



PUBLIC SPACES
Searching out the social underpinnings of democracy
in everyday life

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Abstract

This work is about the everyday relationship between public spaces and democracy. Based on the comparison of historical and qualitative data, it aims to discuss the existence of an underpinning social experience of democracy that is the ground for, but also goes beyond, the institutional and political definitions of democracy.

The thesis argues that, albeit in different ways, diverse public spaces such as public squares and shopping malls are both platforms for democratic practices in contemporary cities. Taking as a backdrop the relatively recent liberalisation processes carried out in Chile and Spain, the study focuses on one central square and one shopping mall in each capital—that is, in Madrid the study concentrates in *Puerta del Sol* and *La Vaguada*, whereas in Santiago it is based on *Plaza Italia* and mall *Plaza Vespucio*. For each setting a twofold question guided this exploration: what are the social and political elements that characterise the transformation of specific locations into particularly significant public spaces and, in turn, how is democracy experienced daily and made viable through social practices within these settings.

In order to answer these questions the analysis is based, on the one hand, on urban-historical data and newspaper accounts, while on the other hand it relies on the description of the daily routines of three different sets of actors linked to these settings: those who relate to them as “experts” (urban planners and mall developers), those who experience these places as working areas, and those who inhabit them as ordinary visitors and frequenters. In spite of the differences among these sets of actors and especially between public squares and shopping malls, the thesis defends that both locations serve as platforms for experiencing democracy. Experiences of access, connection, use, exchange, expression and respect are endowed within public squares and shopping malls, justifying not only the individuals’ appreciation of these locations as valuable public spaces, but also nourishing the idea of what is democracy about and the possibilities one has to experience it directly.



Jury: Peter Wagner (University of Trent), Donatella Della Porta (EUI) and Tracy Strong (University of California at San Diego).

Bio

Daniela Vicherat Mattar is a graduated sociologist from the P. Universidad Catolica de Chile (1996), MA in Social and Political Thought at the University of Warwick (2000) and started her PhD at the European University Institute, where she obtained a Master of Research in Social and Political Sciences (2003). In between her postgraduate studies she has pursued a professional career as development and social policy analyst in Chile and Spain. In 2008 she was awarded a Marie Curie Research Fellowship to carry out a research on intra-urban and inter-national walls in contemporary Europe at the University of Edinburgh. In 2009 she won an essay competition on *Urban Governance* at the Irmgard Coninx Foundation, Berlin. Daniela's academic interests concentrate on the socio-political and cultural dimensions of the urban experience, especially at the level of everyday life interactions, with emphasis on the normative and empirical issues rising from the private/public divide and identity issues underpinning quests for belonging, particularly in relationship to the (de)construction of political communities.