Dr Roman Gerodimos – written evidence (CCE0082)

Author bio: Dr Roman Gerodimos is a Principal Academic in Global Current Affairs at Bournemouth University and a faculty member at the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change. He is the founder of the Greek Politics Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association (PSA) of the UK and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). His research on youth civic engagement won the 2010 Arthur McDougall Prize awarded by the Political Studies Association. He is the co-editor of The Media, Political Participation & Empowerment (Routledge, 2013) and The Politics of Extreme Austerity: Greece in the Eurozone Crisis (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). His work has been published in peer reviewed journals (Political Studies, Public Administration, Journal of Information Technology & Politics, Information, Communication & Society, Journal of Media Literacy Education), in edited volumes, and in hundreds of interviews and articles in news media around the world. In 2015, he was invited to deliver the keynote address at the European Commission / Council of Europe symposium on youth participation in a digitalised world. This evidence is submitted in a personal capacity.

1. The shifts in the modes of civic engagement, and in public attitudes towards the political system and democracy at large, are the result of patterns and deep sociocultural changes that have been unfolding over a very long time within liberal democracies, including the UK. These include, amongst others:
   - (i) the rejection, challenging or by-passing of authority and hierarchy as concepts and organising principles, which has a knock-on effect on political institutions as agents of representation
   - (ii) a shift from civic duty and collective responsibility to individual identity and fulfilment (or ‘self-actualisation’) as the primary driver of engagement
   - (iii) globalisation, which is the symptom and cause of complex, interdependent global challenges, diffused (and occasionally less transparent and accountable) networks of experts and stakeholders, and a perceived gap between the loci of decision-making and the electorate as a collective body
   - (iv) digitisation, which not only favours a radically different mode of public and political communication (faster, less considered, more aggressive, more informal, potentially anonymous) but, also, fundamentally challenges the relevance of affinity with local and national communities and identities.

2. These phenomena pose fundamental, existential challenges for citizenship as we’ve known and defined it over the last couple of centuries because they alter the terms and conditions of the ‘social contract’ and blur the geographic and political boundaries of the community and of the demos. Perhaps the most important of these phenomena is the challenge to representation, i.e. the idea that individual citizens delegate power to groups of representatives chosen in a formalised, orderly manner on the basis of geographic colocation (constituencies).

3. While turnout in recent UK elections shows evidence of resilience, and while the work of parliament remains important, the challenge to representation as a concept, and the preference for more direct forms of democracy in which individuals feel like they have more control, are likely to only become more intense. Furthermore, partly due to the increasing role of affect (emotion) in public communication, we are likely to see a further intensification of personalisation – i.e. citizens having the need to identify with / vote for individual leaders, as opposed to being part of collective institutional aggregators, such as political parties.

4. Citizenship is increasingly structured and performed through ad hoc issue-oriented campaigns and identity politics. As national narratives have been declining, and as both the European Union
project and institutions of global governance are facing a crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness, citizens desperately seek narratives, values and frameworks around which they can anchor their identity and assign meaning to their existence. The decline of nationalism – especially in metropolitan centres and amongst more cosmopolitan demographics – has enabled the development of vibrant multicultural communities. However, it has also created an emotional and symbolic void, that is now being covered by demographic traits (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality), lifestyle choices (religion, dietary preferences, attitude towards animals etc) or – for a small minority of younger people – association with extremist ideologies.

5. The shift to affinity with identity groups creates multiple moral, logistical and social challenges for citizenship: it creates ‘echo chambers’ in which people are less likely to encounter the Other (these ‘filter bubbles’ are also facilitated by digital algorithms); it encourages an identity potentially built around victimhood and grievance, as opposed to enterprise and responsibility; and it positions interest and identity groups against each other in antagonistic pursuit of maximum cultural, political and economic capital.

6. The post-war rules-based framework of human rights, civil liberties and state-provided welfare, and the more recent shift towards framing citizens as users and consumers who are entitled to the provision of choice and service, has created the expectation that the political system will always continue to provide these rights and entitlements automatically, as a default position, regardless of the economic and political context. Less emphasis has been given to cultivating a sense of civic responsibility, duty, compromise, coexistence and active participation in maintaining and nurturing those values and entitlements; and to demonstrating how civic action or inaction can lead to them being taken away.

7. Based on the above analysis, changes to the nature of civic engagement and the social function of citizenship are likely to be radical and long-term. It is, therefore, unlikely that “quick fixes” or “local patches” would be able to have a substantive effect on nurturing the civic culture and citizenship as part of a balanced representative democracy. The course of civic engagement in the 21st century mirrors that of other sectors and human activities (such as journalism, travel, consumption, spirituality etc): it is becoming more individualised and fragmented. The body politic is increasingly amorphous, pluralistic and constantly shifting. The in-group/out-group distinction of the political community depends on engagement with issues and identity groups, rather than solid national citizenship or local residence.

8. That is not to say that the nation-state is irrelevant as a legal and emotional framework; but that it may well face significant challenges and the need to reassert its authority and governability, especially as we move towards a period of “crisis governance” due to insufficient global governance structures, complex global problems and inadequate resources (Goldin 2013, Malloch-Brown 2011, Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2014). Thus, it is important to invent ways of maximising consent and civility, so as to protect the resilience of communities and of the democratic system as a whole.

9. Political science has historically shown that political and party systems are built around cleavages – whether these are socioeconomic (e.g. class), religious (e.g. majority v. minority), ethnic (community A v. community B) or cultural (e.g. liberal v. authoritarian). One such cleavage that was important in the past and has become salient again – and perhaps just about to become by far the most important one – is that between globalised, multicultural urban centres and (re)nationalised rural peripheries. This is something that is happening across many western liberal
democracies. As an increasing number of people move to cities and conurbations, large sections of society on the one hand feel economically left behind (as most income generation, infrastructure projects and business activities take place in urban areas), and on the other hand do not have the opportunity of regularly and meaningfully interacting with demographic and social groups that are substantially different from them. This creates widespread feelings of resentment, alienation and victimhood, as expressed in both the Brexit referendum and in the 2016 presidential election in the United States.

10. One potential cause of cynicism and perceived inequality that has not yet been adequately researched, but could be potentially playing a role, is the fragmentation of opportunities. The multiplication of schemes, grants, benefits and resources – such as the piloting of civic innovations, tools, apps on a microlocal scale – may be reinforcing, rather than tackling, patterns of inequality and disengagement, as these opportunities are likely to be taken up by those who are already engaged and have a basic understanding of how the system works, whereas those who are traditionally marginalised, cynical or less civically literate are unlikely to actively search for, or be aware of, them. The state is finding itself having to invest considerable resource in trying to “sell” policies, initiatives and opportunities to its own citizens, with these policies usually only ending up reaching people who are inclined to listen. In that sense, opting for less but bigger-scale, more visible, universal, nation-wide schemes, reforms of opportunities has a much greater potential of raising awareness and engagement, as well as ensuring that citizens feel that they are being included.

11. The media and information landscape provides us with a similar, albeit somewhat different, case. Past media research showed that the multiplication of TV channels and the fragmentation of media outlets led to the loss of the sense of shared experience (TV having traditionally acted as “the altar of the living room”). For example, increasing the number of channels in Israel led to less people watching the news across both channels, as opposed to when there was only one channel, because people felt less motivated to engage (Katz 1996). While social media (Twitter in particular) have assumed part of this role of bringing audiences together into a quasi-public sphere, the civic experience is going through profound changes. As “the public” becomes more fragmented, and as democratic institutions have to compete for the public’s attention, it is important to reflect on whether a unified body politic (whether we call that “British society”, “community”, “demos” or “the public”) is still a relevant concept – something to be retained – or whether we should fully embrace its segmentation into interest and identity groups. If we are to maintain it, then we ought to agree on the unifying principles – i.e. the values or concepts around which that public is to be united.

12. However, there is also another – symbolic, but no less crucial – aspect to this: by appearing keen or desperate to be “liked” by citizens-consumers, the state is then perceived as just another service provider (and not a particularly good one, especially when compared to some of the better-resourced tech providers). Its core role as provider of other civic functions (survival, civil protection, education, social order, social cohesion, national unity) is, thus, weakened.

13. Therefore, the state should be more proactive and dynamic in reasserting its role, otherwise there is the danger that the social fabric, civic culture, formal political participation and perceptions of fairness will all continue to decline. That does not mean micromanaging or inspecting every aspect of our lives, but providing citizens with robust frameworks of commonly accepted values and ground rules that they can identify with. Strengthening the meaning and relevance of citizenship is key to making democracy sustainable in the long term. Here are a few
practical ways in which this could be facilitated:

14. – Enhancing the importance of citizenship ceremonies, not just for migrants, but also for first-time voters. The citizenship ceremony should be a rite of passage; a cause for celebration; and an opportunity for the citizen to be aware of their rights, but also of their responsibilities to the community.

15. – Requiring that all incoming refugees and migrants demonstrate proficiency of, or take up lessons in, the English language is key to social cohesion; not only does it empower incoming citizens to participating equally in social life, but it can also be perceived by native populations as a sign of *bona fide* determination on the part of incoming migrants to integrate.

16. – Making citizenship a core element of the formal curriculum throughout the educational cycle, but also ensuring that the content of that curriculum addresses current issues and challenges, incorporating: (a) civics, institutions, rights and responsibilities, (b) contemporary history, (c) coexistence skills (listening, debating, compromising, empathy), (d) environmental education, (e) digital and media literacy, (f) awareness of the role, resources and processes of local authorities, including mandatory participation in community engagement projects. Therefore, by the time a young person is eligible to vote they would have been systematically exposed to civic stimuli and they would have acquired vital skills of political socialisation that are currently facing a severe threat due to current patterns of digital/social media use.

17. – Introducing universal and compulsory National Civic Service, perhaps during the summer months, which would include training and voluntary work in the community, as well as getting a first-hand experience of the difficulties and challenges of managing public services, projects, budgets, teams and organisations, and an understanding of the role of structures and hierarchies in social organisation. This is key to radically shifting public perceptions about the process of government and the role of citizens as stakeholders and co-owners of their communities.

18. – Moving elections and referenda from a Thursday to a Saturday or Sunday, which could boost turnout and enhance the perceptions of elections as civic occasions; and giving all young people the opportunity to engage – as volunteers or assistants – in the process, so that they get invested in this from early on.

19. – Considering the introduction of a written constitution that would clearly articulate fundamental civic principles and values that define what it means to be a UK citizen in the 21st century. These would include both fundamental rights, as well as basic responsibilities. The process of creating the written constitution itself should be framed and celebrated as a turning point in the civic life of the UK. Major political parties, civil society organisations and local communities ought to play a key role in leading this conversation and creating a consensual and engaging framework. In other words, this should be seen as an historic moment of articulating civic values, as opposed to a cause for antagonism along narrow party-political lines, although robust debate around particular clauses and provisions is to be expected and welcomed.

20. – Encouraging a sense of civic pride that is not founded on jingoistic nationalism (as is often the case with supporting national sporting teams), but on fundamental shared civic values, such as the unique heritage of the UK’s parliamentary system, the framework of legal protections and civil liberties we all enjoy, the successes of UK scientists and scholars (which might also restore trust in the importance and function of experts, experience and bodies of accumulated knowledge), while
not shying away from reflecting on past mistakes and the values of foreign Others.

21. – Facilitating the integration and assimilation of migrants and refugees, as well as dialogue across diverse demographic groups through innovative methods, such as the Human Library and the Living Library. Diversity is the wealth of a society, and interacting with other people from diverse backgrounds can have a very positive effect. However, a series of studies have shown that excessive diversity (or “superdiversity”) leads to fear, withdrawal and segregation into formal or informal ghettos (such as gated communities or monocultural urban enclaves), which in turn leads to disintegration, strife and echo chambers (Putnam 2007); even in high-trust environments, ethnic diversity has been found to undermine undermine social trust amongst native-born adolescents (Loxbo 2017). Therefore, it is precisely in order to protect and nurture diversity, pluralism and tolerance that we ought to promote and ensure integration.

22. – Public and community art, memorials, festivals, workshops, concerts, town hall meetings and open debates are all key to engaging citizens with public affairs, global issues, their local communities and with each other. There is no single path to renewing citizenship or nurturing engagement, and each one initiative or event on its own may have a marginal impact in the short term. It is the aggregate effect of political socialisation opportunities over times that creates a nurturing environment for the civic culture.

23. - The latest research on campaigning and political communication (e.g. Gerodimos and Justinussen 2015, Bartlett 2017) shows that microtargeting and personalisation algorithms in social media are very potent factors that have been playing a decisive role in a number of recent elections, including the 2008, 2012 and 2016 presidential elections in the United States, as well as possibly the 2016 EU referendum in the UK. As the bulk of our civic interactions and political communications shifts from the local (doorstep, local associations) and the national (TV and newspapers) to privately owned, globalised social media, it is paramount for the health and survival of our democracy to increase the transparency and, if necessary, to regulate the function of algorithms, advertising and microtargeting through social media.

24. – At the same time, the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, and the ease of using social media to spread fake news and influence domestic audiences pose monumental challenges for democracy, as is the case with the interference in the domestic politics of Western countries and the cyber-attacks carried out by Russian agents throughout the last few years (Gerodimos, Vertegaal and Villa 2017). While the full effects of current campaigning and propaganda practices are yet to be fully studied and understood, algorithms, fake news, microtargeting and advertising in social media collectively pose the single most significant threat to democratic citizenship since its modern inception, precisely because there is currently no oversight of their architecture, design, operations, reach and objectives, and no universally accepted mechanism of checking and verifying facts. The expansion of tech companies’ power and the emergence of hybrid warfare have the potential to cause massive disruption to democratic representation (see also Bartlett 2017).

25. While citizenship and civic engagement are fundamentally about the process – “the rules of the political game” – as opposed to individual issues or policies, my research (Gerodimos 2008, Gerodimos 2012) shows that younger people in particular only engage with causes or processes that (a) clearly signpost the issues at stake and (b) clearly signpost the effect or benefit that a citizen’s participation will create. This somewhat utilitarian or functional conceptualisation of engagement does create tensions and problems: firstly, it is unrealistic to expect that one
individual’s actions will always, often or at any time, have a tangible impact; secondly, it creates the expectation that citizens will always “win”, i.e. that they will always more or less get something out of the political process, whereas participating in a democracy includes the possibility of losing, being in the minority or compromising; thirdly, this individualistic perception of engagement goes against the principle of coexisting with others as part of a collective, organised society. However, in reality, these are the terms and conditions under which political engagement has to operate in an environment of accelerated pluralism, infinite outlets of consumption and opinion, and multiple stimuli oriented towards individual self-actualisation.

26. Therefore, citizenship and civic engagement have to be oriented towards solving actual problems and addressing real people’s needs – and to be seen to be doing that. Creating generic process-oriented participation opportunities is unlikely to succeed; research has shown that young people are less likely to engage with process-driven outlets, than issue-driven ones (Gerodimos 2008). As millions of jobs are about to be displaced due to automation, as Artificial Intelligence and nanotechnology are about to pose unprecedented moral and logistical dilemmas, as climate change, terrorism, forced migration and organised crime disrupt more and more communities, the only way for democracy to survive is for citizenship structures to be effective at aggregating citizens’ concerns, as well as at maximising consent for legislative agendas, policies and legal frameworks. Ultimately, civic engagement is not an end in itself; but a means to a resilient, peaceful and well-functioning community.

References


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