

**PRETEXT:**

Dr. Christine Landfried is an established and renowned political scientist, with a longstanding record of her many contributions to the world of politics during her career. Christine has an expansive educational background from both a European perspective as well as an American perspective, and has continued her studies through professorship at a wide array of universities. A central focus of Christine's work is on political finance, constitutional jurisdiction, European integration and the role of art in democratic societies.

In addition, Christine worked at the European Union where she analyzed the conditions under which cultural, economic and political differences can be a potential for democratic governance. Her work at the EU sparked her interest in areas of trust between political leaders and the populus, resulting in the focal point of her current studies at the Thomas Mann House. During her stay at the Thomas Mann House, Christine is investigating whether new forms of political participation, such as citizen conferences, can help to regain trust in democratic parties. Her work is congruent with her residing in LA, with her studies being reflexive of the large scaled dynamics of power that is hard to encapsulate elsewhere outside of LA.

During the last week of May, I had the opportunity to speak to Christine directly in relation to her studies from her time at the Thomas Mann House. While the geographical composition of LA is rather small, the distance between the way of life that different Angelenos endure exceeds the word vast. The dissonance between those in power and those not has only increased as time

progresses, and the conversation has been growing louder. In this interview, I sit down (via Zoom) with Christine to discuss this growing divide between our political leaders and the future of trust and power dynamics in the name of democracy.

Christine discusses her current work in the European Union analyzing alternative forms of participation in democratic politics. She talks about the knowledge of citizens, her methods of conducting her work's data, and the dynamics of power asymmetries versus symmetries. Christine encourages that despite the asymmetries between political powers seeming unsurpassable, every contribution made holds significant weight. She taught me a lot about the power dynamics in democracy, and I gained a sense of optimism from her. There are a lot of bad things going on in the world, but she emphasized that people actually have more power than we realize. There is strength in numbers and we need to be looking at what we can do instead of hounding over the thought that we are not doing enough. Christine gave me hope because she emphasized that regardless of how high the power imbalances get, the efforts made do actually do something. Christine's determination and commitment to bettering democracy was very admirable to hear about; moreover, I definitely found a role model in Christine. She instilled in me values that I plan on taking to my future career as a politician. Talking with Christine had a very positive impact on me, and I greatly appreciate all that she taught me.

Madeline Albright is a UCLA student studying Political Science and Community Engagement & Social Change.

## **INTERVIEW:**

**M:** Okay. My first question, **What's the objective of your research? And how are you conducting? Just walk me through your process.**

**C:** Well, we see that democracy has big problems. Therefore, the question is how to strengthen democracy. How can we reconsider the project of democracy? And in this context, it is interesting that new forms of citizen' participation like citizens' assemblies have been established in Europe and in the United States. The question of my research is: Can these new forms of participation really strengthen democracy? Can they be successful?

**M:** So what are you hoping to discover from your research? And, what do you think you're actually going to find from your research?

**C:** I want to find out under what conditions the new forms of citizens' participation can be an effective way to rebuild democracy. As scholars, we collect the empirical facts and then explain what we are observing. Of course, already the topic we are choosing shows your scholarly

interest. **But once you start researching, you want to find out the truth about the empirical situation and give convincing explanations of what you are observing.**

My interest in new forms of citizens' assemblies has to do with my conviction that the knowledge of the so-called "small" woman and "small man" is an important resource for political problem-solving. **I think that citizens have a kind of knowledge that is different from the knowledge of experts. Citizens have the knowledge of experience of everyday life in different situations.**

The next step in research once you have defined your topic is always to collect the empirical data and to see what really happens. As I said, you have a certain interest once you start, but then you go to the empirical side, and you analyze the data in a way that you and others can understand. At the end of my research - after having explained the empirical situation - I see my task as a scholar in making reform proposals. With regard to my current project, my aim is to develop proposals which promise to give citizens' more influence on politics as it is the case right now.

So you see, the research is the objective part, the proposals are based on this research, and the choice of the topic is the subjective part.

**M: What is the data that you're collecting? How are you collecting this data, and is it quantitative, qualitative, or both?**

**C:** I am always collecting quantitative and qualitative data. In my research on the last Convention of the European Union, I made long personal interviews with the members of the Presidium of this Convention. For example, I have interviewed Giscard d'Estaing, the President of this Convention and Giuliano Amato, one of the Vice-Presidents of this Convention. Such qualitative interviews are very important for me. I would ask how the Members of the Presidium how they prepared the sessions, how they choose the recommendations of the members of the Convention, and how they found a consensus. The results of these interviews have just been published in the third edition of my book "Das politische Europa. Differenz als Potential der Europäischen Union" (2020).

Then I analysed the minutes of the sessions of this Convention and examined whether there has been a real discourse. For example one of my questions was whether Members of the Convention referred to each other in the debate. Or did they just give statements? Also, I counted how often women would speak up. Women don't talk as often as men, and if they do, they would never repeat what was said before. Men would very often start, "this has been said several times, but I want to say", and then they simply repeat what has been said before. You can see that women don't do that, and this is about quantitative data.

In the research I'm doing now on the Conference on the Future of Europe, I participated in some of the sessions as an observer. I would sit in the European Parliament writing down what I was observing. It's not just about spoken words or written texts; it's also about gestures, in which people are saying something. For example, is there passion in a contribution or not. Such observations are qualitative data.

As I was an observer, some of the citizens would write to me about their experiences. I'm thinking of getting in touch with them and asking if they would give me an interview. This would be the more qualitative part. Then there was a young woman whom I met just by accident in the bus in Florence, and I found out she made a film about the Conference, and I'm in contact with her now. So, once again my research will be a mix of quantitative and qualitative data.

However, my quantitative approach is not representative. I can only interview some of the citizens, while 800 citizens were participating in the conference.

**M:** How would your research challenge the notion of power imbalances? How is it enlightening the population about the power imbalances? **And how is your research ideally going to help people?**

**C:** I think that's a very important question – Usually in politics, we don't have a power balance, but we have an asymmetry, an imbalance of power. So if you look to the European Union, you can see a power imbalance. Over the last decades the executives, the Commission and the national governments, have gained in power to the detriment of the parliaments and to the detriment of the public sphere.

During the Euro Crisis, the executives strengthened their power, claiming that new rules were established only for the management of the crisis. But once the crisis was over, the executives kept the new rules of governing and the power balance had changed. You can observe this mechanism in all crises of the European Union. And this is also why many people are losing trust in European politics.

And now, to address this imbalance- regarding the Conference on the Future of Europe, **the idea was to re-make this a little bit- to give back citizens some power.** Citizens don't gain power by the debates alone, but also by the follow-up of such a conference. A young woman said, 'I was participating in the working group on democracy, and communication is the way we understand each other. You politicians should not listen to us just to give us a quick answer. But **you should listen to us to understand.**' I thought that this was a very smart remark.

All depends now on what politicians will do with the recommendations of the Conference. Will the recommendations have a real impact on politics? So it is still too early to give a final judgment.

**M:** So the power imbalance, it's obviously a trend, you know, it's been to where power has been taken away from the people. And the power goes higher up to the politicians. How do we, how do we change it? **Is it too late to make a difference? Do you think that we're too far gone?**

**C:** Never say too late, Madeline. I think because otherwise we would stop working.

**M:** I know, but well, how can we fix it? What is the way?

**C:** Democracy is not in crisis because politicians are bad people. There is an objective trend that power goes to the executives and to the administration. Globalization strengthens the trend towards giving power to politicians who are in the executive, who are in governments, not in parliaments. In addition, there is a process that science is becoming more and more important. If you want to fight COVID, you need the knowledge of scholars who know about viruses. We have seen that. This importance of science and scientific knowledge is also something which takes politics away from the people. **People bring in another kind of knowledge. And this other kind of knowledge should have more of an impact.**

Coming to your question whether I think that we can still do something, **there is one reason why I'm also pessimistic.** Trust in democracy has to do with your economic situation. And here we observe a growing economic inequality worldwide. I think that this makes it very difficult to reverse the trend. Still, if I did not believe that there can be something done, I would not do research. At the same time it's very important to see the big challenges and not to be a naïve optimist.

With my work as a scholar, I can contribute very little to real politics. The Conference on the Future of Europe which I am analyzing right now, will change the critical situation of democracy a little bit. But **a little is already something. So one has to see it like this.** But I agree with you, that one has to ask the question, can the situation still be changed? Does such a Conference help anything? So you're absolutely right with your question.

**M:** I have been really feeling that same dilemma of pain and the imbalance of suffering these past months, similar to what you've mentioned. sorry, I'm like a little caught off guard, because you really hit the head on everything that I've been thinking about. recently... Yeah, this is a real problem.

**C:** There is a book by Thomas Piketty on the Capital in the 21st Century. According to him, it's not the inequality of income anymore. It's the wealth, the inequality of wealth. You can work as much as you want, you will never make up with wealthy people. Today, the average income from wealth is bigger than the average growth of the economy. This mechanism shows a trend towards more and more inequality in a globalizing world.

What can we do against this? We would need taxes on wealth. But even when you have progressive governments as for example in Germany now the coalition between Social Democrats, the Green Party and the Liberals, they don't talk about tax on wealth, just on income. **We have a long way to go to fight inequality, because democracy is not possible with so much inequality.**

What I have seen with the Conference on the Future of Europe is that people are aware of this growing inequality, and that they demand politicians to do something about it. So at least, here you can see some small steps into the right direction.

**M:** So if you had a worldwide megaphone, and you could communicate to the suffering people, and to the people in charge, what would you say to them? **And how would you begin to rebuild this trust in our people and this connection between our leaders and the people who don't have a voice?**

**C:** Well, let's start with the politicians. When people lose trust in political elites and in democratic institutions, there are reasons for it, and politicians should care about these reasons. I would say, politicians should listen more to the people, because the people have experience on the ground, and politicians very often don't. **And my message would be, that if you want democracy, you first of all need justice.** I think this is the central topic at the moment.

What I would say to the people who are suffering? I think that I have no right to address them. How should I reach them as a scholar who is sitting in the Thomas Mann House? I am in a very privileged position, and first of all I should be aware of that before telling others what to do.

My influence as a scholar on real politics is very small. I write, but I don't change the world with my writing. Well, Karl Marx or Einstein have changed the world. And, Thomas Mann has made a difference with his writings. Also, he showed with his speeches on BBC and with his sharp criticism of the Nazi regime that intellectuals can influence real politics. But you know, this was Thomas Mann. I'm not Thomas Mann.

So, I should not reach out to people. From my point of view, if I would do it, this would be arrogant. With my work, I **should rather address the people who are responsible - the politicians.**

**M:** Well, I can speak to you for hours longer, but unfortunately this call is going to cut off shortly. **But are there any other things that I didn't ask or that you haven't had a chance to say that you would like to say?**

**C:** Thank you so much for these questions. It's important for me to have this conversation and to discuss the impact of my research.

**M:** Thank you. Yeah, I think the questions that I asked are similar to your interests, and I've been feeling those same things. I think that I have quite a lot to learn from you. So, yeah, thank you so much for your time, Christine.

**C:** Yeah, thank you for all this preparation. And **this is not the end, we go on.**

**M:** Yes, we will. Thank you so much. Have a wonderful day.

**C:** Bye bye.