right to use arms against peaceful protesters. There's no stepping back from that and there's no future for him. There cannot be a return to business as usual.

So, there's only one option left: victory. We are fighting and standing our ground. There is a huge emotional potential that lies within the Belarusian people. They are angry, but they are also afraid. We need to be able to protest again and when we do, these protests will be massive. They will decide the fate of Belarus. And the rest of Europe needs to show its support. As a European, I am appealing to Europeans.

How can Europe help?

There are two ways. First, we need effective, short-term sanctions. They need to be effective and have a real influence on the Lukashenko regime. And they need to be short-term because we don't want to ruin the Belarusian economy.

Eight months have passed, however, and there are still no such sanctions. In a recent opinion poll, roughly 64 per cent of Belarusian respondents voted in favour of excluding Belarus from the international payments system SWIFT. This would be the most powerful sanction. If you don't sanction Lukashenko's actions, you are supporting them. The people of Belarus are asking for sanctions. They don't want to continue living under a dictatorship. If you believe that sanctions will push Belarus into Russia's orbit, you're mistaken. That's happening no matter what. In two or three years, under the current course, Belarus will have zero sovereignty left. That's why this is also about the fate of Belarus.

I have sent a public appeal to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, and to this day have not received an answer. The EU is discussing another package of sanctions, but it doesn't matter how many packages of sanctions you discuss and

17 November
100 days after the election, protests continue around the country.

19 November
Lukashenko vows not to hand over power. Human rights group Viasna estimates the number of people detained since August is over 25,000.

9 February
A coalition of NGOs appeal to the EU to take stronger steps, highlighting that 400 journalists have been arrested since the elections.

16 February
Security forces carry out raids on the offices and homes of a number of human rights and media organisations and their staff.

21 April
The National Assembly of Belarus passes several bills allowing for harsher measures against opposition activists and media.

2021

implement, what matters is what's inside those packages. Are you sanctioning unimportant individuals and minor companies? Or are you hitting where it hurts?

I have been told sanctions are not an instrument of influence and that they don't bring results. Of course, there won't be any results if you don't employ proper sanctions. Believe me, I have been in the Belarusian government. We need real, hard sanctions, not cosmetic sanctions.

And then we need an international political conference at the highest level to discuss the Belarusian question.

Thailand, Myanmar, Russia, Hong Kong – all around the world we are seeing protests for democracy and freedom. What do these protests have in common and what differentiates them?

There is one key difference between these struggles. Belarus is within Europe. The Belarusian problem is a European problem. And it is not only a political European crisis; it is a civilisational crisis. What is happening in Belarus stands in complete opposition to the values, human rights, and the right to freedom, which Europe represents. Belarus presents a historical challenge for Europe. ■



PAVEL LATUSHKA

was previously Belarusian minister of culture and an ambassador to several EU countries. In support of striking theatre artists amid protests following the disputed 2020 presidential election, he left the government and became a key figure in the democracy movement, joining the presidium of opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Coordination Council. He now lives in exile in Poland.



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DOWN BUT NOT OUT

CENTRAL EUROPE'S INDEPENDENT MEDIA

ARTICLE BY
KRISZTIAN SIMON

Press freedom is essential to democracy, allowing open debate and shining light on abuses of power. Media in Central Europe have had to contend with declining diversity in the sector, the capture of independent outlets, and the omnipresence of propaganda. Yet some outlets in these countries have proved remarkably resilient, continuing to produce quality reporting despite increased pressure from governments. With sufficient support from readers and the international community, they could form the backbone of an emerging, pluralistic media landscape.

Central European journalism is far from dead. Those who do not believe it need only look at the winners and nominees of the European Press Prize – an award that has become an increasingly significant indicator of journalistic quality in Europe. In 2020, the best opinion piece came from Slovakia's largest daily, *SME*. Beata Balogová, a journalist who participated in the 1989 student protests against the country's unfree socialist regime, described how three decades into democracy, Slovaks again found themselves at the crossroads between freedom and "un-freedom". Her piece called for resistance against politicians who are "hijacking the future" and justifying their destructive measures on the grounds of "protecting the identity of the nation against enemies, enemies they cooked up using the recipes of successful autocrats".

In the same year, *Spięcie*, a joint project between five independent newsrooms in Poland, was lauded by the prize's judges for its efforts to tackle polarisation in Polish society. The participating magazines – situated at different points on the political spectrum, from moderate

conservative to progressive left-wing – together selected a series of topics to cover. However, instead of publishing the articles written by their own staff, they published each other's pieces to confront readers with new, perhaps unfamiliar perspectives to help them burst their filter bubbles. The region's media outlets are also well represented among recent nominations, including *Republica.ro* for highlighting the ingrained tendency for victim blaming (whether in cases of sexual harassment, traffic accidents, or natural disasters) in Romanian society in 2017, Hungarian outlet *Direkt36* for describing how German industry shelters Viktor Orbán's regime from Western criticism in 2021, and the Czech website *A2larm* for analysing what Black Lives Matter means for the Roma minority, the same year.

Powerful journalism in the region is not limited to the prize's shortlists, however. In 2018 in Slovakia, Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová were murdered in retribution for their investigative reporting on criminal organisations, published on the online news portal *Aktuality.sk*. The Bulgarian investigative outlet *Bivol*, the trilingual Baltic investigative website *Re:Baltica*, and cross-border projects like the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network are well known by journalists across Europe. The Oscar-nominated Romanian documentary film *Collective* depicts how

journalist Catalin Tolontan and his team at the sports paper *Gazeta Sporturilor* launched an investigation to uncover how corruption and incompetence led to the deaths of dozens following a fire at a Bucharest nightclub. The hard-hitting report led to the resignation of the health minister – a striking example of how meticulous journalism can make a real impact. While the documentary ends with the sobering conclusion that good journalism alone cannot bring much-needed change to societies, the work of these reporters sends a clear signal to politicians that they cannot expect to get away with everything.

A CLIMATE OF CAPTURE

While there is clearly no shortage of quality journalism, Central Europe's political and economic environment over the past decades has made it increasingly hard for these outlets to find sustainable revenue streams. Many have struggled to obtain sufficient resources to fund the painstaking research required for their reporting, as well as suitably far-reaching distribution channels for their findings. A previous article for the *Green European Journal* describes how the media landscape in the EU's new Eastern member states became increasingly colourful as they began to open up, starting in the early 1990s.¹ Journalists were finally allowed to write more freely, and

1 Krisztian Simon (2019). "Media Capture Central European Style." *Green European Journal*. 31 January 2019.

in new formats that were previously unknown to them. Most media outlets ended up in the hands of large foreign conglomerates. In countries that were geographically closer to the “West” (such as the Visegrad countries: Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary), this meant up to 80 per cent of the market. They were rightly criticised for prioritising profit over journalistic quality, yet today there is some nostalgia for the time of foreign ownership. In Hungary, many journalists argue that foreign companies provided financial stability and effectively sheltered newsrooms from political pressure.

The new millennium brought a number of unfavourable developments due to the lack of post-EU-accession rule of law requirements, an economic crisis, and media market changes triggered by the rapid spread of internet access. In line with the global trend, news media revenues plummeted, advertisers migrated to Google and Facebook, and many previously profitable outlets found their finances in the red. Foreign owners lost interest in the media they had bought over the previous decade (particularly in smaller countries; less so in the relatively large and more robust Polish market). Almost simultaneously, a new breed of authoritarian populist politicians began to show an increased appetite for media control. This led to the emergence of media capture, whereby vested interests applied just enough pressure on independent media to prevent

them from doing their jobs properly, while stopping short of overtly violating their rights.

Instead of jailing journalists or sending hit squads to the newsrooms, governments seeking to tighten their grip introduced higher taxes or disproportionate quality control requirements that diverted journalists from their core tasks. In the meantime, interest groups manipulated the advertising market to assert influence over coverage, or simply bought their way into media outlets. In the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš (businessman and prime minister since 2017) became the biggest media owner after he acquired several leading outlets from foreign owners. The Slovak *SME* found itself temporarily in the hands of the Penta financial group, a company whose corruption scandals the outlet had often reported on. In Slovenia, investors associated with Hungary’s authoritarian populist government started buying stakes in news outlets to help fellow populist Janez Janša spread his message. In Hungary, the entire local and regional press was bought from its former (predominantly German) owners and turned into government mouthpieces. The Polish government has expressed similar aspirations for the “re-Polonisation” of its media landscape.

Advertising is often allocated in a biased way. In Bulgaria and Hungary, the state has become a dominant player in the advertising market, which allows it to financially reward favourable

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coverage and punish those who are critical. In this context, muckrakers, investigative outlets, or those who simply want to contribute to an unfettered public discourse often find themselves struggling to make ends meet.

TAPPING INTO READERS

While the context in which the region's independent media operate is far from healthy, a large proportion of outlets have managed to survive, while some of the journalists who lost their jobs managed to launch new – although usually smaller – projects. There are also some hopeful signs for the future. Quality journalism may well be more resistant than some commentators first thought, and readers could display more willingness than anticipated to support the survival of reliable news outlets. A January 2021 report found that a growing number of newsrooms are looking at reader-generated revenues as a means to sustain their future operations.² This focus on reader support could be an option in the Eastern EU member states as well. The Reuters Digital News Report for 2020 found that the proportion of people who paid for news increased during the pandemic: in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, 10 per cent of respondents said they pay for some form of online news content, with figures at 20 per cent in Poland and 16 per cent in Romania.³

Reader-generated revenues generally take one of three forms: subscriptions (readers pay for access), donations (readers pay to keep the outlet freely available), and memberships (readers have a more active, participatory role). There have already been some sporadic examples of successful reader-supported projects. In Slovakia, a group of journalists who were angered by Penta's takeover of *SME* decided to launch the news outlet *Denník N* (meaning the independent daily). Their launch was supported with an initial donation by a local IT company, but their subscription model turned out to be so successful that in a

² Nic Newman (2021). *Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

³ Nic Newman (2020). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

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short period of time they had accumulated enough revenue to repay the starting capital. While *Denník N* was viewed as a possible role model for the region, most other outlets have been less successful in tapping into their readers' potential. In most countries, membership projects are still in their formative phase and subscriptions have so far failed to achieve comparable success. Donations are more common but come with significant disadvantages: their flows are unpredictable and the amounts a crowdfunding campaign generate are rarely sufficient to sustain a newsroom of more than a handful of journalists. Still, many investigative outlets and left-wing, progressive opinion sites would have found it impossible to survive otherwise.

MEDIA AT A TURNING POINT

The pandemic has been a turning point. The health crisis has made audiences more aware of the vulnerability of independent newsrooms. With the collapse of the advertising market and the closing of newsstands, more and more media outlets asked their readers for support. Moreover, the public health emergency and the immediate threat it posed to the health of their loved ones created a renewed appreciation for outlets working to uncover the truth rather than amplifying the government's manipulated data.

In Hungary, the government of Viktor Orbán took a step that caused widespread shock. It removed the editor-in-chief of the country's largest newsroom, *Index.hu* – the only remaining independent news outlet that was still consumed by conservatives, liberals, Orbán fans, and government critics alike – and planted its people in the management team. This triggered the resignation en masse of almost the entire newsroom staff. The newly unemployed journalists responded by launching a crowdfunding campaign that brought them approximately 40,000 paying supporters. In a country where completely reader-driven online journalism seemed hitherto almost impossible, it allowed them to launch *Telex.hu*, an outlet that successfully managed to employ all of the former staff members



wishing to continue their work. Thus far, this support has proved sufficient to allow the platform to operate without advertising and make its content freely available.

Poland's populist leadership has been keen to copy many of Hungary's moves in its attack on the rule of law, civil society, and independent media. A key tactic is turning the public service media (a form of taxpayer-financed independent media) into some form of ideological, government-controlled outlet, which is often labelled "propaganda" by its critics. In early 2020, Dariusz Rosiak, a popular host of the public service radio Trójka, was laid off, reportedly in response to his participation in programmes broadcast by the government-critical TVN channel and his frequent criticism of Donald Trump. As a result, several of his former colleagues walked out and decided to crowdfund their own media. The campaign greatly exceeded its founders' expectations, and Nowy Świat now has a monthly budget of almost 700,000 zloty (150,000 euros).

FALLING SHORT

These cases demonstrate that donations can sustain media outlets. They have allowed journalists with a proven track record, ousted from their newsrooms in a takeover, to continue doing quality journalism. But it

is hard to generalise from these experiences, as the unprecedented support they received was triggered by the audiences' loss of a valued source of information. It is also hard to anticipate how long this model can last, as donation-driven journalism has a relatively short history, and the evidence so far suggests that crowdfunding donors quickly lose interest. They can be generous when a new project is launched but are less likely to contribute to its continued survival.⁴

Subscription – when access is conditional on payment – is widely seen as a more viable model, currently used by renowned outlets like Slovenia's *Mladina* and Poland's *Gazeta Wyborcza*, among others. But these subscription models are difficult to introduce. In the short term, locking content hurts the pages' search rankings, readership, and advertising revenues. In addition, subscriptions (or "paywalls" as they are sometimes, less appealingly, called) risk keeping valuable content locked away from audiences. At a time when certain countries in the EU have governments or other interest groups investing increased amounts of money and energy into spreading disinformation or propaganda, making factual news only available to those who pay for it is a very dangerous strategy. Politically motivated content (both from captured public service

⁴ Tanja Aitamurto (2011). "The impact of crowdfunding on journalism: Case study of Spot.U, a platform for community-funded reporting". *Journalism Practice*, 5 (4), pp. 429–445.

CENTRAL
EUROPE'S
INDEPENDENT
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NOT BE
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providers and politically aligned private media) then risks becoming the default source of information for anyone who is not willing, motivated, or even capable of buying an unbiased alternative. It risks creating an unbridgeable gap – not just between rich and poor, but also between the “experts” whose job, social standing, or keen interest in politics allows them to seek out the best possible information about developments in public life, and citizens with limited expertise or networks, who may have other interests and duties that make it difficult to identify valuable information hidden behind paywalls. In such a situation democracy suffers. If voters have easy access to manipulated information only, making informed decisions on election day (or knowing where one’s real interests lie) is almost impossible.

A more appealing model adopted by Hungarian video channel Partizán, among others, is the reliance on “freemium” content. The outlet produces talk shows, in-depth interviews, documentaries, and investigations. While the majority of their content can be accessed for free on video-sharing platforms or listened to as podcasts, paying contributors gain access to a range of extras, such as uncut versions of the videos. In some countries, governments have stepped in to mitigate the losses suffered by newsrooms as a result of Covid-19. A good example is the Latvian Media Support Fund, which aimed to help broadcasters as well as print and online publications at a time of immense financial pressure. But in many countries, this kind of support is (or would be) unavailable to critical outlets, given the governments’ open hostility towards them.

Unrelated to the pandemic, the EU provides a certain level of support for investigative journalism that many outlets make good use of, and in previous years a range of private philanthropies provided financial support to outlets carrying out valuable work on the ground. In December 2020, the European Commission presented the European Democracy Action Plan as well as the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan. These were accompanied by the promise to take further steps to improve media pluralism, notably by securing the transparency of state

advertising and helping news media apply for financial support. A related recommendation in 2021 aims to improve the safety of journalists, given that the harassment of, and attacks on, journalists (particularly women) has become another serious problem. These are steps in the right direction, but they may not be enough when newsrooms are constantly shrinking and journalists, especially those outside capital cities, are struggling to do their jobs.

When it comes to the skillset of journalists, many of the independent media outlets in Central Europe, as in Eastern Europe more broadly, are well prepared to help their respective countries overcome the “crisis of democracy”. They are masters of the craft of journalism and enjoy the trust of their readers; they manage to effectively draw attention to governance-related problems and are continually uncovering wrongdoing related to the political and economic elites. Nevertheless, they need the help of European policy-makers, foundations, and responsible citizens to continue to do their jobs, maintain the quality of their reporting, and increase their impact. Support is also crucial to keep the profession appealing to talent from new generations, who currently think twice before accepting an underpaid job at a news outlet with a limited outlook for the future. If this support arrives in time, these journalists, well versed in securing reliable information and fighting off propaganda, can form the

backbone of a new, much stronger media landscape. One in which vital information remains accessible to everyone. Newsrooms are especially vulnerable to being locked inside filter bubbles, the fragmentation of audiences, and the volatilities of the media market. A growing willingness to pay for quality content is a promising sign – it shows that more and more people appreciate quality news production and the pluralism of information. Yet, Central Europe’s independent media should not be abandoned and left to confront all of the malign forces in their respective countries on their own. Considering the financial difficulties of Western media outlets, it is clear that self-sufficiency and certainty about the future remains a long way off for Central Europe’s independent media.



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NEVER FAR

POPULISM AS THE SHADOW OF DEMOCRACY

AN INTERVIEW WITH
NADIA URBINATI

It is time to let go of the assumption that democracy always leads to progressive outcomes. The only certainties in a democracy are the ceaseless shifts in the balance of power as majorities rise and wane, and the constant prospect of change. By its very nature, democracy contains the risk of populism. But our democracies may be less fragile than we think, argues political theorist Nadia Urbinati.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: How has populism changed the way we do politics?

NADIA URBINATI: Each country has its own populist tradition. In Europe, for example, nativism is less prominent than in the United States, whereas nationalism is more prominent in Europe than in the US. But, in my view, the outcome of the trajectory of populism in government – that is, populism in power – is the verticalisation of representative democracy. Down with parliament, up with the executive. It also brings more corruption, because leaders need to secure the support of the various groups they claim to represent and promise to satisfy.

Furthermore, populism introduces an unpleasant new style into ordinary political language that leads to forms of verbal and emotional intolerance in the public sphere towards those who are not regarded as belonging to “the people”. In some countries, this may even translate into violence against both minorities and migrants coming from outside. This exclusionary logic and linguistic practice stifles opposition, and dissent more generally. It means radical majoritarianism and the humiliation of those who are in the minority – culturally and morally, as well as politically. This climate of intolerance can become hard to

manage democratically. It prevents the use of reasoned discussion and deliberation among citizens to help them to define their views or change them.

In *Me the People*, you argue that populism in power remains a democratic form of government operating within the limits of constitutional democracy.¹ In Europe, we sometimes hear that Hungary and Poland have taken definitive steps towards authoritarianism. What is your perspective on this?

If populists in power get the chance to change the constitution, they will change the constitution. Populists want to constitutionalise their majority, which is a paradox, because constitutionalism is normally a way of containing majorities. Instead, you have a strong majority that wants to assert itself in legal terms as the only legitimate people. Constituent power is thus a natural target for populists, as we have seen in several European countries. But that does not mean that the countries in which this happens are no longer democratic regimes. The majority may have become preponderant and even intolerant, but until the leader abolishes elections or the majority-minority divide to declare that there is only one true people, *de jure* and *de facto*, we are still in a form of a representative democracy, however unpleasant.

This “yes” and “no” relationship between populism in power and democracy is always problematic. In the US, the moment Donald Trump declared that the elections had been stolen and mobilised people to storm the Capitol, he became a bridge within democracy to another kind of regime. It was the moment when a democracy could turn. But only once it goes beyond that point. Although Hungary and Poland are hyper-majoritarian, they remain democracies. In Hungary, the national government is dominated by Viktor Orbán’s ruling party, Fidesz, but the opposition is achieving majorities in municipalities and local governments. There is still the prospect of a change in the majority. As long as that possibility remains, it is still a democracy.

The Hungarian emergency pandemic law attracted widespread criticism for suspending elections and referendums. The law was eventually repealed but while it was in place, the suspensions were indefinite. Was that a temporary break with democracy?

Democracy is not a static system. Modern democracies are complex and articulated into procedures, institutions, and social and political intermediary bodies. If you remove or dislocate one internal component of democracy, you do not necessarily change the entire system. We should not forget that the system’s

¹ Nadia Urbinati (2019). *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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connection to society is also part of the picture. All

these layers together constitute a democratic society and system; simply passing a new law or making an unpleasant decision is not enough to kill a democracy.

People are used to saying that democracy is fragile. I would prefer to say that democracy is stubborn in its fragility. Rather than fragile, democracies are elastic and possess an incredible ability to adapt and change. The Cold War made us think that liberal democracy is the only form of democracy, where democracy is popular power by majority rule and liberalism is the limitation of power by civil rights and the institutions protecting them. But this conception impoverishes democracy. Popular power by majority rule cannot exist without public conflict over and open participation in the making of that power. Democracy has political and civil freedoms built in because no majority is final, and people have full liberty to change their minds. Of course, this also means that we have conflicting forms of democracy and less pleasant forms of majorities.

We should stop thinking that democracy is good because of its outcomes. Not everything democracy produces is good, and non-democratic regimes can deliver positive outcomes, as we see in some authoritarian East Asian countries. Democracy works because it is based on the premise that we can reverse decisions and

remove those who make them without needing

to dismantle the entire system. Until there is a suspension of the right to vote, or a suspension of freedom of expression and association, and as long as a political opposition exists and is vociferous, we are still in a democracy.

You have described a kind of “shadow fascism” within populism. What do you mean by that?

Fascism and populism share the overarching idea of the people being one with the nation and the people’s special relationship with the leader, a kind of religious or charismatic relationship – regardless of whether this charisma is real or not.

Fascist regimes were born as populist movements and developed in opposition to pluralism, parliamentarianism, and the fragmentation of leadership. But there is a crucial distinction: fascism does not want to face the risk of losing power and thus fascists abolish elections. Populists do not want to abolish elections and take away the risk of losing. They live for the electoral moment, the counting of the votes. They want to use elections as a celebration of those who are right against those who are wrong. Sometimes they fail and sometimes they win. Of course, there is the risk of crossing the Rubicon as Donald Trump did in January 2020. Populism presents the constant risk of fascism taking power, but is not itself a fascist regime.

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Some scholars explain the rise of authoritarian populism as a cultural backlash from older generations or other groups who feel that their dominance is waning. In the long run, they argue, progressive, democratic alternatives will prevail. Do you agree?

I argue that the possibility of populism lies within representative democracy; it is not something external to it or even simply a result of dissatisfaction. People are always dissatisfied with their governments and mistrustful of the political establishment. After all, cyclical elections exist to prevent the political class from becoming an entrenched elite. In contrast, populism is a way of transforming the institutions and the basic foundations of representative democracy from within. Populism is not a regime in its own right, because it does not have its own institutions and procedures; it is parasitic on democratic procedures and institutions, especially majorities.

Populism sees the majority as the substance of democracy. It is not representation through competing visions or parties; rather the representation of the people as one through its leader. Representation becomes the embodiment of the people in the leader, which means that it is wholly indifferent to accountability and checks. This is more likely to be successful at certain times – especially in moments of crisis for representative institutions.

Populism holds up a mirror to representative democracy. When pluralism isn't working well, mobilising a majority is a response to the dysfunctionality of traditional political parties. It can also be a sign of societal problems that need to be resolved and may thereby open the door to positive change. Jürgen Habermas said that when ordinary working people no longer have an effective advocate on the progressive side, they turn towards leaders promising them what they need. Populism is a reflection of the decline of the Left today and, with it, the decline of a social conception of democracy that makes citizenship more than just a formal right to suffrage. Perhaps populism was different

in the past – there is a more positive story of populism in late 19th-century America, for example. But today, in Western democracies based on political parties and parliamentary forms of deliberation, populism is a symptom of the lack of representation of the middle class, working class, and precarious workers. Instead of discourses on social justice and redistribution, they are attracted to discourses on national protectionism and the exclusion of immigrants and other minorities.

The audience is key to populism. Your book uses the term “audience democracy”. Do we live in audience democracies?

In many countries, yes. When political parties no longer act as a structuring force, the citizenry becomes an indistinct and disorganised public that acts as a judging tribunal rather than a source of alternative political programmes. A citizenry that simply reacts to the words concocted by smart leaders seeking popularity, and that exists as an undifferentiated entity without partisan lines, is a crowd that a leader can easily mobilise. The experience of Italy and many other European countries shows where a combination of weak parties and a loud media that shapes political opinions can lead. The media becomes a substitute for the parties, orchestrating the public. From party democracy to democracy of the public – this is the change in representation that populism brings to the floor.

The outcome is not necessarily negative, however. Podemos is a rather positive example, the Five Star Movement is another (although more moderate and in some ways the heir of the Christian Democrats in southern Italy). But there is also the Lega and Matteo Salvini’s quasi-fascist ideology. Parties in audience democracies present themselves as actors performing according to the public’s likes or dislikes. This is a significant shift. There is no longer a language of politics based on reasoned arguments or ideological framing, but a language of “I like” or “I dislike” with no real discussion. This is not a language of politics; it is a language of aesthetics.

How have countries in the grip of populism managed to break the dynamic?

Many people focus on the conditions and reasons for the success of populists. But the important question now is how we exit from populism. In the West, we see at least two developments that attempt to answer this question.

The first is the classical political party model. In the US, Joe Biden has responded to populism by rehabilitating and rejuvenating the political language of Right and Left, and of social justice. It is clearly different from Trumpist language, but it is also distinct from Obama’s because Biden is reviving partisan discourse and not looking for consensus from moderate

Republicans. The Democratic Party – in part because it has listened to its left wing – is showing that good policies such as investing to create stable jobs are possible even when society is divided.

In Europe we see another model. The European response to populism is about stabilising the European Economic Area by drawing on its long experience of technocratic decision-making. As Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Christopher Bickerton have shown in their book *Technopopulism*, there can be a conjunction between populism and technocracy.² Not the demagogical and movement-based populism, but instead a kind of populism that wants to tame the myth of the unity of the people against parties using technocratic governance. Examples include Emmanuel Macron's France and Italy under Mario Draghi. They promise to unite the people through a form of decision-making that is declared to be neutral and objective, with its outputs subject to measurement, monitoring, and evaluation. Economists and bureaucrats are to be the judges of success, not parties or partisan ideas. Technopopulism relies upon leadership rooted in governance and sets out to speak to the people with the assurance that its decisions are expressions of data, independent of views of justice. But the problem with technopopulism is dysfunctionality, not injustice.

Antonio Gramsci has been a source of inspiration for advocates of a progressive left-wing populism. Would it be fair to say that you interpret Gramsci as rather warning against populism and the domination of individual leaders?

Yes, Gramsci's idea of hegemony has been interpreted in such a way as to transform his words into a theory of the strong leader. This is not Gramsci. Gramsci emphasised the rule of the collective and the party. We can be critical of his Leninist understanding of the party, but he never proposed transforming its logic into that of a leader unifying the people. That is precisely what fascism created: Mussolini created his movement using the rhetoric and myth of national unity against class divisions that brought together different post-World War I dissatisfactions, those of veterans, workers, and peasants. Gramsci opposed all of that. He supported the idea of a society densely populated by intermediaries: with associations, unions, cooperatives, and political parties. It is a rich society, not a simplified one, brought together by the struggle over how to run the country. It is therefore about collective leadership, not individual.

² Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2021). *Technopopulism The New Logic of Democratic Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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How will the pandemic affect the populist dynamic?

The pandemic will lead to a difficult situation. People are getting poorer and poorer. Because they are currently locked inside their homes we do not know the full extent of the problem, but some public demonstrations of discontent are already taking place. As soon as the situation evolves and people can resume their ordinary lives, we will see the extent of their despair. If we do not adopt the mentality of transforming states into public actors capable of providing concrete answers, creating better working conditions, and investing in public services – particularly healthcare and public education – the situation will become very risky.

Can this transformation also be a means to reinvigorate democracy?

I think we have the opportunity to recreate a new kind of welfare state. But it needs to be constructed. We cannot simply give Draghi, Macron, and other technocrats the freedom to do so, using their financial experts, bureaucrats, and scientists to determine what is good for us and what should be done. Democratic citizens are not recipients of policies devised by experts; they are not clients who judge according to the products they buy. The people and organisations themselves need to be brought into the process of participation. Without that, all you are left with is a managerial state.

So far, Biden's United States is a good model of social democratic and ecological sensibility. The state is calling for active participation and decision-making in favour of those who are in untenable situations. Without this political project, populism would be rampant – and by populism, I mean the bad kind. So, there is a lot of room for emancipatory projects, participation, and political imagination. But we need to create the conditions for it, we need to want it, and give value to it. It will not come by itself. Democracy requires people who are ready to act, not simply people who like having a good constitution.

So democracy is as much about the substance as the form?

The Athenian Solon is often considered the father of democracy. After he was elected ruler in 594 BCE, Solon's first act was to free the land by "shaking off the burdens". He cancelled debts, freed the slaves, and gave them land. He then gave the Athenians a new constitution that granted them the right to participate in government. Why? Because he wanted the people to guard against a return to slavery. Though Athens was riven by factionalism, Solon did not want indifferent citizens but rather active participants ready to take sides. Democracy entails participating – that is, taking part and taking sides. The best way to pacify a society is not retreating from politics and handing over responsibility to experts or a single leader, but, in Aristotle's words, "fighting and disputing vigorously for each side against the other".



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AFTER MODERNITY

CITIZENSHIP BEYOND THE NATION-STATE?

ARTICLE BY
**ALEKSANDRA
SAVANOVIĆ**

Increasing numbers of people live and work abroad as non-nationals, while states filter and categorise residents and their rights in ever more complex ways. What does citizenship mean for the millions of people in Europe who are migrants of some form or another? If democracy stays cast in its national mould, the path ahead in the 21st century may be one of exclusion and disenfranchisement. Unless, that is, citizenship can be reimagined.

It is 2074 in post-apocalyptic Europe, and organised human life as we know it has ceased to exist. What remains of the European population is scattered across the continent, living in various communities or tribes. This is the setting of *Tribes of Europa*, a 2021 Netflix series which relies on a rather common trope in science fiction: humanity regressing to its pre-modern form after a catastrophe. The future is imagined as a return to the past. To the literary theorist Fredric Jameson, the paradox of sci-fi is that it reveals that the future is ultimately unimaginable. Its function is therefore “not to give us ‘images’ of the future [...] but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present”.¹

Tribes of Europa, preoccupied as it is with questions of identity and belonging, of group loyalty and divided allegiances, is speaking about the present. It is about the search for a (lost) community – something which, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman observed, we all sense as lacking in the era of “great disengagement”.² Interestingly, this future knows no nations and, more importantly, no nation-states. There are also no other modernist institutions, no modern states, no

1 Fredric Jameson (2005). *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso.

2 Zygmunt Bauman (2001). *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press

citizens, no universal rights, and so forth. It is a world after (or prior to) modernity, in which various historical, social, and political forms exist simultaneously, and where there is no trace of modern secular human universalism. In short, the series uncovers our inability to think about the universality of rights beyond the nation-state.

NATIONALITY = CITIZENSHIP

Scholars Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller argue that nation-states have come to be understood as the natural social and political forms of the modern world: modernity, as they put it, “was cast in the iron cage of nationalized states”.³ What they term “methodological nationalism” reveals this naturalisation of the nation-state as a blind spot of modernity. Understanding national states and societies as naturally given objects of study, and the nation-state model as the only thinkable way of organising politics, produced an analytical separation between “nation” and “state”, and subsequently “nation” and “democracy”. The national framing of modern state-building and democratisation therefore became invisible. Consequently, “nation” was understood as a question of identity and belonging, and “state” as a sovereign system of government in a particular territory. For this reason,

“nationalism appears as a force foreign to the history of Western state building. Instead, it is projected to others [...] Western state building was reimagined as a non-national, civil, republican and liberal experience”.⁴

The modern nation is an “imagined community”, conceived in language rather than in blood, which, although projected into history, was a conscious and deliberate political project.⁵ There were never obvious national communities to which the nation-state naturally corresponded. Each had to be built, often violently, via a painstaking process. However, with the nation being understood as the container of the modern state and democracy, its permanent role in shaping the policies of inclusion and exclusion was put aside. Today, this conveniently forgotten national framing has returned with a vengeance, perhaps as farce, but nevertheless a deadly one.

Following the prescribed Western model, the task of building a viable national culture became a natural corollary of modernisation. As such, it was copied throughout the world during decolonisation and, later, in the transition processes of post-socialist countries. In his book *Nations and Citizens in Yugoslavia*, Igor Štiks proposes the (ethno-)national framing of citizenship and democracy in its

3 Andreas Wimmer & Nina Glick Schiller (2002). “Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences”. *Global Networks*, 2(4), pp. 301-334.

4 Ibid.

5 Benedict Anderson (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

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subunits as a key moment in the disintegration of the multinational federation.⁶ In line with the Western path to modernity, i.e. the transition to liberal democracy and the market economy, the nation was perceived as the only viable framework for democratisation, and citizenship laws were deployed as one of the important means for its establishment. Štikš finds that in almost all post-Yugoslav states, new legislation offered a privileged status to members of the majority nation regardless of their place of residence, and substantially complicated the process of naturalisation for those outside of it.

THE DE-DEMOCRATISATION OF DEMOCRACY

The citizenship regimes of Western nation-states serve a similar function. The central paradox of today's liberal democracies, according to philosopher Étienne Balibar, is that they need to simultaneously “understate and affirm” the equation between nationality and citizenship.⁷ Squeezed between the ubiquitous transnational movement of capital and people on one hand, and the national roots of their legitimacy on the other, liberal democracies employ complex administrative and coercive apparatuses to differentiate between citizens and non-citizens, desirables and undesirables, those who belong and those who are excluded, those that can be “integrated” and those that will remain aliens. Unsurprisingly, the national aspects of citizenship feature heavily in these processes. To become naturalised, and therefore granted political rights, one needs to prove commitment not only to the state, but to the nation, for example by learning the national language and often by renouncing one's previous citizenship.

Nation-building, although obscured by bureaucratic and civic language, remains one of the central criteria shaping the

⁶ Igor Štikš (2015). *Nations and Citizens in Yugoslavia and the Post-Yugoslav States: One Hundred Years of Citizenship*. London: Bloomsbury.

⁷ Étienne Balibar (2008). “Šta je granica?”. *Treći program Radio Beograda*. Br. 137–138, I–III/2008.

naturalisation process. After all, in the majority of European states *jus sanguinis*, the transmission of citizenship status “through blood” from parents to children, is the central practice.

However, the intense globalisation of the last 30 years has called into question the stability of the supposedly autarchic nation-state which conflated citizens, sovereign peoples, and nationals, whereas the advent of neoliberal rationality has weakened the ties of solidarity between members of the national group. During the last decade, the share of non-citizens has risen significantly across Europe, with cases such as Malta (5.3 per cent to 20.1 per cent), Austria (11.8 per cent to 16.6 per cent), Iceland (6.7 per cent to 13.6 per cent), Germany (9.4 per cent to 12.5 per cent), and Ireland (11.8 per cent to 13.0 per cent).⁸ In cosmopolitan cities the ratio is even more striking: every fifth resident of Berlin and Barcelona, and almost every third of Vienna, is a non-citizen.

Along with global economic integration and the emergence of powerful supranational financial institutions, it has been said that these tectonic changes would lead to the decline of the nation-state. However, our contemporary world is more than ever a world of nation-states.

They have proved to be not only compatible with globalisation, but indispensable to it, especially in moments of crisis. The differentiation of social conditions among national economies and the preservation of the exploitable low-cost labour regimes they help maintain are exactly the forces that drive globalisation forward.⁹ It is therefore more accurate to speak about the reconfiguration of nation-states rather than their demise.

To Balibar, the concepts of citizenship and democracy are inextricably linked, yet at its heart, the institution of citizenship carries a contradiction with regard to democracy. As a universal category implying equal rights for all, the modern idea of citizenship contradicts its “really existing” national form. Citizenship as an “eternal idea” suggests a constant move towards the universalisation and conquest of rights. While democracy, inscribed as it is in the nation-state, functions to preserve a certain definition of citizenship and therefore becomes incapable of resisting its “de-democratization”.

This contingent character of citizenship has until recently remained largely invisible because modernity has equated citizenship with nationality, making them practically identical in “the founding equation of the

⁸ Data from 2012 and 2019. Eurostat migration and migrant population statistics.

⁹ Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002). *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London: Verso.

modern republican state”.¹⁰ Demographic changes brought about by globalisation reveal that this equation is historically determined, essentially unstable, and susceptible to destruction and reformulation. They also show that national identity does not necessarily contribute to the unity of the community of citizens.

CLASSES OF CITIZENS

The development of modern citizenship was closely connected to the progressive expansion of rights, both in terms of their quality – from civic to political and social rights – and who were considered their legitimate holders. The neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state model through simultaneous deregulation, privatisation, and individualisation has reversed the developmental direction of citizenship, narrowing the range of social rights and recasting the citizen as the citizen-entrepreneur.

The penetration of neoliberal rationality into the political realm, in the words of political theorist Wendy Brown, “produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a new organization of the social”.¹¹ What she terms the “de-democratization of democracy” implies the extension of market values into formerly non-economic domains, so that

all human and institutional action becomes “rational entrepreneurial action”. In doing so, neoliberalism erases the distinction between moral and economic behaviour and designates morality as a matter of rational deliberation. The state itself transforms, not only responding to the needs of the market but behaving itself like a market actor, pointing to the health and growth of the economy as the basis for its legitimacy. Brown concludes that, taken together, these processes lead to the death of liberal democracy, as they diminish the separation between economy and polity so that political principles of equality and freedom no longer figure as alternative social and moral referents to those of the market.

One of the consequences of this reconfiguration is the commodification of citizenship and transformation of the state into a company-like service provider. In many European countries (Malta, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Latvia, Bulgaria, UK, Montenegro), residency, and even citizenship itself, can be purchased either directly or via an investment through the so-called “golden visa” programmes. Portugal became the first EU country to introduce this service in 2012, offering several routes to residency (such as a capital transfer of at least 1 million euros or the purchase of property valued at 500,000 euros or more) and citizenship after five years of renewed

¹⁰ Étienne Balibar (2014). *Equiliberty: Political Essays*. Translated by James Ingram. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

¹¹ Wendy Brown (2003). “Neoliberalism and the end of liberal democracy”. *Theory and Event*, 7(1), pp.15-18.

residence (though physical residence is not required). The sector has already been dubbed the “investment immigration industry”, and manifold consultancies offer expert support in gaining golden visas.

The naturalisation process is the most densely regulated aspect of citizenship law. To accommodate the increased influx of foreigners in their territories, states have developed a myriad of statuses “below” that of citizen (temporary and permanent residents, refugees, asylum seekers, etc.), each with a different set of rights and obligations. In doing so, they effectively construct classes of citizens, a practice which can only be expected to grow. Much discussed “community cloud” concepts, such as “digital citizenship” and “nation-as-a-service”, which redefine the state as a platform of digital services, social and cultural values, and/or economic rules, are already being tried out. Estonia is one of the pioneers of this trend with its e-residency, which allows a person to operate economically within the national legal system but without standard benefits such as the right to actually reside in the country. Other states, like Croatia and Serbia, are introducing legislation to facilitate residency access to “digital nomads”: third-country citizens who work digitally or have a company registered elsewhere.

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DEMOCRACY WITHOUT CITIZENS?

In the 2012 blockbuster *Total Recall*, set at the end of the 21st century, citizens of the Colony (formerly Australia) commute daily via a gravity elevator through the Earth’s core to the only other inhabitable place on the planet in Western Europe. This scenario closely resembles our contemporary predicament: numerous are those that, either physically or virtually, regularly traverse national borders to find employment.

This phenomenon was made especially visible at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. Despite closed borders, special air and rail corridors were organised to allow seasonal and care workers to travel from Romania to Germany and Austria. These new types of mobile migrant

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workers comprise a growing share of the European labour force, especially in the agriculture and care sectors. Legal seasonal workers, illegal immigrants, and Schengen-area citizens who work illegally make up as much as half of Italy's agricultural workers, while Germany relies almost entirely on intra-EU migration to meet its demand for seasonal agricultural workers.¹² In Austria, care workers from Romania and Slovakia hold up to 80 per cent of jobs in the sector.¹³

With the transition to working from home accelerated by the pandemic, capital's ability to employ workers from outside the national labour market will expand into other sectors. The globalisation of the labour market and its spread to white-collar office work will be felt most sharply among the middle classes of rich countries. Economist Branko Milanović suggests that this will in turn make cheaper-to-live places more attractive, a phenomenon already observed in the case of digital nomads.¹⁴ Like the blue-collar workers before them, these workers may start doubting the benefits of globalisation, becoming similarly attracted to "they-took-our-jobs" narratives, further giving rise to right-wing sentiments and more restrictive migration policies.

When extrapolated, these tendencies – the ubiquity of non-citizens

and mobile migrant workers, the neoliberal transformation of state and citizenship, and the growing usage of tiers of citizenship – all grafted onto the national democracy framework, paint a pretty dystopian picture. The attempt of "material" democracies to preserve the national definition of citizenship may imply that a significant portion of their population (those that seasonally, temporarily, or permanently inhabit them and/or work under their legal frameworks) will be non-citizens or even non-residents. At the same time, others may enjoy advantages purchased on the "citizenship market". With a growing number of stateless people, or those with only limited citizenship rights, citizenship may no longer be understood as a universal category. In the context of a climate crisis which may well mean the dissolution of political structures in affected areas and mass migration, these prospects are especially worrying.

Tribes of Europa presents a fictional scenario about a possible future. What we are witnessing today might sound like fiction but is becoming reality at a galloping pace: the advent of a new sort of democracy, a "democracy without citizens" wherein full

12 Marie-Laure Augère-Granier (2021). *Migrant seasonal workers in the European agricultural sector*. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service.

13 "Romania-Austria night train new lifeline for care workers, elderly". *France24*. 11 May 2020.

14 Branko Milanovic (2021). "A simultaneously expanding and shrinking world". *Social Europe*, 29 March 2021.

citizenship is a luxury not available to all (a development already anticipated in the idea of “illiberal democracy”). Would these still be called democracies, or rather systems institutionalising new forms of apartheid? Let us not forget, until they were delegitimised, old apartheid regimes were considered properly democratic.

Can we dream of a different future, even if, as Jameson says, we cannot really imagine it? We can certainly try. As the modernist idea of universal rights seems to no longer find its expression under the national framework, should we not think up alternatives? The supranational structure of the European Union is often seen to be one. However, this seems misguided: like the Federation in *Star Trek*, to cite another famous utopian future, it is essentially an extension of the national model, characterised by hard borders, exclusive (and excluding) identities, and a demand for loyalty to the nation (or the Federation). Still, that is not to say that the European Union cannot play a role, especially if it is made an ally in the struggles over the meaning of democracy and citizenship that lay ahead: it could help facilitate the processes of transformation, particularly if the EU itself transforms.

Other imaginaries appear more promising, such as the growing significance of cities that employ municipalist approaches to broaden democratic participation (including non-

citizens) and re-establish public ownership and control over critical infrastructure and services. Kindred to these are attempts to organise economic activity around the ideas of commons and economic democracy. These stand for democratic stewardship of natural, cultural, and built resources and infrastructures that span borders and national interests, implying the creation of new forms of polity beyond that of nation and national citizen. In the context of ecological crisis, democratic ownership and resource governance seem especially pertinent to an attempt to challenge the capitalist paradigm of endless growth. In the end, if we are witnessing the end of modernity, it is up to us to struggle for what comes after, which of its ideas and institutions we should keep, and which we should abandon.



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Thinking Ecological Democracy with Benoît Lechat

Six years after his death, Benoît Lechat, co-founder of the *Green European Journal* and head of publications at Belgian green think tank Etopia, continues to enrich our society with his thinking. In his final works, Lechat stressed the need for a green democratic reboot that effectively combines democracy and ecology. Logically, this effort was to be led by European Green parties. But, in order to succeed, Greens would first have to understand the fundamental shifts underway in society.

representative democracies can prevent or even simply cope with ecological crises, some environmentalist groups and thinkers (among these Franco-Swiss philosopher Dominique Bourg) are proposing reforms that would enable democracies to better respond to ecological constraints. Whatever the merit of these proposals, the contemporary political landscape and the legitimacy crisis afflicting democratic institutions show that it is no longer just a case of making democracy environmentally compatible; it is a case of saving it, full stop.

In the editorial to the summer 2014 edition of the *Green European Journal*, Lechat noted that: "Between 1980 and 2014, not only has the scale of the ecological problems dramatically expanded, but the social and anthropological conditions of political commitment have also been deeply transformed by the cultural evolution of our post-industrial societies."¹ Any proposals for the reform of current democratic institutions towards more sustainability and participation would need to take these structural changes into account.

In 2021, this lesson remains as relevant as ever. At a time when people increasingly question whether

EXPERTOCRACY VERSUS SOCIETAL DISTRUST

Today, awareness of environmental issues is undoubtedly growing. Many countries have seen successive climate marches and green debates playing out in the media, and even the business world is asking everyone to do their bit to save the planet. Yet the mainstream approach remains narrowly environmental, tending to look at the problem in terms of pollution and emissions. The question is only ever seen through the lens of stabilising the current system, never as



This article is available in French on the *Green European Journal* website.

PENSER LA DÉMOCRATIE ÉCOLOGIQUE AVEC BENOÎT LECHAT

Benoît Lechat situe la démocratie radicale au cœur du projet de l'écologie politique. Réflexion de Jonathan Piron sur la pensée de l'ancien rédacteur-en-chef du *Green European Journal*.

¹ Benoît Lechat (2014). "From a Green Reboot of Democracy to a Democratic Reboot of the Greens". *Green European Journal*. 1 August 2014.



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a catalyst for transforming it. The gulf between experts and politicians on the one hand and the public on the other has been laid bare throughout the Covid-19 crisis, leading to further erosion of trust. The "expertocratic temptation" feared by Lechat has come to pass, forcing us to think about mechanisms that will stop it further taking root.

There are many facets to democracy's current crisis. But do they really share common roots with the ecological crisis? As Lechat highlighted in his history of

that is unable to fully address the causes of problems. What is more, these same processes can be used against the pursuit of environmental policies when, for example, local groups oppose the building of windfarms. Social and environmental consultation processes overlap and, at times, conflict. And even though politicians seem unbound by the constraints of consultation, the fragmentation of political representation makes negotiations fiendishly complex. This in turn bolsters

political dynamics that the Greens would like to create to meet their objectives?"³ For Greens, then, the following question arises: how can we be politically effective? By winning majorities, sure – but to do what?

TOWARDS ECOLOGICAL DEMOCRACY

Lechat explained that radical democracy must be a priority for Greens on the path to a sustainable society. Democracy will of course remain a system for debate between humans, the best way to "oppose one another without slaughtering one another".⁴ But unlike modernity's early ideologies such as socialism and liberalism, peace under ecological democracy will not be built at the expense of future generations, ecosystems, and non-humans. Nor will it make the environment a trade-off for traditional policies. Instead, it will make institutions green and ensure their decentralisation. It is not about giving the vote to animals or unborn children but about building democratic systems that better incorporate the signals

THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTION IS ONLY EVER SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF STABILISING THE CURRENT SYSTEM, NEVER AS A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMING IT

Belgium's French-speaking Green party,² methods of consultation established in the 1970s and 1980s to prevent polluting industrial projects resulted in cumbersome administrative processes that tie up a significant amount of resources within environmental and social activist groups. The result is an "environmental bureaucracy"

the impression of a political world that is both incapable of governing and out of touch with social realities.

This illustrates the importance of using political sociology to understand these obstacles: "We must ask ourselves the question: how are the social dynamics in place in our societies not actually conducive to the

2 Benoît Lechat (2014). *Ecolo, la démocratie comme projet*. Namur: Etopia.

3 Benoît Lechat (2014). "A Climate for Change". *Green European Journal*. 1 November 2014.

4 Marcel Mauss (1950). "Essai sur le don". *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 1950, pp. 143-279.

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nature sends us and the impact of our actions on future conditions for life.

In the move towards ecological democracy, three priorities emerge. First, environmental politics must strengthen local participation – an act of decentralisation – in implementing more ambitious plans for ecological transition – an act of centralisation. This implies strengthening democracy at every level by creating public spaces for debate that inform decision-making processes. Each of these decentralising processes must be built on the dynamism of public spaces energised by a pluralist media which favours debate and analysis over sensationalism and controversy. The work of democracy is inseparable from that of strengthening genuine public spaces, from the local to the European.

Second, this democratic rebirth cannot happen without tackling the cultural question – a point that Lechat emphasised repeatedly in his contributions to the Belgian progressive magazine *La Revue Nouvelle*. Since the late 1980s, there has been a disconnect within the

institutional and political reform agendas of Green parties between their environmental and cultural projects. But the ecological transformation must mobilise all of society, including its educational and cultural resources. It is not just a matter of technical, political, or economic choices, but of generating civic and social dynamics. "Culture is the ability of a society to act on itself by changing its social representations."⁵ Transition, therefore, also depends on cultural policies that unlock the history, creativity, artistic expression, and social cohesion of places and people.

Lastly, ecological democracy will not happen without the creation of a socio-environmental state that

addresses inequalities while pushing the logic of the state further. The productivism shared by the neoliberal, social-democratic, and Marxist traditions "rests on the belief that the growth of productive forces is essential to the resolution of conflicts inherent in society".⁶ Rather than clinging to the conviction that policies can satisfy everyone, the ecological transition should be institutionalised through a new conception of democracy that widens participation. For there is no social ecology without a movement for democracy and a post-materialist and cosmopolitan redefinition of solidarity.

In each of these cases, the meeting of expert knowledge and democratic deliberation is essential to prevent the drift towards an expertocracy that would only be rejected by ever-wider sections of society. The handling of the pandemic has alerted us to these growing dangers. Faced with the long-term climate crisis, our institutions must change. ■

⁵ Benoît Lechat and Jonathan Piron (2021). *Ecolo, l'écologie de l'action politique*. Namur: Etopia.

⁶ Benoît Lechat (2014). "A Speech by Benoît Lechat". *Green European Journal*, 21 August 2014.



GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

Europe's leading political ecology magazine, the *Green European Journal* helps ideas travel across cultural and political borders, building solidarity and understanding. An editorially independent publication of the Green European Foundation, the Journal collaborates with partners across Europe. Editions explore a topic in depth from different analytical and cultural perspectives. The *Green European Journal* website publishes articles and interviews in various languages, many of which are available in audio format on the *Green Wave* podcast.

GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

The Green European Foundation is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate, political education, and to foster greater citizen participation in European politics.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL Spring 2021

Printed in Belgium by
a CO₂ neutral company
100% recycled paper

PUBLISHED BY GEF

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ILLUSTRATIONS Dieter De Schutter
© @dieterdeschutter

ILLUSTRATION CONCEPTS Klaas Verplancke
www.klaas.be

ISSN 2684-4486
ISBN 978-9-49-051505-8



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This publication can be ordered from
www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu

The views expressed in this publication
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of the Green European Foundation.

This publication has been realised with
the financial support of the European Parliament.
The European Parliament is not responsible
for the content of this project.



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DEMOCRACY EVER AFTER?

PERSPECTIVES ON POWER AND REPRESENTATION

Democracy is politics in motion. Rather than residing in immovable structures and institutions, it takes its form in everyday acts and processes at every level of society, from global deliberations to local decision-making, from national campaigns to the votes of individuals. Majorities wax and wane, alliances shift, divisions open and close, and sometimes earthquakes send shockwaves through the whole system. It remains fundamentally a battleground, not only for competing visions for society, but also over the very meaning of democracy itself. In the struggle over democracy's future, Greens and progressives must be present to defend their ideas and the values underpinning them. The efforts of those fighting for the most basic democratic rights and freedoms, both in Europe and on the other side of world, remind us of what is at stake. As democracy wends its way onwards, it is up to us to steer it towards ever greater fairness, inclusion, and participation.