Giving Europe political substance

Following the 2019 European Parliament elections, **Mary Kaldor** *argues that developing substantive democracy in Europe to tame neoliberal globalisation must be the Leitmotif for the coming European term.*

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Many of us who live in Britain feel embarrassed and ashamed by the contortions of our politics and the meanness of our government, towards the poor, the foreign and, particularly, the European – which is only going to get worse with Boris Johnson as Prime Minister.

Yet, paradoxically, the continuing *struggle* over 'Brexit' is an expression of democracy: the fact that the UK has not yet left the European Union is due to debates and positions which have been taken in Parliament, based on a mix of tactical advantage, public pressure and moral conscience. 'Britain is thinking,' I remember the great English-European historian Edward Thompson saying during the 1980s – 'and it only thinks every 50 years or so.'

Yes, the rise of right-wing populism has unleashed the dangerous demons of racism, homophobia, misogyny and general human cruelty. But it has also galvanised a new engagement with progressive politics, which could help to make possible the reforms needed if the EU is to survive until 2025.

Cry of frustration

The new political tendencies on both right and left are an expression of a pervasive distrust of formal politics and political institutions, evidenced in a series of *Eurobarometer* polls. Brexit was a cry of frustration about not being heard, at Westminster or in Brussels: a project on its impact at local level undertaken in my research unit at the London School of Economics showed that the most significant demand in majority-leave areas was for political empowerment. That is why the slogan 'take back control' had such resonance in 2016.

In explaining this frustration, it's useful to distinguish between procedural and substantive democracy – as Alexis de Tocqueville did when he studied 19th-century America. Procedural democracy has to do with the formal rules and processes necessary for democracy, including free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, freedom of media and association and civilian control of security services. Substantive democracy is about political equality, a democratic culture, being able to influence the decisions that affect one's life – the 'habits of the heart', as de Tocqueville put it.

The problem today is the weakness of substantive democracy: we have 'a vote but not a voice', said the Spanish *indignados*. And this is the consequence of three decades of neoliberalism.

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The Maastricht treaty of 1991 was a compromise between the new wave of Europeanism, constructed from below by the peace and human-rights movements which opposed the cold-war divide during the 1980s, and the then newly fashionable (if retro) market fundamentalism pioneered in Britain by Margaret Thatcher. Maastricht enshrined in law the requirement to reduce budget deficits and the imposition on debtor countries of the burden of deflationary adjustment of fiscal imbalances. Meanwhile, the freeing up of capital movements and the liberalisation of markets associated with the establishment of the single market speeded up the process of globalisation, facilitated by the emergent information and communication technologies.

In a world where democratic procedures remain focused on the national level but where the decisions that affect one's life are taken in the headquarters of multinational companies, on the laptops of financial speculators or otherwise in Brussels, Washington or New York, substantive democracy is evidently weakened.

But neoliberalism has also weakened substantive democracy as a consequence of what is happening at national levels, especially since the 2008 financial crisis. On the one hand, it has spurred the erosion of the welfare state and a dramatic increase in social and economic inequality. On the other, the growth of finance relative to manufacturing, as in the US and UK especially, or the dependence of governments on external finance, as in central and eastern Europe and many third-world countries, has meant that states are increasingly dependent on *rentier* forms of revenue, with all the worrying tendencies associated with rent extraction.

In addition, the contracting-out culture introduced into government, as part of the 'new public management' associated with neoliberalism, has given rise to crony capitalism. We see a new breed of politician for whom gaining a political position is a means of access to contracts and other rents with which to reward supporters.

Bad behaviour

These phenomena help to explain the rise of the new right. They are different from classic fascists. They tend to be crony capitalists – some, such as Viktor Orbán or the oligarchs in other eastern-European countries, have become very rich. Their stances are less ideological and more to do with a celebration of bad behaviour – some analysts call it 'transgressive'. They lie, steal and say horrible things to ethnic minorities, Muslims, women or gay people, and they get away with it. It is a licence to all those who would like to be bad, especially those who resent the 'politically correct', socially liberal, educated 'elite'.

They promise to give back control by 'making America great again' or by otherwise restoring sovereignty. It is a very dangerous phenomenon because they cannot actually give back control and the licence to bad behaviour weakens the values underpinning the rule of law and increases the risk of violence. Yet they make political capital out of the damaging consequences of neoliberalism – the inequality, the poverty, the resentment – and they make material capital out of their access to state rents.

To oppose the new right we need to be able to 'take back control' in reality, to construct or reconstruct substantive democracy. At the local level, citizens need to be able to feel that there is some hope for the future and they have a chance to shape that future. But because of globalisation, this can only be achieved via substantive democracy at the European level. So what would this involve?

First of all, it is necessary to shield the local level from the harmful effects of globalisation. We need to develop mechanisms in financial terms so that creditor and debtor countries share the burden of adjusting imbalances – so that a Greek-type crisis, with its devastating effects on the ground, cannot be repeated. We need to restrain financial speculation, so that national and local policies are not vulnerable to the vagaries of capital markets. We need to develop automatic stabilisers, such as a Europe-wide unemployment-insurance scheme. Multinational companies need to be regulated and taxed. Conflicts need to be addressed and migration needs to be managed.

This list could be extended endlessly. The point is that we need far-reaching measures to tame globalisation, so as to create space for action at local and national levels.

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Secondly, the measures which need to be taken to create more space for genuine participation in decision-making require substantive democracy at the European level – debate and deliberation, and activism, across Europe. There are widespread complaints about the bureaucratic character of the EU but this has to do with the absence of politics: the European bureaucracy is not actually that large but it appears overwhelming because it represents a substitute for political engagement.

Some argue, as for example DiEM25, that the problem is procedural and that we need a constitutional convention. As a matter of fact, EU procedures, while they could be improved, do involve serious mechanisms to ensure the accountability of the institutions to citizens. The parliament has far-reaching powers to amend legislation, as well as to approve appointments and the budget. The Europe Citizens' Initiative, introduced in the Lisbon treaty, offers another mechanism. The neoliberal Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership trade deal was stopped as a result of a citizens' initiative, as was the abolition of roaming charges on mobile phones, hugely improving communication across Europe while reducing the excess profits of the supplier companies.

The problem is that these powers are not utilised sufficiently because of a lack of serious political engagement. What is lacking, as the Italian federalist Altiero Spinelli said decades ago, is the 'substance of politics'.

Political mobilisation

But this may be changing in response to the rise of the far right. Ever since the early 2000s, there has been a social mobilisation against neoliberalism, first in the World Social Forum and the European Social Forum, then in the occupations of the squares in 2011 and 2012. But at that time, this activism tended to be 'anti-political' and, even where it led to the formation of political parties as in the case of Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, it tended to be focused on local and national levels. The further rise of the far right in Europe has however provided an impetus for an activism that is more political and more pan-European.

The European elections of 2019 represented the beginning of a debate about different visions of Europe. There were real differences among the parties. Since the Brexit referendum, the far-right parties seem to have shifted from wanting to leave the EU to the idea of creating a European alliance of nationalists. The Party of European Socialists (PES), the greens and the far left put forward radical manifestoes for ending austerity, tackling climate change and addressing inequality. The turnout was higher than for decades. And, with the exceptions of Britain and Italy, the elections were about the future of Europe rather than being proxies for national issues.

Europe is beginning to think.

The risks are huge. There could easily be another financial crisis, because the appropriate measures were not taken after 2008. The Pandora's box of bad behaviour opened by the far right is very difficult to close. How things will look in 2025 will thus depend on our individual analyses and collective actions – on whether pan-European public pressure can reconstitute the 'substance of politics'.

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