City & Society

Justice is Spatial, Also During the Pandemic: The Case of the Blankenberge Beach Riot

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Alongside public squares and parks, beaches are often seen as commons, as iconic examples of public space. They are, in principle, not owned by any specific person or group and freely accessible to all. They are commonly perceived as spaces where Lefebvre's (1967) "right to the city" could be fully exercised. Over the past several decades, though, academic literature has complicated such idealizations, showing that beaches can be territorialized, privatized and contested.

Already in 1974, Julian Edney and Nancy Jordan-Edney, based on an experiment conducted in Madison (USA), showed how claims made on beach spaces vary according to the size of the group and gender of the beach-goers. Similarly, the 2007 Brazilian documentary *Faixas de Areia* [*Sand Tracks*], by Daniela Kallman and Flávia Lins e Silva, shows how beaches in Rio de Janeiro are spontaneously divided along the lines of class, culture, lifestyle, age, sexual orientation, activity and so on. The documentary emphasizes, however, that territorialization leads to conflict when groups trespass onto other groups' territories. Elsa Devienne (2016) explores similar conflicts in her study of Los Angeles beaches. According to her, strategies of urban planning and police control, which started after WWII, made the city's beaches exclusive places for the white middle classes, while evicting undesirables. For similar reasons, Adam Keul (2015: 49) discusses beaches as "a programmatic, bourgeois-public space", emerging "where a fantasy of open-access occludes the experience of exclusion".

Belgian beaches are also characterised by privatisation and exclusionary practices. For many years, wooden cabins on the beach have been rented out to users for the storage of beach gear. More recently, according to [an article on the Belgian media outlet Apache](#), privately owned bars on the beach have become a common sight. Their presence has doubled in five years, resulting in the privatization of formerly public areas, which are now reserved for the exclusive use of customers.

Against this backdrop, a rather violent conflict occurred on Saturday, August 8, 2020, in the town of Blankenberge, on the Belgian coast. Several hidden tensions between groups of visitors and the local police escalated into view. The events started with a lifeguard informing a group of young people that, due to Covid-19 safety measures, they were not allowed to sit on the breakwater. When they refused to leave, the police were called and a violent brawl between the group and the police ensued. Videos of the confrontation went viral on social media and were reproduced on mainstream national media outlets. Politicians called for zero-tolerance policing. The local police stressed that the young people were migrant “gangs” from Brussels. The right-wing [police union VSOA](#) claimed that “these ‘young people’ had been harassing good citizens for quite some time”, and also accused them of ignoring corona rules while trying to “play boss” on the beach and other recreational areas, “as they did in ‘troubled’ neighbourhoods” (Knack 2020, our translation). Local mayors temporarily suspended access to the beach for day-trippers. The Federal Commission of Domestic Affairs scheduled an exceptional meeting. The Dutch tabloid *De Telegraaf* dubbed the perpetrators “[terrorists](#)”.

The conflict did not come out of the blue. That Saturday was a particularly hot summer day in Belgium. Due to the pandemic, many public leisure spaces were closed in Brussels, where no open-air swimming pools are available, even under normal circumstances. The lockdown, which started in March, had already exhausted the patience of many of these young people. Youth workers and outreach workers had already called attention to the ethnic profiling practiced by the police as they enforced the lockdown, warning authorities that this would eventually “lead to a catastrophe”. They were right. Groups of young Brussels inhabitants took the direct train to Blankenberge and occupied parts of the beach, which grew busier and busier. Due to the rising tide, beach-goers were squeezed between the water and the privately-operated beach bars.

Edward Soja’s (2010) point on justice being spatially distributed is particularly relevant in this case. The right to public space is a highly sensitive issue in Brussels. Most lower-class young migrants live in deprived areas in the west of the city. Their houses do not have private gardens and public spaces are derelict. In the city centre, young people who appear North African are intensely policed and surveilled, which causes many of them to avoid going there at all. Stories of random stop-and-search practices and police violence are numerous.

The conflict on the Blankenberge beach cannot be understood through references to the inherent hostility of young migrants or to the criminogenic nature of deprived areas in Brussels, as many voices in the public debate seem to believe. Rather, it unveils often overlooked spatial injustices which may be hard to grasp for white, middle-class media pundits. Young migrants in Brussels

experience spatial deprivation which can – and often does – lead to conflicts in and about public space.

The case of Blankenberge also shows that public spaces are not peaceful spaces of consensus. On the contrary, we could argue, following Mouffe (2000), that “public” spaces are *by definition* conflict-laden and contested. This does not mean that any type of violence or crime in public spaces should be tolerated, but it does invite scholars, journalists and policy-makers to look for the underlying spatial injustices that cause specific everyday spatial conflicts to escalate.

Rather than looking at the “deviant” behaviour of young people with a migrant background, we should pay attention to the deep impact that sanitary rules and security regulations have on these groups’ right to the city. As reported by [Luce Beeckmans](#), Maynard Swanson (1977), in his historical research into colonial city planning practices in Africa in the beginning of the 20th century, shows how hygienic discourse (e.g., on the prevention of epidemics) was used as an excuse to implement ethnic segregation. Today, mayors of Belgian coastal towns may implement beach passes to regulate access based on homeownership, while the local police commissioner states, matter-of-factly, that groups of young people “with that profile” will be prevented from [getting off the train](#). Through a spatial justice lens, it seems that not much has changed over the last century.

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