

Everyday Meeting Spaces as Infrastructures for Democracy

Research Paper

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The Center for Liberal Modernity is a Berlin-based Think-Tank that stands up for the defense and renewal of open society. Liberal Modernity, as such a combination of individual freedom, democratic republic, cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity is facing pressure worldwide. It is challenged from within as well as from the outside. In times of fundamental changes there is a need for crosspartisan reflection about the future of our common society and the international order. For us the individual freedom and social cohesion, personal responsibility and strong public Institutions belong together.

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Two simultaneous trends are changing the way people live together around the world. One is the global megatrend of urbanization. People are drawn to cities by the lure of economic and social advancement, entertainment, diverse infrastructure and job opportunities. It is estimated that up to seven billion people worldwide will be living in cities by 2050.¹

There is a downside to this process. Rural areas are becoming increasingly isolated. Social structures, infrastructure, doctors, shopping and leisure facilities are disappearing. Villages and towns are becoming deserted.

These two trends are two sides of the same coin, and they are massively changing the way people live together. Neighborhoods are being built or rebuilt at a rapid pace, people are moving, social networks are shifting, dissolving, and reassembling. Often, social infrastructures don't form as quickly as physical ones. Social networks are important to protect people from loneliness, to provide support in times of crisis, to provide a sense of security, and much more. Not only this, but something else is at stake: our democracy.

It is not just urbanization and rural depopulation. The world faces many immense challenges. Foremost among them is climate change. The consequences of global migration, digitalization, wars and crises, health crises and much more are still hard to predict and are putting pressure on societies. All this is changing how we live together, where we can live, what our cities look like, how we move, how we eat and how we work. The 2020s are a decade of major global change – and there is no end to the turbulence in sight. All this is leading to a renegotiation of our social

interaction, indeed our democratic coexistence. This renegotiation requires certain (infra)structures.

WE NEED TO RENEGOTIATE HOW WE LIVE TOGETHER

There has been a lot of talk about infrastructure lately. Often, it's about (dilapidated) buildings, pipes, bridges, cables, roads and railways. These are all important to societies. They frame and enable life, transport and prosperity. But democracies need infrastructure too, because they have long since ceased to function as in the ideal of the ancient polis, an assembly of equal men who solve problems together through discussion. Modern democracies are complex in order to cope with a complex world, and so they need a variety of underlying infrastructures.

DEMOCRACIES NEED INFRASTRUCTURE

Democracies are based on equal fundamental rights for all. Fundamental rights, argues Princeton political scientist Jan-Werner Müller, need infrastructures to be effectively implemented. He focuses in particular on political parties and free media. They structure time in democracies through decisions, elections and events. They also – at least potentially – give a large part of the population access to democratic processes.²

Democracy is not just about parties, media or institutions. For most people, these are very distant; indeed, they rarely have anything to do with them. Politics is conveyed to the majority of people mainly through the media (which is another reason why they are so relevant). What people actually experience are citizens' offices, that work well or not so well, good or

not-so-good schools, streets and squares, clubs, cafes and pubs. Where those places wither or disappear, a piece of everyday democracy falls away.

»We need to renegotiate how we live together.«

How will the street, or the square around the corner, be transformed? Who will I meet at the parents' evening at school? Who will I meet on the train? And with whom can I argue about politics, and philosophize about life, in the local pub? Everyday meeting places are, in short, the places where we experience democracy in everyday life. It is here that we meet other people, experience their differences and yet perceive them as equals. It's also where we experience how negotiation between people works – or doesn't. Little is written about these places, but their role can hardly be overestimated.

MEETING PLACES ARE THE EVERYDAY INFRASTRUCTURE OF DEMOCRACY

In recent years, a different kind of meeting place has come to the fore: political fora, often used to discuss certain issues, sometimes also to bring together people who would otherwise rarely meet. There is a lot of discussion about citizens' councils in particular, and some high-level experiments, for example in France, Germany and the EU. Often the focus is on a single big issue, such as how to deal with climate change, and the results should be concrete. Participants are often randomly se-

lected to represent as broad a cross-section of the population as possible.

These new formats are important; they add deliberative forms to the principle of representation that many democracies claim to use. However, they are also far removed from the daily lives of most people and are not suitable for experiencing and consolidating democracy in everyday life.

HOW DO MEETING PLACES WORK?

Why everyday meeting places are important is best illustrated by considering what happens when they are missing. The US-American sociologist Ray Oldenbourg complains that the US-American middle class only commutes by car between the family home in the suburbs and the workplace in the city. He contrasts these first and second places with what he calls third places, where people interact and are socially or culturally stimulated. These cafes, bars, hairdressers, beer gardens and the like are easily accessible, have low standards and bring very different people together.³

These places have both individual and community benefits. Individually, they reduce loneliness – the new epidemic – and are places where people learn new things and are exposed to different perspectives.⁴ Socially, they are hotbeds of everyday democratic debate, where people learn to tolerate, debate and compromise with others and their different attitudes. In addition, according to Oldenbourg, they are places where people can act out; where they can vent their feelings, but in a socially controlled way.⁵ And sociologist Eric Klinenberg adds that well-maintained third places encourage people to take responsibility for their surroundings: The better maintained a street is, the more

people will take care not to litter it. The better the social net in a neighborhood, the better people can cope with catastrophes – because they look after each other.⁶

What makes everyday places “meeting places”? First of all, we use them every day, i.e., we encounter them on the routes that we travel: We use the roads, the suburban train or the bus together, we eat lunch in a café near our workplace, in the evening we go to the swimming pool or to the gym, and sometimes we go to the parents' evening at the local school. Secondly, they are easily accessible: None of these places require a great deal of effort or money to enter. You may need to buy a ticket for public transport or pay for a beer in a bar, but the investment costs are reasonable. Thirdly, they are largely voluntary, or at least they do not force certain encounters, and there are alternatives.

What happens in these places? That is very different. One activity that takes place in all everyday meeting places is casual observation. Whether in cafes, swimming pools, on the street, in the metro or in the library, we meet people who are different from us in some way. We share a common space, are sometimes even engaged in the same activity, and yet we are different. Differences take on faces, they become associated with concrete people. Someone in the library is reading Thomas Mann instead of fancy Georgian-German author Nino Haratischwili, but he actually looks quite nice. A mohawk with a suit? Unusual, but why not. This casual observation, this experience of diversity, is invaluable for democracies, because it is based on people willingly making compromises and not necessarily asserting their interests. This requires them to recognize others as legitimate members of a

society – for which they need to experience those others on a regular basis.

But that's not all: Additional linguistic exchange takes place in pubs, in political education, in specially created spaces of encounter, or on benches in the park. Anyone who has ever spent a night in a pub discussing a sensitive issue with a supporter of a different political persuasion knows the value of such encounters: You can agree to disagree – and still have a beer together. Nobody would do that on social media. Many formats of political education work in a similar way.

In some places you can even meet peo-

»Democracies need infrastructure.«

ple on a regular basis. At home, in schools, in youth clubs or at the old men's evening boules game in the park: The same people can meet, whether they want to or not. This is an opportunity to get to know each other better and to deepen relationships based on a shared activity or a shared place of residence. “Acquaintances” play an important role in feeding new information into networks, i.e., exposing us to opinions, views and information that are not familiar to us. Since it is acquaintances and not strangers who provide this information, we need to take them seriously.

Some meeting places also offer the opportunity to do different activities together. Practicing rescues with the volunteer fire brigade, singing cantatas or gospel with the choir, playing chess in the park in front of an audience, taking sports classes at

the gym, or gardening in the community garden – all of these involve working with others, sometimes strangers. This shared activity is an important building block of community.⁷

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT ENCOUNTER IS SHORT-LIVED

The Corona pandemic showed how important encounters are for people. Democracies can get by with fewer encounters for a while if they have stable institutions, but this does not work in the long run.

Now, one might say: That's a nice list, it's all important for democracies, but it works, so what's the problem? The problem is that in many places, these meeting places are disappearing.

Two examples: In the UK, pubs are dying. This trend has been going on for a long time: While there were over 60,000 pubs in the UK in 2000, there are now just over 46,000. The Corona pandemic has accelerated this trend, and rising energy prices are putting even more pressure on venues.⁸ The situation is similar for public swimming pools in Germany. Affordable summer fun at the pool, currywurst and chips or swimming twice a week as a workout? This is becoming less and less possible, because swimming pools are increasingly being replaced by much more expensive water parks that offer a lot of fun but only for those who can afford it.⁹

»Meeting places
are the everyday
infrastructure
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The list goes on: small kiosks are dying because they have to compete with supermarkets and online deliveries, many voluntary clubs are desperate for members, libraries are being merged and youth clubs are being closed.¹⁰ There is at least some good news: The number of fitness studios, for example, is increasing in most countries – individual exercise rather than club exercise is the trend. Urban gardening is taking over the few open spaces in big cities and making them greener.

MEETING PLACES NEED TO BE PROMOTED

Meeting infrastructures are undergoing major changes. In many places, these changes are accompanied by losses, but new things are also emerging. This makes it all the more important not only to observe these processes, but also to actively promote opportunities for encounters.

What does this mean at a political level? In general, everyday meeting places should be promoted because they benefit democracy. However, this doesn't mean that artificial meeting places should be created everywhere. Rather, places that people already use should be promoted, such as pubs and swimming pools, libraries, village shops and clubhouses, parks and streets.

Some suggestions for concrete policies:

- 1) Funds for meeting places in structurally weak areas

Meeting is especially important where it is diminishing. In areas affected by depopulation, where the economy is crippled, there is a downward spiral. Fewer people and fewer businesses mean less money for the communities, which leads to fewer

opportunities to shape the future. This is where targeted help is needed, not only with economic development, but also with the promotion of meetings. The pub has to close for financial reasons. Why not pay the rent? Doctors move to the next town. Why not keep a surgery open twice a week next to the village shop? How can the park in the town center be maintained? Together – and with support from a fund. These funds can be used in individual regions or countries, and as an instrument of development cooperation. Why not promote democracy through meeting places?

- 2) Co-design instead of forced gratification
Meetings rarely work the way they are designed on the drawing board. If you tell people what to do, it often goes wrong. That's why it is important to create open infrastructures that can be used in different ways. So, how do you find out what people need? You ask them. Participation processes are essential to the design of meeting places – that's the only way they'll really be used, the only way they'll be designed the

way people need them. Participation itself is a small school of democracy.

- 3) Remove barriers, encourage mixing
For meeting places to promote democracy, they must not be too exclusive, but must welcome a variety of people. Therefore, the entry requirements should not be too high. This applies to financial, logistical and knowledge barriers.

- 4) Multifunctional facilities
Places can have multiple functions: Schools can offer classes during the day and space for voluntary associations and initiatives in the evening. Their auditoriums can be used for performances, classrooms for counseling services and much more.

- 5) Exchange on meeting infrastructures
Last but not least, there is a need for forums to exchange views on the everyday foundations of democracy across disciplinary and national boundaries. The G20 and its associated processes can be places for this, as can city summits or UN conferences.

¹ Urbanization - Our World in Data. [2019]. Retrieved March 24, 2023, from <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization#citation>

² Mueller, J.-W. (2021). *Democracy rules. Liberty, Equality, Uncertainty*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

³ Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place. Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Marlowe & Company.

⁴ Ibid., Ch. 3

⁵ Ibid., Ch. 4

⁶ Klinenberg, E. (2018). *Palaces for the people. How to build a more equal & united society*. Vintage.

⁷ Manthe, R. (2020). *Warum treffen sich soziale Bewegungen? Vom Wert der Begegnung: Interaktionssoziologische Perspektiven auf das Weltsozialforum*. Transcript Verlag.

⁸ <https://beerandpub.com/data-statistics>, see also <https://www.uhy-uk.com/insights/pub-and-bar-company-insolvencies-jump-83-past-year-512>, accessed 26.03.2023. For Germany, see <https://www.merkur.de/wirtschaft/bericht-corona-krise-hat-zu-kneipensterben-in-deutschland-gefuehrt-91421779.html>, accessed 26.03.2023.

⁹ <https://www.gws-os.com/de/die-gws/news/detail/unsere-zahl-des-monats-022020-baedersterben-und-regionale-schwimmbaddichte-deutschland-droht-ein-land-der-nichtschwimmer-zu-werd>, accessed 26.03.2023.

¹⁰ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/brauchtum-koeln-kiosksterben-2000-geschaefte-weniger-in-zehn-jahren-dpa-urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-180823-99-655256>, accessed 26.03.2023