SCIENCE NOTE

Regulating Public Space

When a Children's Playground Turns Into a Hangout for Smoking Joints

Book review

Reviewed by De Krijger, F. M. Utrecht School of Governance (USG). The Netherlands.

As a resident of the marvelous city of Amsterdam, I cycle past the Mercator square in De Baarsjes district on a weekly basis. At first glance, this area does not stand out in any particular way: just like many other squares in the Dutch capital, it is home to shops and restaurants, it has several benches to sit on to enjoy the sun, and it serves as a tram stop for many passengers daily. However, what I did not know before reading this book was that in 2006, a ban on using soft drugs was established in this area. This ban aimed to prevent the nuisances caused by the local soft drugs users, and could be considered as the catalyst of a wave of local bans across the Netherlands (81 in total). Playing It by the Rules teaches us that behind these seemingly simple and clear-cut measurements lies hidden a fascinating world of the public 'production' of space and the multilayered social responses to local by-laws. Chevalier's aim in this impressive study is to understand the emergence and effects of these local bans on soft drugs and to unravel the social structures underlying these processes. On a more theoretical level, she endeavors to understand what happens in the behavior and minds of people when municipalities attempt to regulate public space.

Key words: book review, public space, urban ethnography

In *part one*, Chevalier provides the information necessary to understand and evaluate her empirical chapters. First, she briefly describes the policy context in which soft drug bans are situated (*Ch. 2*). For a long time, the Netherlands was known to be Europe's 'odd man out' because of its exceptionally liberal policy regarding soft drugs. However, this policy discourse has recently started to shift: whereas emphasis was previously placed on the health of soft drug users, concern with public nuisance are now regarded as more important. The increased adoption of these public bans can be considered a consequence of this general development. After this contextualization, Chevalier elaborates on her qualitative research strategy (*Ch. 3*). With the use of ethnographic methods, she investigated the following three soft drugs bans in-depth: a ban in a playground in the inner-city of Amsterdam, a ban in a neighborhood shopping square in a suburb of the provincial town Tilburg, and a ban in a central square in the old fishing town of Spakenburg. In each case, a different rationale – as found in a preliminary survey – prevailed in making the case for installing the ban: respectively, nuisance related to a specific site, nuisance related to specific social group, and nuisance related to the use of soft drugs themselves. With this selection of cases, she attempted to create maximum variation of possible justifications for individual bans and subsequently sought cases that seemed representative for of each different category.

In *part two,* Chevalier offers a remarkably rich and contextualized description of the three case studies (*Ch.4*). In Amsterdam, the ban was situated in a neighborhood that was previously characterized by a large blue-collar population, but, owing to a quick gentrification process, has recently became more popular among 'yuppies'. As a result of this development, the old working class identity of the neighborhood has begun to fade away rapidly. In Tilburg, the ban was instituted in a completely different area with an opposite development trajectory. This post-war neighborhood was originally built for the lower and 'normal' middle class of ethnic Dutch residents. However, since the 1990s the prosperous residents moved out, allowing for a an influx of many less privileged people, often with a non-Western ethnic background. Lastly, in the town of Spakenburg the ban was established in a homogeneous community of protestant Christians. In this area, nuisance related to soft drugs usage was not present and the ban enacted as a form of prevention. In the three cases, the disparate qualities and histories of the physical and social environments conveyed a multitude of voices laying claims to the spaces at hand and the perception of nuisance related to soft drugs use.

Part three is structured in theoretical terms and covers topics related to the production of space (*Ch.5*), the codification of social norms (*Ch.6*) and the public responses to legal measures (*Ch.8*). In these chapters, Chevalier raises her empirical explanations to a more abstract level and engages them in a fascinating (and sometimes conflictual) dance with existing theories. The overarching question is how the regulation of public space by means of legal interventions relates to (and influences) the process of space making. Building on the work of Lefebvre (1974), she explains that 'space' is made up of planned, lived, and perceived dimensions. The planned environment encompasses idea(l)s about the function and use of a space. The lived dimension concerns the expression of these ideas in practice. The perceived environment signifies the symbolic meaning people ascribe to their surroundings. Chevalier demonstrates that social frictions in and around public space often occur when these three dimensions are not sufficiently aligned. For example, this occurs when a group of adolescents consider a children's playground as a convenient spot to hang out (perceived space) and decide to use one of the slides as their standard bench for smoking joints (lived space). This practice runs counter to the original purpose of the playground, namely a safe place for children to play (planned space). In the book, 'moral entrepreneurs' (p.14) hoped that by making changes in the planned environment - namely, banning soft drugs in a particular

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public space - the desired changes in the lived dimension and the perceived dimension would follow. However, in practice, this appears to have often not been the case. This is because all the investigated spaces figured prominently in the everyday lives of the people who used them and had thereby created feelings of 'emotional ownership' over these spaces (p.209). For these people, these public 'spaces' had turned into 'places', since they had functioned as sites for physical, social and personal experiences. Local residents thus felt as if they had the legitimate authority to control these spaces. Simultaneously, their conception of ownership generated a sense of place-related responsibility and civic engagement. Chevalier explains that the bans often generated dismissive behavior and active resistance because these measurements were perceived as an infringement on people's feelings of emotional ownership. She concludes by saying that the social struggles around the installment of soft drugs bans reflect a contentious process in which public space is produced. This process is comparable to a game that has winners and losers and that, in turn, has players who try to change the rules of the game and players who do not adhere to the rules.

From both a theoretical and empirical point of view, this book is very convincing. The topic Chevalier investigated is utterly complex, but her analysis remains easy to follow.

In particular, the original concept of 'emotional ownership' seems to be a useful theoretical contribution to the field. With regards to her empirical strategy, Chevalier uses an ethnographic eye, allowing her to disentangle the deeper meanings that underpin the daily habits and rituals of public life. Her observation notes are vividly written and reflect her great sense of detail, reading at points almost like a novel.

Above all, Chevalier must be praised because of her sophisticated multidisciplinary approach. In her analysis, she employs theories from urban sociology, criminology and the sociology of law. These theories serve as different lenses for understanding the phenomenon of local bans. Whereas multidisciplinary studies often provide multiple yet relatively autonomous explanations for a particular phenomenon, Chevalier's approach is more refined. The different theoretical lenses she uses are complementary and mutually reinforcing. For example, to understand how the local bans 'landed' in the different communities she combines the literature on rule compliance with work done in the field of space making. It appears that the social recognition and valuation for the law worked in tandem with the overall production of space. In other words, changes in the planned dimension of space appeared to be unsuccessful in changing behavior in, and perception about, a public space if the users did not respect the authority of the law in the first place. In these cases, the ban only heightened social tensions rather than mitigating them. This synergetic use of different theories is so apparently successful because she manages to bring these completely different theories in line with her own ontological standpoint. This prevented her from deteriorating into the contradictory assumptions of theses disciplines and enabled her to use the theories as a means to deepen her analysis and focus her observations.

However, this book does have its missed chances and shortcomings. The first one involves the relation between her case selection and her empirical chapters. As explained, Chevalier selected her cases purposefully, whereby the rationales behind the installment of the bans served as the leading selection criterion. This practice assumes that these different rationales could have had an influence on the social mechanisms that were at play. However, in her empirical chapters, she does not take this possibility into account and neglects to differentiate between the different cases in a consequent manner, choosing instead to structure them around three theoretical topics. Although this

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strategy still plays out well, it would have been insightful if she had discussed to what extent the discovered mechanisms functioned differently in every ban-type case. In my reading, such a relation seems to have existed. For example, whether a ban was installed because of nuisance related to a specific group (Tilburg) or as a result of a general rejection of soft drugs (Spakenburg) seems to have influenced the way the notion of 'emotional ownership' played out locally. In Tilburg, the ban was primarily directed towards a specific group, namely Somali and Moroccan immigrants. Consequently, this group took the ban quite personally, thereby reinforcing their feelings of 'emotional ownership' and, with them, the forcefulness of their reaction ('[T]his is our place, were are not leaving. We fight back' p. 179). Contrarily, in Spakenburg, a fierce social struggle around the enactment of the ban was absent, potentially because there the measure was not directed towards a specific group but towards drugs in general. An avenue for further research would be to trace back the influence of this target group's immigrant background on the production of space. Perhaps in this case, the sentiment 'we do not want drugs to be present here' also came to stand for 'immigrants are not welcome here' or even 'immigrants are not welcome in this country'.

Second, Chevalier has neglected to include an explicit reflection on the social relevance of this study. This seems a missed chance, since her empirical data definitely has societal value. In her epilogue, she states that the aim of her book was not to evaluate whether these bans worked, but rather how these bans worked. Therefore, she refrained from giving any concrete remarks about the desirability of these bans and the elements

that constitute 'good' space (p.215). The only guidance she provides for practitioners is that 'the game' of the production of space should be 'transparent' and 'comprehensive'. Only when adhering to these values, this game - to stick to Chevalier's idiom - could be considered as 'fair play' (p.212). These remarks leave the reader a little empty-handed and elicit further clarifying questions like: 'how should we interpret this advocacy for transparency and comprehensiveness?' and 'who is responsible for executing this; the municipality or the different social groups themselves?'. Given the ethnographic nature of her research and the accompanying ontological assumptions, the absence of a detailed strategy for action seems understandable and justified. However, there are certainly other approaches for improving the social relevance of research that she did not incorporate in the book either. For example, she could have related her finding to the broader societal debate about how processes of immigration and gentrification have drastically changed the street-scene in many urban areas. Many city residents, of diverse ethnic backgrounds, have started to feel alienated from their living environments. This, because the unknown cultures that new residence bring along have drastically changed the visual make-up of many neighborhoods. In certain respects, this study relates to this debate and teaches us how these feelings of alienation become activated and from where they originate. Moreover, it shows how these impressions inform our behavior in public spaces.

To conclude, *Playing it by the Rules* is an interesting book that has definitely deepened our understanding of the social struggles that arise from the regulation of public spaces. It teaches us that public space is something subjective that is produced by people and therefore not easily or exhaustively re-shaped by legal interventions. The next time I cycle past the Mercatorplein, I will apprehend that behind every bench, a complex web of planned, lived and perceived space is hidden. If I decide to take a rest on one of them, I now realize that - in addition to soaking up the sun - I am, in a small way, engaging in the quarrelsome and fascinating process of public space production.

Floris de Krijger

Floris studeerde o.a. Taal- en Cultuurstudies, Politicologie en Bestuurskunde aan de Universiteit van Utrecht en UC Berkeley. Op dit moment is hij student binnen de research masters: Colonial and Global History (Universiteit Leiden) en Public Administration and Organisational Science (Universiteit Utrecht). Tevens is hij is medeoprichter van Public Note en werkt nog steeds als redacteur in de redactie.