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Democracy in the Age of Platformisation

1.1 Reproblematising Democracy in the Age of Platformisation

The question of how digital technologies – from basic ICT to more recent AI-powered platforms – reconstitute democracy has caught the attention of scholars in geography, digital democracy, urban studies and science and technology studies (STS)¹. Yet much analysis on the interplay between democracy and new digital technologies – like mobile apps, social media and bespoke algorithmic platforms – is dominated by concerns about anti-democratic outcomes and futures. As such, many scholars have declared that digital platforms – with their usages of AI technologies such as generative AI or Machine Learning (ML) algorithms – now threaten the very foundations of ‘our’ democracies. They assume that the existence of AI-powered platforms interferes with the very conditions under which political opinions, debates and actions are constructed. Social media platforms are known to spread misinformation about important political events, such as the US general election (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2018). AI-driven bots manipulate ‘the facts’ by manufacturing and disseminating extremist political opinions and fake news during elections and beyond, for example the ‘infodemic’ event during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gruzd *et al.*, 2021). In doing so, AI-powered platforms inflict and evoke particular feelings in the minds

¹ STS is a critical approach to digital technologies, platforms and algorithms that sometimes intersects with other sub- and emergent fields like critical algorithmic studies, critical platform studies, digital humanities and digital anthropologies.

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of voters and citizens, making them more susceptible to manipulation through fear, panic or anxiety (Erku *et al.*, 2021). AI-powered platforms recondition the ways in which protests and resistance are detected and policed in urban spaces, as they can learn to recognise these events by studying patterns from past occurrences (Amoore, 2020).

In the broader sense, AI-powered platforms are also accused of undermining democratic principles that underpin our political life, such as freedom, equality and accountability (Coeckelbergh, 2024). Platform companies like Amazon and Google are not held accountable for collecting and monetising data about our private lives and online activities (Pasquale, 2015) in new forms of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016). Indeed, most digital platforms fall short of delivering or enhancing democracy, despite frequent claims of nurturing social connections and building communities that drive democratic egalitarianism (Gillespie, 2010, p. 355; van Dijck, 2013, p. 4).

Scholars have concerned about AI-powered platforms for their anti-democratic tendencies. However, many analyses have focused solely on mainstream digital platforms and AI systems (such as social media platforms and biometric systems) prevalent in Euro-American contexts. These analyses often make universal assumptions about the concept of platform capitalism, with little engagement with 'internal' debates within democratic theories or digital democratic studies. In this universal scenario, there is often an excessive emphasis on a single model of democracy: liberal democracy. There is little effort to extend our understanding of democracy and platforms beyond the disciplinary boundaries that delineate digital democracy studies, STS studies, human geography and urban studies. There is little attention paid to the 'lesser-known' digital platforms that facilitate ordinary political actions in decision-making processes outside the confines of platform capitalism and the 'mainstream case studies' of the United Kingdom and the United States. There is a noticeable lack of engagement with the enduring debates and challenges surrounding the essence and future of democracy in democratic theories or/and digital democracy studies. Lastly, there has been limited effort to recognise digital platforms and AI as agents that actively construct and reconstruct political actions with implications for democracy.

Liquid democracy acknowledges the aforementioned issues in order to rethink and retheorise democracy in the age of platforms. Few theories adequately capture or identify the contextually and empirically shaped conditions under which actually existing democracy might emerge in digital spaces that are often entangled with urban spaces. Such theories often overlook the works of STS scholars and geographers like Donna Haraway, Louise Amoore, Kate Crawford and many others, who see

digital platforms and spaces as being continuously shaped by ML algorithms, data and human interaction, thereby holding potential for democratic emergence within (or sometimes against) foreclosure. Digital platforms and their components all have agency. The fact that they act to construct and reconstruct what Barnett (2017) describes as ordinary political actions – from voting to campaigning – at an unprecedented level should not be taken lightly when thinking and theorising democracy in the age of platforms.

This book grapples with three key questions to unravel the ontological corrections, categorical (or binary) divisions and universal assumptions inherent in democratic theories that lead to epistemic challenges about democracy:

1. How do new digital platforms reconstitute political actions, opinions and actors in participatory decision-making processes, and with what implications for democracy?
2. How might we theorise democracy in relation to cities and platforms beyond the normative, binary and Northern conceptualisation of democracy?
3. How can comparative studies help conceptualise and discern (new) conditions and openings for democracy in digital and urban worlds?

1.2 Meeting ‘Differences’ of Democracy at the Intersections

Liquid democracy aims to adopt an intersectional approach that seriously reconsiders how ‘differences’ can shed light on our understanding of democracy. The concept of liquid democracy identifies multiple openings, movements and moments for democracy from different temporal geographies, different worlds, different platforms and different democratic theories. It hopefully draws out the democratic possibilities in liquid conditions, where the boundaries defining political actors, actions and propositions are established and de-established at the crossroads of digital and urban spaces. ‘Democracy’ here is multiple and cannot be confined to a single democratic theory, category or principle. Rather, it presents an emerging set of multiple possibilities and openings in liquid conditions that evoke situated democratic practices such as pluralism, care, collective knowledge-making and alternative future-making for struggles.

The term ‘liquid’ evokes characteristics of water – surrounding, flowing, dissolving and generating – to serve as an overarching metaphor for this book. It is helpful to describe the ways in which this intersectional approach dissolves the rigid binaries, categories and theories of

democracy that stubbornly divide our worlds into hierarchical, categorical and other ‘unbridgeable’ differences. The difference between Global North and East/South. The difference between human and technology/algorithms. The difference between good and bad democracy. The difference between different categories of democracy. The difference between past, present and future. The difference between disciplinary boundaries. All that has been marked as different now meets each other at the intersections of digital and urban worlds.

Liquid democracy works the ‘differences’ into multiple entanglements that produce new knowledge about democracy in digital and urban worlds. Previous rigidities and binaries (e.g. human and algorithm, urban and digital space, different geographical places, theory and worlds) forcing our understanding of democracy into foreclosures now meet *within* and *between* these worlds. These intersections grow, morph and multiply, as do the digital urban worlds that unfold in front of us.

This intersectional approach to understanding democracy resonates with feminist and post-colonial scholars who have long pondered how to make sense of all these differences in ways that bring about new knowledge. For them, the questions of how to intersect and acquire knowledge are political and ethical (Haraway, 1991, 2000, 2016; Robinson, 2006). In other words, there should be a political and ethical intention behind melting down and mixing up differences into entanglements, intersections or crossroads. Considering this, my intention here is to unravel the very danger around thinking and practising democracy from the standpoint of mainstream American-European terms, theories and histories without acknowledging their limitations, contestations and competitions in asserting authority over their claim to democracy (cf. Derrida, 2005; Barnett, 2017).

Indeed, there is a danger in considering how these well-known terms about democracy form a strong ‘fraternity’ (Derrida, 2005) that, consequently, further compartmentalises our understanding of democracy into particular historical traditions, geographical locations, theoretical ontologies and categories. It is precisely from this vantage point that I hope to unearth a situated and partial knowledge about democracy emerging from other worlds that have remained obscured to democratic theories and categories. The liquid metaphor does not completely dismantle the rigid boundaries and frameworks that have traditionally underpinned our understanding of democracy in someone’s, someplace’s, or some history’s terms. Rather, much like water that renders binaries and categories permeable, this intersectional approach finds resonance in what Shohat (1998, p. 1) describes as categories that ‘exist not as hermetically sealed entities but rather as parts of a permeable interwoven relationality’.

Intersections, then, become crossroads, meeting points where the ‘mutual embeddedness’ of different cities, platforms and democracies from other urban and digital worlds is received and taken seriously. Here, the ‘liquid’ metaphor also illustrates the circulations and movements – what Shohat (1998) refers to as ‘travelling’ – of AI and digital platforms across different cities and countries. Before delving into more details about the workings of intersections, let’s pay a short visit to the larger world where feminist and post-colonial scholars provide ways to challenge many of the arbitrary divisions in our understanding of democracy and where we might connect democracy with larger and unknown digital and urban worlds.

Feminist and post-colonial scholars from STS, human geography and cultural studies have challenged the divides between the ‘good’ local and the ‘bad’ global and between the rich Global North and the poor Global South. From Floya Anthias’s multicultural feminism to Jennifer Robinson’s concept of ordinary cities, universal categories and theories that divide worlds into binaries or hierarchies have been problematised, challenged and complicated. This has been achieved by inventing new notions such as transnational positionality (Anthias, 2002) and networks (Shohat, 1998, 2001; Tsing, 2004), necropolitics (Mbembe, 2019) and the logic of care (Mol, 2008). For these scholars, what matters is the celebration of situated, particular, fluid and more-than-human practices and experiences imbued with interconnections and power dynamics that have been made obscured under simplistic binaries (such as the Global North and South) or universal concepts like the global city (Sassen, 1991), gender and race (Haraway, 1991; Shohat, 1998), technology (Haraway, 1991, 2000) and reason (Mol, 2008).

For Haraway (1991, 2000), a feminist and post-colonial approach in STS privileges ways of knowing that find and construct affinities from unlikely sources and allies, rather than adhering to predefined, rigid and so-called global identities, categories and concepts. These are difficult yet important issues for feminist and post-colonial scholars to handle, as connections and affinities are built not to establish division or opposition but to make a difference in knowledge-making, keeping it as fluid and partial as possible. There are certainly many possible affinities, but not all are oriented towards political ends that keep the narrative open to establishing new affinities, creative repropagations and more hopeful futures (Haraway, 2000, p. 113).

Taking this critical approach from STS studies, intersections ‘partake’ and ‘accommodate’ different worlds and theories to push against the conventions that shape the geographical and theoretical boundary of knowledge-making about democracy. As such, all distinctive theoretical

stances and empirics about democracy are intersected in a way that contravenes a singular adherence to a particular theory, moment, location or history. The differences are juxtaposed – thrown together (Massey, 2005) – in ways that mutually amplify and contextualise one another without eliminating each's unique difference. Links that thread through theoretical differences in democracy and empirical differences in digital and urban worlds should be located, drawn out and named. Many critical voices, openings and movements about democracy have become noticed, named and made known. Their differences are well accommodated, acknowledged and engaged in a dialogue in which no one theory, no one geographical location, no one city, no one movement, no one platform and no one history silences others. Each leans alongside the other not in opposition or to compromise its distinctive difference, but to create a kind of dissonant connection (Shohat, 1998). This connection makes it possible to engage with theoretical tensions and empirical gaps to question and thicken our understanding of democracy in the age of the platforms.

These intersections challenge the disciplinary, ontological, categorical and geographical boundaries traditionally defining, understanding and practising democracy and expose them as part of an arbitrary, self-celebratory, canonical circuit of knowledge production. One shall not have the field – with all its differences and heterogeneity in the digital and urban worlds of democracy – ‘pinned down’ like a sample of an exotic butterfly exhibited behind the glass door in the museum. One shall not have democracy trapped in a singular category, ontology and history, as each theory claims to be universal, normative or managerial. One shall not have all the possibilities of theorising and practising democracy otherwise exhausted. Drawing on Shohat (1998) and Haraway (1991, 2000), intersections foster *new* actions of paralleling, relating and embellishing one another in ways that allow no one to possess absolute priority in understanding what democracy is and should be.

Differences emerging at the intersections between digital and urban worlds prompt us to reconsider democracy and depart from anti-democratic inflexions and binary epistemes. *Liquid democracy* accounts for ‘differences’ in digital worlds as they interact with urban worlds. That is, algorithms operate differently (and with varying effects) depending on how they interact with data, humans and regulations whose agency and actions are situated in the urban worlds (Graham, 2005, 2020; Crang and Graham, 2007; Kitchin, 2014; Kitchin, Maalsen and McArdle, 2016; Barns, 2020). *Liquid democracy* also considers geographical differences in thinking and practising democracy differently. As Isin and Ruppert (2015, p. 42) have already shown, geographical

differences – different institutions, imagination, history and culture – ‘make a huge difference to how citizen subjects realise certain possibilities and act and organise themselves through the Internet’. Thus, intersections allow us to seriously consider and gather all these differences, and might enable us to capture emergent and multiple democratic practices that are not otherwise known.

Liquid democracy exposes and engages with many puzzles (i.e. ontological corrections, categorical or binary epistemes) arising from different democracy theories, including participatory, radical, ordinary, post-structuralist, plural democracy, digital democracy and more. By reworking assemblage thinking with an emphasis on ‘in-the-world ontologies’, *liquid democracy* unravels such puzzles and recontextualises democracy in its openly and mutually constitutive relationship between digital urban worlds and theories. Following Barnett (2017), *liquid democracy* refrains from rigidly adhering to an ‘ontological correction’ in democratic theories. As Barnett (2017, p. 3) puts it, a radicalised theory of democratic politics must ‘resist the temptation to identify the possibility of political change with forms of extraordinary action that are sharply set off from the ordinary rhythms in which politics is routinely experienced and known’. For Barnett (2017, p. 7), the task for critical scholars is ‘not to determine the essence of the political, the core ontological sense of democracy, or the prescriptively normative rules of public deliberation’. Critiques of democratic theories should ‘open out to a program of inquiry into how democratic politics emerges in the world’ by illuminating ‘the course of political action and value’ through which ‘democracy’s meanings emerge’ (Barnett, 2017, pp. 4, 279). Barnett (2017, pp. 79–84) warns that developing an *a priori* ontological assertion² of democratic politics risks ‘an unacknowledged arrogation of interpretative authority’ (see more on debates in radical democracy in Section 2.1.3).

Indeed, Barnett (2017) has turned away from radical democratic theorists, such as Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière³. For him, these scholars have split democratic politics into a stylised contrast between

² There are three ontological readings of democratic politics: theoretical critique, an empirical interpretation and a philosophical assertion (see details in Barnett, 2017, p. 79–82). Such ontological claims are often presented as objective perspectives underpinning conditions for democracies. What Barnett suggests is that we should rework such distanced ontological claims with our own commitments as scholars or/and participants in the world (Barnett, 2017, 19–20).

³ While Jacques Rancière is not conventionally described as a radical democracy theorist, for Clive Barnett (2017, p. 14), he shares ‘ontological inflections of the political’ with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.

rationality and passion, between consensus and antagonism and between 'post-politics' and self-evident events of 'the political' that dramatically and transcendently disrupt political orders. Such scholars have predetermined democracy from an ontological correction: a pre-arranged consensus 'replaces' the possibility of dissent, debate and disagreement (Rancière, 1998; Crouch, 2004; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2011), or what Mouffe (1999) terms antagonism – irreducible exclusions and differences that shape a given political issue through a binary proposition of 'we' versus 'they'. Whilst Mouffe sees antagonism as an ontological foundation for pluralistic/antagonist democratic politics, Rancière, as critiqued by Barnett (2017), tends to normalise democratic politics as rare, fleeting and eventful disruptions of a given political or social order. Democracy is envisioned in a constant struggle to assert power over various forms of hegemony (Mouffe, 1999; Purcell, 2013), or it manifests in moments that challenge hegemonic power due to its failure to uphold equality (Rancière, 1998).

Taking an intersectional approach also chews dichotomies entrenched in digital democracy studies through which digital technologies and platforms are normatively understood as either for or against democracy, either a digital utopia or dystopia and either revolutionary or politics as usual (Hague and Loader, 1999). Such dichotomies tend to affirm a technological-deterministic position that 'suggests that power will transfer to the demos once they are armed with ICTs; empowered citizens will engage in informed and free deliberation, foster peer-to-peer connections, overcome barriers to access and produce information beyond the boundaries of the state and experts (Hague and Loader, 1999, pp. 4–6). Many scholars, policymakers and computer scientists believe that digital technologies can and will significantly *transform* democracy (cf. Jenkins, 2006; Castells, 2007). However, this deterministic position only reinforces outdated theories and discourses about digital democracy that fail to discern and interpret empirical details of changes, both big and small, in the social, economic and political conditions that actually improve democratic practices and institutions (Hague and Loader, 1999; Smith, 2009; Wright, 2012b). As Wright (2012b) explains, such a position lacks nuance in fully capturing and interpreting the empirical complexity of digital democratic practices and processes; it offers oversimplified, unrealistic and incomplete understandings of democratic politics, which fail to identify actually existing empirical changes in digital spaces (Wright, 2012b, p. 245–246).

Moreover, this deterministic approach often understands digital democracy through certain normative principles of 'good democracy' or 'democratic innovation', such as empowerment, accessibility,

transparency, efficiency, equality and more. Wright (2012b) and others have critically reflected upon the limitations of using a predefined assessment framework for online democratic participation. First, the principles originally developed for democratic participation are automatically considered relevant for digital democracy – an example of ‘effectively forc[ing] square pegs into round holes’ (Wright, 2012b, p. 455). The risk here is that selecting any of these principles to measure democratic politics might foreclose the potential to discern other democratic possibilities in the digital space (Wright, 2012a, b). Why should one principle (e.g. transparency) bear more democratic relevance and predefine what democracy should look like in digital space?

Secondly, many democratic criteria and principles, such as inclusivity, transferability and efficiency are ambiguous and susceptible to manipulation, much like the term ‘democracy’ itself. For instance, *transparency* may carry very different meanings and connotations for different people in different situations (Strathern, 2000). Scholars of digital citizenship suggest such principles and indicators are a reductionist and managerial mode of digital participation (Chadwick and May, 2003; Isin and Ruppert, 2015). Digital participation should not be measured and managed against various ‘efficiency’ criteria such as information delivery and cost/benefit balance (Chadwick and May, 2003, p. 272) or within sets of indicators such as ‘widening Internet accessibility’ or ‘acquiring digital literacy’ (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2007).

The binary approach also fails to problematise what digital democracy means; rather, it reinforces the authenticity, legitimacy and validity of established democracy theories (Barnett, 2017, pp. 46–48) and ethical regulations on algorithmic technologies (Amoore, 2020). These principles and values are indeed important; however, they also draw arbitrary boundaries around how we envisage and theorise digital democratic participation. These epistemic binaries become particularly problematic when they morph into universal rules for democracy in and beyond digital space. Very often, such epistemic binaries reinforce the privileged Global North as a site for making easy universal claims about democratic origins and practices, whilst leaving out ‘the heterogeneity of diverse contexts and differences and cultural specificities’ (Milan and Treré, 2019, pp. 325–326) that could make a difference in how we understand and theorise digital democracy.

This dichotomous and rigid demarcation of democracy has little epistemic and theoretical value. It cannot locate actually existing democracy emerging from the digital and urban worlds and does not consider the uncertain, generative and interactive natures of these configurations. As Amoore (2020, pp. 6, 160–161) describes, ML algorithms actively

(unpredictably) generate new thresholds for defining what is good or bad as they interact with data and humans. That said, ML algorithms' decisions about what good democracy is do not follow predefined statistical rules because their performance is subject to context-specific changes (also see Gillespie, 2014; Kitchin, 2017). For example, Kitchin (2017, p. 25) explains how algorithms perform differently 'in context – in collaboration with data, technologies, people, etc. under varying conditions'. Urban worlds also influence how algorithms, digital objects and platforms operate, and how they afford or foreclose democracy in digital worlds. In digital and urban worlds, there remains a possibility for algorithmic performance to deviate from its normal political actions for democracy (or not).

It is not surprising that most new theories about AI and digital platforms suggest that 'democracy' does not lead to democratic realities. This anti-democratic perception in 'critical' AI or platform studies and digital democracy studies has further entrenched certain epistemological divides and universal standards. Such approaches often overlook more fundamental issues in democratic theories. The question about agency of digital and human. The question about ontological tensions and epistemological categories about democracy. The prioritisation of certain geographies and histories over others. All of these issues have foreclosed the possibility of foregrounding actually existing democracy in digital and urban worlds.

However, there is some good news. A renewed interest in understanding the relationship between AI, digital platforms and democracy has resurrected longstanding ontological debates about democratic politics in digital and urban worlds. Whilst acknowledging that much work remains, this book advances current understandings of democratic politics by seriously considering the role of digital platforms in affording (or constraining) new possibilities for thinking and practising democracy from a comparative perspective.

1.3 Democratisations, Occupy Movements and Global Circulations

This book focuses on three digital democracy platforms (DDPs): Decide Madrid, vTaiwan and OmaStadi⁴. DDPs are powered by an open-source

⁴ Strictly speaking, the Finnish prefix 'oma' means 'somebody's' city (possibly an individual, collective, etc.). However, city officials agreed that 'my/our city' is a suitable English translation.

software (i.e. Decidim, Pol.is and Consul) that allows multiple actors to access, reuse and customise embedded algorithms – amongst other digital objects and functions – to develop localised digital decision-making processes. DDPs are usually deployed by a particular governmental institution to democratise its decision-making processes through e-petitioning, e-participatory budgeting, e-consultation, e-voting and more.

DDPs enable policymakers, civil servants or activists to set up a digital decision-making process that reaches out to citizens and stakeholders who are not hitherto involved in decision-making. DDPs enable citizens and stakeholders to get involved in decision-making processes that will make a direct impact in policymaking at the district, municipal or national level. DDPs enable citizens to exercise various political actions such as proposing, commenting, voting⁵, campaigning, debating, browsing and lobbying, which has the potential to redistribute political resources and attention to (urban) issues. For instance, the Madrid City Council has used Decide Madrid to allocate a 100-million-euro annual public budget and collect public petitions and consultations since 2015 (except for 2020–2021). The Taiwanese government has used vTaiwan to collect civic opinions to revise Taiwanese legislation on digital issues since 2015. The City of Helsinki transported and remodelled Barcelona's *Decidim* into OmaStadi to facilitate the distribution of 8 million euros biannually (since 2018). This book focuses on the e-participatory budgeting processes in Decide Madrid and OmaStadi and an e-consultation process in vTaiwan.

These three DDPs emerged from a wave of global democratic revitalisation around 2015 and have been globally circulated ever since. The Occupy Movements in Taipei, Madrid and Barcelona led to the *parallel* invention and deployment of open-source platforms to facilitate urban decision-making, budget distribution and legal revisions in more than

⁵ Each DDP has assigned a particular set of 'jargon' to name different stages in a given decision-making process. For example, the participatory budgeting process in OmaStadi is officially split into the phases of 'brainstorming' (where citizens propose), 'co-creation' (where experts/citizens comment and refine), 'voting' and 'realisation'. In Decide Madrid's participatory budgeting process, the different phases are changed into 'project presentation' ('Presentación de proyectos'), 'project revision' ('Revisión de proyectos'), 'project support' ('Apoyo de proyectos'), 'project evaluation' and 'final vote' (Votación final). In vTaiwan, the decision-making process is described in five stages: new cases, opinion gathering (including online/offline consultation), policy preparation, policy under review and historical cases. For simplicity, this book focuses on the political actions (i.e. proposing, commenting and voting), not the official terminologies.

220 governmental institutions. DDPs have been implemented by numerous governmental institutions in the United Kingdom, Spain, Finland, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Iceland, Japan and elsewhere. More recently, the 'Pol.is' software underpinning vTaiwan is utilised by the UK-based charity 'Crowd Wisdom Project'⁶, the Lancaster City Council, the Wandsworth Borough (in London) and the environmental group 'Extinction Rebellion'. DDPs have seemingly both constructed and responded to ever-expanding global circuits.

Each instance of the Occupy Movement had its own (shared) roots in the process of consensus-oriented democratisation (see further illustration in Section 3.2). Political consensus is central to democratisation and economic and urban development in the three cities and their respective countries. Taipei and Madrid have a shared history of social movements after long periods of authoritarian rule by 'strongmen' (General Francisco Franco and his Falange party in Spain and Chiang Kai-Shek's KMT party in Taiwan). Both countries experienced largely peaceful transitions to democratic rule in the 1970s and 1980s and continue with ongoing struggles. Comparative studies of Taiwanese and Spanish democratisation reveal that both transitions were driven by rapid economic growth, dramatic social change and a consensus towards democracy from within and beyond each authoritarian regime (Bustelo, 1991, p. 2). Interestingly, Finland also suffered from a period of 'electoral authoritarianism' in the 1960s (the so-called 'Finlandisation' period), when the pro-Russian president Urho Kekkonen censored anti-Soviet news, books and films whilst steering Finland towards economic growth and modern urban development (Arter, 1998, p. 43; Forsberg and Pesu, 2016). However, public resistance in Helsinki never rose to the levels of Taipei and Madrid. Finlandisation is often described as a consensus, not just between political parties but between politicians and citizens.

The convergent democratic movements have afforded political and economic stability, rapid urbanisation, economic development and digital infrastructures in all three cities. Digital technologies and platforms can now be utilised by citizens, elites or politicians to advance decision-making processes within or outside governmental institutions. Both Madrid and Taipei have experienced large-scale, digitally facilitated social movements (i.e. 15M and the Sunflower Movement) that stimulated a strong demand from civil societies to revitalise decision-making processes. Whilst these movements were sometimes lumped into the wider Occupy Movement, they did not express the same demands as

⁶ <https://www.crowdwisdomproject.org/>, accessed on 01 April 2023.

Occupy groups in the United States. Both 15M and Sunflower condemned undemocratic processes in their respective governments and demanded improved decision-making mechanisms. Additionally, in Taiwan, there was a significant and constant fear of losing democratic sovereignty to China (Ho, 2018), a fear which has been significantly amplified by recent geopolitical tensions.

The various movements spawned new political parties (Más Madrid, Barcelona en Comú) and new national and municipal governments made up of activists and civic hacktivists. They also inspired activists and software engineers in the United States and elsewhere to develop an open-source software to involve citizens in decision-making. The political environments in the Madrid City Council, Barcelona City Council and the Taiwanese government allowed hacktivists to develop and deploy DDPs to reform policymaking processes. vTaiwan invited stakeholders and citizens to offer their opinions on digital issue legislation. Decide Madrid configured five different decision-making processes for residents registered with the city: debate, participatory budgeting, petition, consultation and voting.

The DDPs' inventors (i.e. civic hackers and politicians) perceived them as 'an extension' of the global Occupy Movement, namely the 15M in Madrid and Barcelona and the Sunflower Movement in Taipei. The platforms not just carried the spirit of the streets but also aimed to concretise Occupy's 'unfinished' business of actually democratising current mechanisms of decision-making through digital platforms at the global and local scale.

DDPs landed in Helsinki in 2018 for different reasons (Tseng, Becker and Roikonen, 2024). There was no pressing demand from civil society to reform existing decision-making processes. Rather, OmaStadi was positioned as an e-participatory budgeting tool and a localised solution for democratising decision-making that would complement Helsinki's rebranding as a global city with a high quality of life, efficient urban service and continuous economic growth (The City of Helsinki, 2013; City of Helsinki, 2021). OmaStadi emerged after a decade of elite advocacy and with unanimous support from politicians across the political spectrum in the Helsinki City Council. They shared interests in solidifying Nordic Welfare democratic values like inclusivity, equality and autonomy through digital technologies (Taipale, Wallgren and Peltola, 2011; Typpi, Reunanen and Rissanen, 2013). This case reveals a particular elite-led path for platforming democratic participation, situated within a wider context of long-term right-wing governance and neoliberal policymaking.

These DDPs – with their specific political goals and relatively small user bases – are less studied than digital platforms like Twitter, Google and Facebook. Nonetheless, they actively circulate in global mass media narratives of innovative digital democracy. Within these narratives, DDPs are portrayed as scalable and universal solutions for curing democratic problems, spanning the general (e.g. political demotivation or disengagement and disempowerment) to the more specific (e.g. political polarisation). Both vTaiwan and Decide Madrid were featured as leading case studies for digital democracies in a UK parliamentary select committee on ‘democracy and digital technologies’⁷. vTaiwan has been called ‘a consensus-building social network’ that offers valuable lessons for Western democracies (Miller, 2019a), and Decide Madrid won the United Nations Public Service Award in 2018. However, we cannot fully accept these self-celebratory discourses about what democracy is supposed to be. After all, these discourses assert an epistemic authority that is too technologically deterministic to capture the complex and nuanced decision-making processes enabled or disabled by the DDPs.

In the next section, I explain how my choice of a relational comparison grounds the three DDPs beyond ‘case studies’ by considering their entanglement with digital and urban worlds. DDPs find themselves involved in different processes (e.g. democratisation, policymaking, geopolitics or neoliberalisation) and particular time periods (e.g. the past, current and future). DDPs reconfigure specific decision-making processes through the coming together (and falling apart) of different actors (e.g. users, policymakers, data, algorithms, social media platforms, policymakers and more).

1.4 A Liquid Comparison and Epistemology

Because it [water] constantly renews itself and, flowing from some invisible point upstream, its course never stops proceeding. . . Or rather-and the image of flowing helps us to seize upon the difference. . . (Jullien, 2004, p. 171)

In this section, I reappropriate comparative methods from urban studies as a methodological tool and generative device (McFarlane, 2010; McFarlane and Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2022b; Söderström, 2023) to outline a liquid comparison for new epistemology of democracy in

⁷ <https://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/a14d9967-c9a9-4c12-aa5f-79521af31d45>, accessed on 11 April 2020.

the age of platforms. I borrow geomorphological terms to figuratively describe my use of the comparative method as ‘a river’ that crafts, alters or abandons its conversational channels between empirics and theories by placing them in larger digital and urban worlds. A liquid comparison resembles a river that initiates new conversations between ‘case studies’, theories and digital urban worlds. Through this comparison, dichotomies – from the universal/particular to the incomparable/comparable that prevent us from understanding democracy as it is – are dissolved into a river that joins with larger worlds for fostering new confluences, connections and conversations about democracy.

According to National Geographic⁸, a river is a freshwater body which is, in one sense, locally bounded, territorialised and sourced within its watershed. The river flows at various speeds and in different directions: it bifurcates into two branches, joins with other affluents into a main-stream or creates a confluence between tributaries. However, a river can change suddenly, abandoning its channel by forming a new one beyond its local watershed (Huggett, 2011, p. 202). This phenomenon, known as ‘flooding’, ‘overflow’, ‘avulsion’ or ‘breaching’, is usually triggered by natural forces such as earthquakes, glaciers or heavy rains (Huggett, 2011).

These geomorphological terms are not intended to provide a scientific or objective definition to justify river thinking as a comparative method. Rather, they serve only to broaden our engagement with urban comparison. Certainly, I am aware that my riverine take might incur the problematic aspects of political and historical geography’s ‘organic approach’, or only provide vague guidelines on how to conduct studies in very specific geographical areas (making it of little practical value as a method) (Stoddart, 1966). However, my use of the river is a non-prescriptive way of using comparative methods to generate new knowledge about democracy through a specific comparison of the three platforms in digital urban worlds. The river, then, serves as a metaphor that offers a creative force that evokes new ways of thinking and imagining comparative methods in relation to digital and urban worlds.

Like the generative attributes of a river, liquid comparison creates a flow of conversations: (1) between three supposedly isolated and analytically irrelevant case studies and (2) between empirical case studies, theories and digital urban worlds. Put differently, a liquid comparison is less about confining case studies within the constraints of any given theoretical and geographical category and more about allowing each to

⁸ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/rivers>, accessed on 29 November 2023.

flow freely, illuminating its own unique propensities that might become entwined with or caught up in others.

This 'river' enables each case study to 'run' beyond its territorially delineated 'watershed', becoming connected with other 'tributaries' originating from elsewhere at various 'confluences'. On the one hand, each DDP is contextually and contingently shaped by heterogeneous relationships between data, users, policymakers, algorithms and other emergent entities. On the other hand, each is disembodied and enfolded into wider processes (e.g. democratisation, geopolitics, neoliberalisation, institutionalisation) across digital and urban worlds, across the past, present and future. Thus, the relational comparative analysis constantly composes analytical conjunctures – or 'confluences' – between the case studies and between empirics and theories, thereby opening (and constraining) alternative or multiple democratic possibilities in digital and urban worlds.

This liquid approach engages with each platform not just as a geographically bounded singular 'case study' (i.e. a variant of digital democracy) but rather delves into each one's individual and collective components (as they change) and their involvement in wider processes. It does not consider each platform within the binaries of 'global/local', 'Global North/South' and 'universal/particular' that structure mainstream analysis and comparative urban methodology (Robinson, 2006, 2016, 2022a). The liquid comparison shares concerns with other urban comparative methods that aim to critique 'all-encompassing' (global) approaches (Robinson, 2006) on any given subject (Hart, 2018). In doing so, liquid comparison considers each case on its own terms and resituates them into the wider (but not 'global' or 'universal') processes of democratisation, neoliberalisation, geopolitics and so forth.

That said, this liquid comparison activates each case's agency by liberating it from being merely 'a variant' of a pre-theorised 'global' or 'universal' process. Instead, each case is shaped by its specific historical and sociopolitical trajectory to potentially yield different impacts, become entangled with broader processes and influence phenomena in unique ways (Robinson, 2022a). In other words, it does not identify and prioritise a single trajectory with distinctive political, economic and societal conditions that permit the development, deployment and democratic performances of DDPs. Rather, the comparison brings different sources and different channels into a flow. It reveals how DDPs, stemming from multiple trajectories, share political consensus around democratisation and economic development. That said, the liquid comparison works like a river that draws connections of different trajectories and territories of DDPs. It engages each platform as a singular and living stream with a

capacity to set itself free from a fixation on the ‘here and now’, the ‘particular and universal’ and the ‘territorialised’ analysis of (digital) democracy.

My liquid comparative method produces three conjunctures (confluences) that transcend each DDP’s locality. Such conjunctures can be explained by what Robinson (2016, 2022b) terms ‘genetic’ and ‘generative’ connections. In Robinson’s (2016, p. 16) words, ‘genetic’ refers to the ‘strongly interconnected genesis of often-repeated urban phenomena’ across different cities, whilst ‘generative’ denotes the production or revision of concepts by incorporating cases with shared features.

The first conjuncture considers the DDPs’ shared trajectories and circulation in the processes of democratisation, institutionalisation and neoliberalisation that have affected many places. The liquid comparison starts by relocating the three platforms’ similar and genetic processes of democratisation in Spain, Taiwan and Finland. It then coins the term ‘convergent democratic movements’ to explain how the DDPs emerged and flourished by connecting with wider historical processes in each’s and others’ times. The ‘convergent democratic movements’ mark a starting point from which to compare the three case studies and chart the shared progressive trajectories and processes of democratisation – ones that always return to consensus over political-economic matters *within* ongoing tensions between the people’s resistance and the hegemonic state (see details in Section 3.2).

The second conjuncture repositions DDPs along the axis of present and future. The process of platformisation of political actions – from voting to campaigning – through risk calculus renders political actions computable in the present and future. Such a process is also influenced by each situated intersection with distinct and broader processes manifesting in urban spaces in current times (e.g. neoliberalisation in Madrid and Helsinki; geopolitical tensions in Taipei) to foster different alternative futures. This intersection foregrounds the possibility of imagining and making a more democratic future, deviating from the one anticipated by the risk calculus embedded within the DDPs (see details in Section 3.3). The third conjuncture considers the liquidity of political actions (voting, proposing, debating), which are (re)constituted by changing relations between algorithms, data and human actors in digital and urban worlds. The comparison shows that liquid conditions vary in speeds, durations and intensities.

Liquid comparison then opens up a site of conversation where existing theories that presuppose democracy are both acknowledged and

suspended to bring about ‘constructive differences’⁹ between the ‘case studies’ and better delineate conditions and possibilities for democracy in digital and urban worlds (Hart, 2018, p. 382; also see Robinson, 2022a). Liquid comparison shares concerns about Euro-American modes of knowledge-making, in which spatio-historical difference is reduced to empirical variation (Hart, 2018; Robinson, 2022a). It rejects prescriptive modes of urban comparison and does not see geographical, economic-political and cultural differences between cities across the Global North and South as ‘incommensurable’; rather, they make constitutive critiques and knowledge possible (Robinson, 2006; McFarlane and Robinson, 2012). In this site of conversation, different situations of liquidity, as well as intersections between digital and urban worlds, should not be dismissed for failing to fit pre-supposed theories; rather, they should be seen as sources of analytical innovation. The liquid comparison, then, sends researchers into a flow within digital urban worlds to think about how theories might resonate with what is happening ‘out there’ to creatively foster unexpected connections between ‘case studies’, theories and worlds (Jacobs, 2012; Robinson, 2022a). The liquid comparison gathers all these differences not to make a global claim but rather to extend the possible in democracy, city and platform. Democracy

⁹ The most obvious difference between the two approaches lies in how each strand ‘does’ or ‘constitutes’ a relational comparison. For post-structuralist scholars, comparison is a way of strategically *generating* new analytical connections as well as *tracing* shared/genetic trajectories between cities across difference, with an emphasis on openness and experimentation (McFarlane, 2011a; McFarlane, 2011b; McFarlane and Robinson, 2012; Söderström, 2014, 2023; Robinson, 2016, 2022b; McFarlane and Söderström, 2017). On the contrary, as Hart (2018) reflects, mainstream Marxist approaches often start with ‘macro processes’ (e.g. globalisation, neoliberalisation, dispossession) that constitute events and relations. Studies become about the ‘existing’ or ‘interconnected’ relationship between cities, which are seen as ‘variations’ (Hart, 2018, p. 387, 382). This approach engages ‘encompassing comparison’ to make an authoritative generalisation of cities (e.g. planetary urbanism; Hart, 2018, p. 382). Firstly, there is a pre-given ‘internal’ connection (e.g. colonial) between cities within the given process (Hart, 2006, 2008, 2018). Secondly, there is a tendency to equate changes with revolutionary transformations (Hart, 2018, p. 378). As Hart (2018, p. 381) acknowledges, Marxists may not pay enough attention to ‘spatio-historical/empirical specificity and complexity’ and may ‘play down or even ignore the parts, the details, in deference to making generalisations about the whole’. Such assumptions differentiate Marxist and post-structuralist approaches, though complementary bridges between the two remain under-explored (Hart, 2018, p. 383).

comes about from different entry points, times, spaces, places and moments within its very own foreclosure.

The liquid comparison emphasises openness in considering the vast under-explored empirics of many democracies ‘out there’ as they are lived, made and remade at the intersection between urban and digital worlds. It encourages researchers to actively and creatively seek or produce less expected relations between the so-called case studies for urban comparison. As Robinson (2016, p. 4–5) notes, this allows ‘surprises and new possibilities for thinking the urban . . . from many different sources: different cities, regions, trajectories, forms and practices’ and repositions comparative methods as ‘a conversation’ with different yet specific urban situations and experiences (not just processes) that is ‘intrinsically open to revision’ as other urban worlds unfold (see Simone, 2011, p. 356).

The goal for liquid comparison is to generate an understanding of democracy in relation to digital and urban worlds, which will then be articulated by a matching theory (see more details in Section 2.2). Said differently, the liquid comparison finds and re-accounts for how democracy is plurally composed – *not* by any kinds of relations – but through those that create the ‘liquid conditions’ under which political actions and orders move between points of stabilisation and destabilisation. This approach foregrounds a ‘liquid’ take in urban comparative methods, with references to the feminist and post-colonial scholars (Haraway, 1991; Shohat, 1998; Robinson, 2006; Hart, 2018). It brings about a *liquid* understanding of democracy by intersecting each instance of a platform’s own time, space and geography with others to keep them ‘alive’ at many conjunctures. It actively searches for, juxtaposes and blends the heterogeneous conjunctures between the three platforms whilst attending to each case as it evolves within its own time and terms. As such, this liquid comparison brings out non-linear relationships between theories and ‘case studies’ by placing the latter into urban and digital worlds as a challenge to the pre-supposed relationships between ‘case studies’ (e.g. colonial and colonised) (Söderström, 2014, 2023; McFarlane and Söderström, 2017; Robinson, 2022a). In doing so, our understanding of democracy flows, diverges and moves around like a liquid body – sitting still, moving with or dissolving obstacles along the way – as it gets in touch with the digital and urban worlds.

Different democratic theories are rearranged to interpret and illuminate how different democratic possibilities come to light in differentiated liquid situations. This effort does not align with normative democratic theories about how democracy is, should be and will be (see critique in Barnett, 2017). Instead, the theoretical rearrangement serves

to retheorise democracy in more modest ways, veering closer to empirical situations – the differentiated liquid conditions. As there are multiple democratic openings unfolding from various liquid situations, there is no need to stick to a specific, overarching, normative definition of democracy (e.g. digital democracy, participatory democracy or radical democracy) as each would foreclose the possibility of illuminating actually existing openings for democratic politics. In this sense, the ontological tension over democracy is temporarily suspended and hollowed out, even as we fully attend to the empirically grounded conditions of liquidity in the search for emergent democracy.

In short, the liquid comparison puts DDPs into conjunctures that are simultaneously juxtaposed and intersected to reconstruct existing understandings of democracy. I identify conditions and possibilities for democracy by working with emergent geographical, temporal, relational and all other differences found in the three cases. For instance, each liquid specificity around points of stabilisation (convergence, thrown togetherness) and destabilisation (friction, reordering) brings a particular democratic possibility to life (see details in the next section). Each democratic specificity is matched with and interpreted against existing theories of democracy, actively reconstructing them in a manner akin to the comparative tactic of ‘subtraction’. Such a method finds and highlights differences in multiple examples to envision different futures and foreground each example’s unique insights rather than fitting them all into the same narrative (Jacobs, 2012; Robinson, 2022a).

I think democracy geographically by locating similar trajectories and charting the differentiated potential of three ‘case studies’. Indeed, the comparison of three case studies, as Flyvbjerg (2006) and Robinson (2016, 2022a) argue, attests to the generalisability of a theory (i.e. liquid democracy) as a *reference point* for different urban societies and geographies. However, I am wary about using the term ‘global’ for its implied universal generalisability for liquid democracy (cf. Mbembe, 2019). To be absolutely clear, this conversational river does not claim global knowledge-making on democracy in the age of platformisation. Rather, it fosters a liquid knowledge of democracy akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of a rhizome (see also STS scholars like Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing and Annemarie Mol). Liquid democracy is always situated and partial – not reducible to the one (the global, if you will) nor to the multiple. It is perpetually haunted by a refusal to fully fit into assumptions and implications inherent in the term ‘global’ – namely, an excessive emphasis on all-inclusive generalisability and knowability, without recognising the potential that arises from ‘not-knowing’ (refer to Section 7.3 for further reflection).

1.5 Liquid Conditions for Democracy in Digital and Urban Worlds

The ‘liquid’ metaphor, with its theoretical roots in assemblage thinking, describes *the contingent conditions* through which democracy emerges as multiple openings, moments and movements at the intersections between digital and urban worlds. Liquid accounts for the contingency of democratic politics. Normative political actions (e.g. voting, commenting, debating, proposing, lobbying, campaigning, protesting and resisting) are now being constituted and reconstituted through human-digital relations, with direct impacts for democracy. I hope to illustrate the contingent conditions in which political actors, actions and propositions are stabilised (ordered) and simultaneously becoming otherwise (reordered) (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 9–11; Connolly, 2010; McFarlane, 2011b; McFarlane and Anderson, 2011; Amin, 2012; Anderson *et al.*, 2012)¹⁰ at the intersection of digital and urban worlds.

The ‘liquid’ metaphor illustrates how ontological assertions, categories and binaries of democracy are rendered dissolvable. In other words, the liquid decouples the question of ‘what democracy is and means’ from existing ontological and universal assumptions that span managerial principles and technologically deterministic good/bad democracy. It does not buy into any democratic ontology or subscribe to any category of democracy. Each category makes a more or less universal assumption about what democracy is supposed to be. Such a category insists that democracy only exists in one particular way and is not allowed to be otherwise (see Barnett, 2017). The liquid metaphor dissipates democratic assumptions and categories and ontologies (e.g. transparency, rational consensus, majority rule, disruption). From here, we can bring democratic politics into the open.

¹⁰ Deleuzian assemblage thinking takes a different orientation from the dystopian account of liquid society (Bauman, 2000). Bauman (2000) identifies three characteristics of a liquid modern society: high mobility, flexibility in space and time and (continuous) changes. These liquid features amount to a perpetual state of uncertainty within digital and global capitalism, where possessions, situations and people are always on the move, endlessly shifting between being dismantled and (re)assembled (Bauman, 2005, pp. 2–5). Bauman’s focus is on the dystopian implications of liquidity for our precarious and insecure lifestyles. He assumes that all frictions, tensions and obstacles will make way for the mobility of capital, goods and elites. This specific reading forecloses the chance to see possibilities that may unfold from frictions and other forms of uncertainty. Bauman’s interpretation of liquidity, therefore, offers an insufficient account of digital urban democracy.

Liquid democracy eschews a technological-deterministic ontology by acknowledging that democracy cannot be achieved solely with digital platforms and technologies, even when well designed and intended for democratic purposes. Democracy cannot start and end with technologies and platforms (see Wright, 2012a, b) or with ready-made universal principles such as transparency, accessibility and deliberation. These have slippery meanings and are open to various interpretations and manipulations (see Strathern, 2000; Isin and Ruppert, 2015). Democracy is more than rational consensus or the counting of positive votes. It is more than antagonism and conflict or the disruption of existing political orders through a (re)inscription of equality. Democracy should be considered more than an ontological correction that perpetually sets a contrast between the political proper and the political (Barnett, 2017).

Liquid democracy hopes to demonstrate that nothing in these principles and ontological corrections makes them inherently democratic (see more in Section 2.2). To do so, it moves from questions of democratic essence to the emergent conditions through which democracy is empirically brought into being by considering the constitution and reconstitution of political actions and propositions at the intersection between digital and urban worlds. This move departs from normative, universal and ontological claims about already-known democracy to conceive democracy without precedent as Derrida (2005) proclaims. Barnett (2017) also critiques the ontological correction inherent in democratic theories: the dualisms of good/bad, North/South, human/nonhuman, utopia/dystopia and we/they. Normative, Northern and managerial measures and theories of democracy are hollowed out in favour of 'the context' and 'the conditions' under which democratic politics emerge.

Building on this perspective, the liquid is a useful metaphor that illustrates certain empirical conditions as 'liquid' because they bring about democracy. It gives a name and an explanation to these empirical conditions by understanding them as contingently and contextually constructed by emergent heterogeneous relations at the intersection between digital and urban worlds. To put it succinctly, liquid democracy denotes the contingent yet contextually grounded conditions in which the order of political actions, opinions and actors are established or/and destabilised to bring democracy into light.

In this sense, the liquid metaphor is the answer to the question of 'how' democracy emerges. It is the contingent conditions where political actions – from voting to campaigning – are made and remade, ordered and reordered, out of relations of heterogeneous actors – data, algorithms, regulations, users, policymakers and other emergent ones – that are *empirically* held together or falling apart at the intersection between

digital and urban worlds. There is a strong emphasis on empirical ontology that is influenced by feminist and post-colonial STS scholars and, more specifically, by a modified version of assemblage thinking applied in human and urban geography. The latter, whilst acknowledging ontological commitments from assemblage ‘theory’ (DeLanda, 2016), modifies this ‘theory’ into a lens that leaves out the questions as to which openings, possibilities and multiplicities are for empirical investigations (McFarlane, 2011b; Anderson *et al.*, 2012, p. 176). For Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage thinking does not tell us to foresee or determine what political possibilities – in this case, democracy – are but only ‘how’ they might emerge. For instance, such possibilities might emerge by undertaking ‘an experimentation in contact with the world’ – through new connections, offshoots or ruptures ‘with the wind, an animal or a human being’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 18–19).

Indeed, the liquid conditions become more relevant when we identify democracy in the digital and urban worlds in which algorithms, data, interfaces, game objects and avatars all have agency in constituting and reconstituting political actors, actions and opinions. They are part of the making and remaking of political actions, actors and opinions. Everything is highly contingent, changeable and fluid. Many geographers have explained this ‘liquidity’ with various terms and concepts. Becoming. Reordering. Transduction. Transfiguration. Fluidity. For many geographers, digital technologies are involved in the process of ‘becoming’ (otherwise), never fully completed (Peszczynski, 2015; Kitchin, 2017). Some use the concept of ‘ontogenesis’ to describe how technologies are constantly brought into being through various embodied relations (not only with humans, for example Kinsley, 2014; Kitchin, 2017; Dalton, 2020), but also ‘in’ their own ‘reading’ of disordering (Amoore *et al.*, 2023) or evolution (Keating, 2024).

In the context of LDPs, political actions, actors and opinions in participatory decision-making processes are contingently configured as they become stabilised (or not) around the gathering (or dispersion) of heterogeneous actors across spaces and times. There has always been uncertainty in how each political action and order is constituted and thus performed. Citizens can support a particular issue in a participatory budgeting proposal or a petition, comment on it, vote for it, leverage resources to campaign about it, or protest the result. Algorithms and human actors can reorder how political opinions and propositions are divided, prioritised and visualised. Throughout this process, new actors – users, activists, policymakers, algorithms, proposals, comments, votes – might emerge into the digital space or disappear. New alliances between actors might be forged or dissolved (see ‘territorialisation’, ‘re/territorialisation’ in Deleuze and

Guattari, 1987, pp. 9–11, 23; McFarlane and Anderson, 2011, p. 126). New political actions might be performed between the embedded and the potential, between the present and the future (McFarlane, 2011b). This potential to become otherwise enables (or disables) democratic openings.

This chapter situated the book in larger conversations about democracies in urban and digital worlds. I re-problematised how democracy has been understood in relation to technologies, platforms and, more recently, AI. Several binaries and categories have segmented the ways in which democracy is understood, each haunted by its own corrective version of democracy as a universal assumption. Democracy is often presumed to look the same everywhere as if there is only one singular form. My intersectional approach weaves seemingly ‘incommensurable’ differences across democratic theories, places and platforms. All that has been separated is intersected to accommodate urban and digital worlds in a new understanding of democracy. Different theories, platforms, places and relations are threaded through my chosen metaphor – liquid in two flows:

1. ways in which the differences are met, intersected and generate new knowledge.
2. the contingent conditions under which democracy empirically emerges in contact with digital and urban worlds.

In the next chapter, I ground my take on ‘liquidity’ in assemblage thinking and ‘into-the-world’ ontologies. This allows me to dissolve the divisions between normative democratic theories and generate new hybrid democratic concepts that account for urban and digital worlds.