

Report

Workshop on Cities and Regions in the EU
with Saskia Sassen and Julien Deroin



F(EU)TURE > FESTIVAL >

The workshop took place in the framework of the F(EU)TURE FESTIVAL organised by the European Democracy Lab in Berlin from 1–16 March 2019.

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Workshop on Cities and Regions in the EU

with Saskia Sassen (Columbia University) and Julien Deroin (Regional Parliaments Lab)

On 15 March 2019, the renowned sociologist Saskia Sassen (Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University) held a workshop on “Cities and Regions in the EU” as part of the European Democracy Lab’s F(EU)TURE FESTIVAL which took place in Berlin from 1 –16 March 2019. The workshop was organised and moderated by Julien Deroin (Research Associate at the Regional Parliaments Lab). Below is a summary of Prof. Sassen’s introductory keynote.



Rethinking Europe necessitates a rethinking of the social, political and economic role of the European cities and regions. In her workshop, Prof. Saskia Sassen explained that a large variety of global circuits connect cities, with some cities being connected to dozens of global circuits. With globalisation, many cities become more closely connected to the global economy than the economy of their surrounding region or nation state. Thus Shanghai, for example, shares greater similarities with Chicago or Seoul than with other cities in China. Sassen furthermore emphasised the concurrent weakening of the nation and the strengthening of certain cities and cross-border regions in the global economy. As a result, there is a growing gap between where economic power lies – in complex networks of global cities and regions – and where political power remains – in the nation state.

Sassen views Europe as an extraordinary network of connectivities, a network that is not limited to the borders of Europe but rather extends across the globe. However, she emphasised that most connectivities are invisible; residents and politicians don't even realise that they exist and thus we are unable to make use of these connections. Until now, the academic sphere has focussed too much on the analysis of specific cities and regions in isolation. She suggests that we need to dedicate research to understanding the circuits that may connect various cities and regions in Europe, and make use of such connections. This necessitates developing an understanding of the deep histories of these cities and regions, as the histories of places have a major impact on the structure of cities and their networks. Furthermore, we need to develop an interdisciplinary approach to research and policy featuring the collaboration of different sectors. An economy cannot be understood just by analysing standardised measures such as GDP.

Sassen's discussion was ultimately highly provocative for rethinking Europe. Beyond the idea discussed at the F(EU)TURE FESTIVAL that nation states are hindering the political rights of citizens, Saskia pointed out that it does not make sense to have a system of discrete state units when systems of production, finance and management operate in networks of globally-connected cities and regions. The audience were left contemplating the forces that shape some European cities to be hyper-connected globally and others to be isolated; how does geographical and political polarisation in Europe develop and change? Such curiosity, argued Sassen, is an essential catalyst for deepening our understanding of connectivities and the forces that shape economic power. Ultimately, she pointed out, we must mobilise existing sites of knowledge such as universities and encourage research to discover and utilise new connectivities in Europe.

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