

Responding to Brexit: creating a European Foundational Assembly

Brexit has triggered an avalanche of reactions. While everybody agrees that "things cannot continue as before," and that a European unification process based almost exclusively on market integration and on the free flow of goods, people and capital has now turned against Europe, turning it into the soft underbelly of globalization, the conclusions that are being drawn and the proposals to get out of this situation vary widely.

There are those who see the crisis as an opportunity to progress towards a more unified Europe, especially within Euroland, through tax harmonisation, a common investment program, and stronger economic governance. This solution, however, has one big drawback: it assumes that European societies and national political leaders are ready for new transfers of sovereignty, which is clearly not in tune with the times. And there are those who believe that the European project must be refounded with the active participation of European citizens. We are among the latter. But there is still the question of how to achieve this goal. Hanging on to the vague notion of "giving a voice to the people," in a context marked by a general distrust of political leaders and a crisis in traditional representative democracy, can only lead to the prospect of further referendums (national or European) which is exactly what the far right is calling for across the continent.

Given the complexity of the world, we cannot build a project for the future by asking European citizens to answer a simple yes or no question. The real question is: how can European citizens be involved in building a future European project? And the real answer? By initiating a process that we might call a Foundational Assembly. It is the only adequate response to Brexit. A Foundational Assembly is not a Constituent Assembly. Although the example of Iceland, which has entrusted the development of its new constitution to 25 "ordinary" citizens, shows that citizen-led deliberative processes can result in quality proposals, our goal is not to entrust a European citizens' panel with the task of drafting a new treaty! The concept of a Foundational Assembly is based on the observation that routine governance is about the regulatory processes that govern already-established communities. Which leaves out the essential prerequisite: How is a community established in the first place? How does the idea of a common destiny emerge as community members acknowledge their responsibility for each other? Is there any other way to establish a community than through 'iron and blood,' in the words of Bismarck?

This is the main challenge of the 21st century, both in Europe and all over the world. Technological and economic changes, and a growing awareness of irreversible realities such as climate change and the interdependent nature of our world, have created a new anthropological reality, which challenges the ideological construction inherited from previous centuries that nation-states are the only viable and genuine communities. The challenge of the 21st century is to enable the emergence of communities that believe in a common destiny, and which understand the reality of interdependence. As the European integration

process has illustrated, establishing common institutions is necessary for the survival of a community, but they can't create a community in the first place.

It is true that the European Union was built without the input of its peoples. Of course, no community was ever forced to join the European Union. But an attempt to safeguard democracy (in the case of the southern European countries doing away with decades of authoritarian rule), or to join an area of economic prosperity (in the case of new members from Central and Eastern Europe) does not constitute a genuine foundational process leading long-rival nations to recognize common values and a common destiny. It is this flaw that we need to address today.

Deliberative democracy is the idea that before being a confrontation between political platforms, politics is first and foremost an ethical standpoint and a method – an ethical standpoint that strives towards transparency and that seeks out that which unites rather than that which divides (unlike the current political game...). It is a method by which "ordinary" citizens build an opinion on complex subjects and, through collective deliberation, develop common beliefs and perspectives. Deliberative democracy requires: a robust participant selection process; questions that are as open as possible and that don't lock citizens into discussions framed by institutions; a process built over time; sufficient financial and human resources; rigorous methods to summarise discussions and identify common views and irreconcilable differences.

The result is a Foundational Assembly comprised of a random cross-section of the population. The questions this Assembly will address will effectively shape a new project for Europe and start the process of building a genuine European community: How can we come to terms with the legacy of the past, which has made Europe a distinctive civilization and yet has so often divided us? Do we want to be part of a community of destiny, and what are the common values on which a European identity should be based? What role should Europe play in the world, and what kind of world do we want to help build in order to address global challenges? What about the current governance of the European Union and what kind of new governance would best reconcile our rich diversity and our underlying unity? What is the most optimum economic model for Europe, and what would be the role of market forces in this model?

We suggest a two-step process: first at the level of cities and regions; then at European level.

The first step consists of local citizens' assemblies held in the cities or regions that volunteer to host them. Why cities and regions? Firstly, to break away from the idea of "national interests", which really only exist because nations and states have decided they do. And international or European dialogue shouldn't be reduced to a confrontation between national interests. Secondly, it is easier to grasp the complexity of societies and how they operate at the level of a city or a region. In each participating city or region, a cross-section of the population will be randomly selected in order to create a panel of 60 people of all ages, backgrounds and socio-professional groups, ready to commit the adventure. Local assemblies will work over a year, following a rigorous process to address the different issues.

Deliberative democracy is the opposite of an opinion poll. Like a trial in a criminal court, members of the citizens' panel must be able, as the process unfolds, to ask any questions they wish and get a detailed response, and to hear from experts with conflicting views in order to form their own opinion. Experience shows that it works, even when it comes to complex scientific issues that might be considered inaccessible to laymen. Is not this ability to make an informed judgement the very essence of democratic hope?

Second stage: a European Citizens' Assembly, for a period ranging from ten to thirty days, with a thousand citizen delegates from local assemblies gathered in council. The work of the Assembly will be based on the proposals submitted by local assemblies and through dialogue with them. There will not be a permanent plenary session, given the risk that discussions might be monopolised by a few opinion leaders, but back-and-forth dialogue between interactive working groups of twenty to thirty people comparing their findings. The traceability of discussions and the methodology for progressively drawing conclusions are critical to the credibility of the whole process: the art of democracy and governance today is the art of addressing complexity and managing it.

During the local assemblies and the European Assembly, it is essential that society as a whole benefit from the information being voiced in the assemblies and engage in the same discussions and the same debates; Or the result will be just another caste of dignitaries, even if they are ordinary citizens. Social networks and the internet will play an instrumental role in this respect. The various educational institutions that simulated the climate negotiations last year illustrated the value of civic initiatives in high schools and universities; a similar process could also be used by young Europeans to develop a collective project for Europe and for the planet.

This Foundational Assembly can only be held with the endorsement and support of European leaders. They will play an instrumental role by: requesting the involvement of regions and cities; providing the human and financial resources required for both building a solid information base for citizens and for the translation and interpretation work needed to make this information accessible to all and enable dialogue between local assemblies and the European Assembly; and by summoning an extraordinary session of all European institutions – the Commission, the Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, and the Economic and Social Committee – to conscientiously consider the proposals put forward by citizens. It is only at this last stage, once a level of consensus is reached which identifies a new European project, a new European governance, a new place for Europe in the world, that we can consider submitting it to all European citizens in the form of a referendum held simultaneously across all Member States.