

# A study of the various social mobilisations and collective activities in Europe that we chose to describe as 'subterranean politics' reveals a general frustration with current political practices

by Blog Admin

**Mary Kaldor** presents research into the new political phenomena occurring across the political spectrum, both right and left, around the world. Those who have engaged in the activities studied cite concern with the failures of democracy as the reason for engagement. The 'bubbling up' of political forces into the mainstream can have both negative and positive consequences: There is a real risk of a rise in euro-scepticism and xenophobic populism, but there is also an extraordinary opportunity to reconstruct democracy on a trans-European scale.



This is one of those rare moments in history when subterranean politics 'bubbles up' to the surface. Actually the demonstrations, protests and occupations of the last two years are probably less joined up, more localised, and not even bigger than similar phenomena our [research has tracked](#) over the last decade. But what is different about the popular mobilisations of 2011 and 2012 in Europe is the way they have struck a chord with mainstream opinion. This can be seen most dramatically in the rise of non-mainstream parties like the Pirate Party in Germany and Sweden, Jobbik in Hungary and Golden Dawn in Greece, the 5 star movement in Italy or Respect in Bradford, England. The term *wutberger* (angry citizen) in Germany became the word of the year in the Gesellschaft fuer die Deutsche Spracht (the authority on the German language). While the term *indignados* (the indignant) was coined by the Spanish press to describe the protest movement in Spain, identifying the protestors with the best-selling book *Indignez-vous*, written by the nonagenarian French resistance hero Stefan Hessel.

Indeed, what was so significant about Occupy London was not the existence of the camp –after all there have been camps before like the Climate Change camp or the anti-war camp in Parliament Square and indeed many of the protestors were veterans of these camps. Rather it was the debate that was generated inside one of the most establishment British organisations, the Church of England, so much so that the camp led to the resignation of two high-ranking officials as well as a chaplain. Moreover, there was a lot of interest among the general public. Passing bankers donated money and the protestors were invited to write articles in mainstream newspapers including the *Financial Times*.

This is why the Civil Society and Human Security Unit in the Department of International Development undertook a research project about what we call subterranean politics that resulted in the report: [The 'Bubbling up' of Subterranean Politics in Europe](#). We used the term 'subterranean politics' in order to escape the conceptual straitjackets of related terms like 'civil society' or 'social movements'. Civil society tends to be identified with NGOs. Social movement research has its own specific methodology and moreover leaves out interesting developments like fringe political parties. We wanted to capture new political phenomena across the political spectrum, both right and left.

In order to investigate the various social mobilisations and collective activities that we chose to describe as 'subterranean politics' we undertook seven contextual studies: four national studies (Germany, Hungary, Italy and Spain), one global city (London) and two trans-European studies (one focussed on trans European grass roots initiatives and one focussed on anti-austerity movements).

Perhaps the most important finding of the study is that what is shared across different types of protests, actions, campaigns and initiatives is extensive frustration with formal politics as it is currently practiced. The terms 'angry', 'indignant' or 'disappointed' are an expression of this frustration. The German case

study is particularly interesting in this respect. German society is far less affected by austerity measures than other European societies: its economy has recovered relatively quickly from the financial and economic crisis and it has experienced continued, albeit slow, growth and prosperity. Yet, despite the relatively positive situation in Germany, there is a striking public display of subterranean politics in Germany just as in other European contexts. There has been a wave of protests against infrastructure projects, such as in Stuttgart, Frankfurt/Main and Berlin; these protesters, the so-called 'Wutbürger', object to the lack of the transparency in the planning process and to the absence of citizens' participation. The case of Guttenplag – a website through which activists revealed that the Defence Minister Karl Theodor Freiherr von und zu Guttenberg had plagiarised his doctoral thesis – shows the concern with corruption among the political elite, which was also apparent in the protests against President Christian Wolf. Squares have been occupied all over Germany just as in Spain and Greece. Not to mention the Pirate Party's success in recent regional elections.

But even in other European contexts, which are much more affected by austerity than Germany, those who have engaged in the activities we have studied cite concern with the failures of democracy as the reason for engagement and protest rather than austerity per se. For instance, the 15-M Movement in Spain, which triggered the spread of Occupy in Europe, was not simply a reaction to austerity policies. Rather, it was inspired by the occupation of Tahrir Square, as the symbol of the Arab Spring. This concern with *politics*, that is, the general frustration with current political practices, was apparent in the symbols and the slogans that were used in the 15-M Movement such as the widespread use of Egyptian flags and slogans such as 'Apolitical? Superpolitical', 'A Cairo in each neighborhood', and 'It isn't the crisis, it's the system'.

Statistical data on trust in government and political parties collected by Eurobarometer supports the contention that it is frustration with politics that motivates the protestors and resonates with a wider public. Among European countries, 62 per cent (Germany-lowest) and 80 per cent (Spain and Italy-highest) of their respective populations tend not to trust their governments, while 78 per cent (Germany-lowest) and 86 per cent (UK-highest) tend not to trust political parties.

	Political Parties		National Government		The Internet	
	Tend to Trust	Tend Not To Trust	Tend to Trust	Tend Not To Trust	Tend to Trust	Tend Not To Trust
<b>Europe</b>	14	81	24	70	37	39
<b>Germany</b>	15	78	32	62	27	43
<b>Hungary</b>	15	80	26	68	41	32
<b>Italy</b>	9	84	12	80	37	40
<b>Spain</b>	12	84	16	80	34	40
<b>UK</b>	11	86	21	74	34	46

**Source: Eurobarometer 76 (Autumn 2011)**

The frustration with the political elite and the lack of participation is something that is shared both by populist movements and by what might be described as more emancipatory movements and initiatives. The difference is that the latter try to pioneer their own forms of participation and to develop new techniques of dialogue and democratic practice. It is not just dissatisfaction with a particular fault within the (formal) system of representative democracy but with the nature of what has come to be practiced as 'democracy' more generally. 'They call it democracy and it isn't', was one of the slogans among protesters in Spain.

A striking conclusion from all the case studies is the importance of the subjective experience of participating in politics in a new way, of reconstructing democracy out of one's own actions. [Pleyers](#)

describes this type of politics as prefigurative action; the attempt to practice the kind of democracy that the participants imagine. This has been the primary attraction of Occupy, which experiments with forms of participation like daily assemblies and consensus decision-making and insists on horizontality and leaderlessness. This experimentation was pioneered by the Spanish movement and copied all over Europe, as well as in other parts of the world. Several German interviewees, for example, stress that it was videos of the Spanish Assemblies on YouTube that motivated them to join. 'My heart was beating. I couldn't understand a word of what they were saying but I thought: awesome! They meet in a public square and they talk to each other.'

As well as the findings about politics and democracy, the study also investigated the impact of the Internet, not just the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter but also the way the use of the Internet has constructed a new ethos of doing politics – what we called [the 2.0 ethos](#). We also were interested in perceptions of Europe and one of the most interesting finding was that Europe is by and large invisible at the level of subterranean politics. While many of our interviewees regard themselves as European in terms of life experience, Europe as a political community or a public space only seems to exist for a small 'expert' minority. In interviews, the subject of Europe rarely came up unless explicitly raised. This does not mean that there were no expressions of solidarity beyond borders or that protestors were only concerned with local and national issues. On the contrary, the slogan 'we are all Greeks now' to be found on many protests is an indication of concerns beyond the local.

The implications of our study is that solving the Euro-crisis will not be a solution to the crisis of Europe. And vice versa, it may not be possible to solve the financial crisis without addressing the political crisis. If we accept the finding that the 'bubbling up' of subterranean politics is an expression of a political crisis, rather than a response to austerity policies or the economic crisis, and once we understand that these concerns are not simply about faults in the formal structure of representative democracy but about a profound re-imagining of politics and democracy, then it is possible to propose new ways to rethink democracy in Europe. The current 'resonance' of subterranean politics, the 'bubbling up' of political forces into the mainstream can have both negative and positive consequences. There is a real risk of the rise of euro-sceptic and xenophobic populism. But at the same time there is an extraordinary opportunity to reconstruct democracy on a trans-European scale by building on and taking seriously subterranean experiments.

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### **About the author**

**Mary Kaldor** is Professor of Global Governance and Director of the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit at the London School of Economics. She is the author of many books, including 'The Ultimate Weapon is No Weapon: Human Security and the Changing Rules of War and Peace', 'New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era' and 'Global Civil Society: An Answer to War'. Professor Kaldor was a founding member of the European Nuclear Disarmament and of the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly. She is also convenor of the Human Security Study Group, which reported to Javier Solana, and now Cathy Ashton.

