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How to cite:

Breines, Markus; Dahinden, Janine; Jónsson, Gunvor; Lindmäe, Maria; Madella, Marco; Menet, Joanna; Schapendonk, Joris; Van Eck, Emil; Van Melik, Rianne and Watson, Sophie (2022). Re-producing public space: the changing everyday production of outdoor retail markets. *Urban Geography* (Early access).

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/02723638.2022.2054604>

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To cite this article: MMP, Markus Breines, Janine Dahinden, Gunvor Jónsson, Maria Lindmäe, Marco Madella, Joanna Menet, Joris Schapendonk, Emil Van Eck, Rianne Van Melik & Sophie Watson (2022): Re-producing public space: the changing everyday production of outdoor retail markets, Urban Geography, DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2022.2054604](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2054604)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2054604>



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Published online: 03 May 2022.



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Re-producing public space: the changing everyday production of outdoor retail markets

MMP, Markus Breines ^a, Janine Dahinden ^b, Gunvor Jónsson ^c,
Maria Lindmäe ^d, Marco Madella ^e, Joanna Menet ^f, Joris Schapendonk ^g,
Emil Van Eck ^g, Rianne Van Melik ^g and Sophie Watson ^c

^aDepartment of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK; ^bLaboratoire d'études des processus sociaux, Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland; ^cSchool of Social Sciences & Global Studies, The Open University, UK; ^dCaSEs, Department of Humanities, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain; ^eCaSEs, Department of Humanities, ICREA, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain; ^fLaboratoire d'études des processus sociaux, Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland; ^gInstitute for Management Research, Radboud Universiteit, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In 2020, nation states across Europe restricted access to, and use of, public space to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As almost all public spaces in Europe were consequently affected by restrictive measures, so too did outdoor retail markets drastically change. Some had to close down completely, whereas others operated under the sway of severe limitations for traders and customers. By re-engaging with the work of the late Michael Sorkin, it could be argued that the effects of COVID-19 add another dimension to the “end” or “death” of public space. In this paper, we shift attention to the tactics and strategies of one category of public figures behind the everyday production of markets, the traders, to show that markets in Spain, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and the Netherlands did not simply stop functioning as public spaces. Rather, they took on different forms that extended spatially beyond their physical boundaries. These transformations allowed for the continuation of the social and political dimensions of public space.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 October 2020
Accepted 1 March 2022

KEYWORDS

European markets; tactics; strategies; traders

Introduction

When it hit in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed numerous aspects of urban life and impacted its everyday expression through the (partial) closure of public spaces in the face of government-mandated orders. Consequently, scholars started investigating what impacts COVID-19 might have on the design, use, meaning and perception of such public spaces (e.g. Honey-Roses et al., 2020). Adding to this debate, we focus on outdoor retail markets as specific public spaces, which, contra semi-privatized market halls and festival markets, are freely accessible and publicly managed by local authorities.

CONTACT Emil Van Eck  emil.vaneck@ru.nl  Institute for Management Research, Radboud Universiteit, Elinor Ostrom Building, Room 2.213, Heyendaalseweg 141, 6525 AJ Nijmegen, Netherlands

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Although the markets we analyze in Spain, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and the Netherlands¹ do not fit a fixed terminology, we approach markets in terms of sociability, material arrangements and everyday practices which are always in the making. Without disregarding the plurality of actors that together contribute to the coming-into-being of markets as public spaces, we focus on the practices of one of their principal everyday producers: market traders. Returning to their (allocated) market spots to sell their wares on a regular basis, traders play a key role in shaping the “social glue” (Watson, 2009) around which the socio-political and material organization of markets unfold. In this paper, we show how COVID-19 impacted traders’ practices and, by extension, the public spaces in which they operate during the lockdowns. We adopt Michel De Certeau’s (1988) account of the modern city being made and remade in the routines and improvisations of human practice. While acknowledging the disruptive effects of the pandemic, this focus allows us to be sensitive to these inventive practices and provide an alternative reading of the presumed “end” or “death” of cities’ public spaces as a feature of COVID-19.

Everyday practices and the end of public space

Taking Michael Sorkin’s (1992) work on the “end of public space” as the critical starting point, many scholars have identified ongoing structural factors responsible for the reduced visibility and accessibility of public space, such as privatization and individualization. The new urbanity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has transformed the social mixtures, wilderness and aberrant voices of many traditional public spaces into “perpetual shadows” (Sorkin, 1992, p. 216) of capital accumulation and consumption. Sorkin described a dampened urban world in which public spaces are heavily managed with an obsession on security. Watson (2006) has shown how such neoliberal governing strategies can mobilize notions of fear and risk through the dismantling of social relationships that otherwise uphold a sense of collective responsibility and care in public space. Watson argues that public spaces are performative spaces, deriving their nature from unexpected encounters and volatile interactions, which she labeled as “rubbing along” (2009). Public space, therefore, is constituted in associational and agnostic relations, “in that it is implicated in the production of identities as relational and produced through difference” (Watson, 2006, p. 7). The perception of increased risk control inhibits people from enjoying public space as a space of both *social* encounters and *political-identical* expression.

Many scholars who study markets engage with the “end of public space” argument to contextualize the decline and socio-political changes to markets that have taken place within the trajectory of the neoliberal political economy (e.g. González & Waley, 2013). Van Eck et al. (2020) recently argued that the COVID-19-related health-regulations added another dimension to the (temporary) “end” or “death” of public space, as local authorities transformed markets into “sanitized” public spaces which became difficult to appropriate for uses and ends that are not economically motivated.

However, to fully understand the effects of COVID-19 on the functioning of markets as spaces of social encounter and political expression, attention should not only be paid to the restrictions leading to the assumed end of public space, but also to how the traders interpreted, negotiated and even tried to subvert these exclusionary practices. If the interventionist measures to safeguard the protection of human health resulted in the partial

curtailment of socio-economic and political freedoms of both producers and consumers of public space, it is all the more urgent to discover the “miniscule” ways by which they “appropriate[d] the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” (De Certeau, 1988, p. xiv). As such, the end of public space should not be seen as a “complete diagnosis” (Madden, 2010, p. 190), but as an ongoing practice fit for empirical investigation.

We adapt De Certeau’s approach to interrogate the diverse “strategies” and “tactics” of traders through which they tried to uphold their livelihoods, and, by so doing, reconfigured the social and political nature of markets as public spaces. Strategies refer to organized ways of reworking power relations on the very grounds on which they are cast, while tactics refer to everyday acts that, due to their transformative nature, help to constitute a social fabric that is the “unpredictable sum of singular, creative acts rather than a function of ... disciplinary logic[s]” (Barker, 2009, p. 157). Methodologically, we make use of a triangulation of ethnographic and digital research, drawing upon (participant) observations, semi-structured interviews with traders and market managers, and document analysis of newspaper articles and Twitter.

Below, we show how the transformations of markets became both an object of health-related policy and a subject of everyday practice. First, we contextualize how traders were relocated under the sway of new health regulations. Secondly, we show how traders made use of different tactics and strategies to uphold their livelihoods and proclaim their right to trade in this context. By focusing on traders’ responses to shifting regulatory frameworks, this paper demonstrates that the locations and meanings of public spaces are always reconfigured in relation to changing socio-political, economic, and in this case health related contexts, in ways that go beyond an absolute reading of the end of public space.

The spatial reconfiguration of markets

During the first peak of the virus outbreak in Europe from about March until June 2020, many traders in our four countries were initially forced to stay at home. In Switzerland, both non-food and food markets were closed down completely. After more than six weeks, farmer and vegetable markets were allowed to reopen. In the Netherlands, Spain and UK, where both food and non-food traders work on mixed markets, licenses for the latter selling “non-essential” goods were suspended for a couple of weeks. After the re-openings of almost all markets, most of them remained subject to both strict regulations to prevent dense gatherings and loitering, and to spatial reorganization measures to ensure the required social distance.

These socio-spatial transformations had a direct impact on traders because of the reallocation of their market pitches. In Amsterdam, officials of the city districts decided to temporarily “freeze” permanent trading licenses for at least a year. Instead, the municipality provided a limited number of daily licenses to allocate traders in a more flexible way in accordance with the distancing rules. This meant that most traders had to occupy new trading spots, which were clearly separated from each other and sparsely spread out over enlarged market terrains. Moreover, these terrains were more intensely surveilled and meticulously managed by community service officers to deter dense gatherings of customers around market pitches. As many traders have their preferred trading

spots with a high run-up of market visitors, their relocations resulted in the loss of turnover rates. Frustrated by the new allocation system and declining customer numbers, a Dutch vegetable trader complained: “I’ll pack up here and search for a new market!” (AT5, 2020).

Also in the other countries, traders suddenly had to accept the relocation of their market pitches. In a small town in Switzerland, traders were even allocated to neighborhoods located far away from the regular market. In a provincial market in Spain, the unilateral decision of the managers to reallocate traders was contested by a few who jointly decided to use the early hours of the market set-up to reorganize the pitches themselves. In all four countries traders were suddenly subjected to rigid reallocation practices that fragmented the accessibility of markets and the relationships between the traders and customers. Nevertheless, traders made use of both tactics and strategies through which they were able to not only uphold their own professions, but also to re-configure some of the social and political dimensions of markets as public spaces.

Creating a “market spirit”

Due to the institutional limitations impeding on-site trading practices, many traders started exploring alternative ways to sell their products. In Spain, a dairy farmer set up her stall in front of an ecological food store to continue the direct sales during the period that the market was suspended. In other instances, traders started with home delivery services to distribute their goods, and, maybe even more important, to keep in contact with their customers. Both of these practices can be theorized as important *tactics*. Without operating from a stable base from which one could “stockpile its winnings” (De Certeau, 1988, p. 37), the pop-up vending point and the invented delivery services built up their own positions from the change offerings of the moment.

As markets no longer accommodated pitches for all traders because of the reduced capacity, many traders found themselves stuck with an abundance of (fresh) goods which they would normally have sold in person on the markets. A Swiss trader who used to sell her homegrown vegetables on two different markets started with delivery services. Despite the additional work, she enjoyed delivering directly to the doors of her customers, especially to those who preferred not to leave their houses because of the virus. During deliveries, she always tried to have a chat with her customers as she did not like to “just deposit [the vegetable box] and leave”. That is not, as she argued, the “*market spirit*” (Phone Interview, March 2020, emphasis added).

Though arguably these market relations had shifted spatially to the private (or individualized) sphere, many of the traders described the continued importance of sociability. These kind of brief interactions also enabled the relations of care which would normally take place on the market to be preserved through their spatial transformation to new, domestic spaces; keeping the “market spirit” alive even at a distance from the original markets. The continuation of such social relations despite the closures of markets occurred across all four countries. In Spain, a Catalan trader selling bakery products also engaged in home deliveries for the first time. Several of her loyal customers who were missing the market sent their orders by *WhatsApp* and she personally delivered them to their doorsteps. Just as in Switzerland, many traders insisted on the importance of brief meetings to maintain the meaning of the relationships with customers away from

the market. Traders still played a significant role in keeping an eye on their customers and taking an interest in their lives. This constitutes “an important aspect of the making of social worlds in cities and villages” (Watson, 2009, p. 1579), especially in the face of the constraints to such interactions within markets themselves.

While a public space of sociability is often conceptualized as the literal “coming-into-the-public of private individuals” (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007, p. 796), the examples above depict the inherent porosity of the boundary between the public and the private, in this case precisely because of the traders’ spatially extended acts of being sociable. The re-configured social-spatial relations of the market thus re-configured private/public boundaries also; thereby highlighting, as argued by Staeheli (1996, p. 616), the mutual construction of the “private” and the “public” spheres as well as the permeability between them.

Politicization of the market

In addition to home delivery being a tactic to survive economically, thereby re-creating some of the social elements of public space, traders also mobilized in more collective-*strategic* ways to express their discomfort with the shifting regulatory measures. In the Netherlands, traders throughout the country took to the streets to protest against the strict distancing measures on the markets. With the support of the national trade union acting as the institutional base to gain discursive legitimacy (De Certeau, 1988), traders were able to reach beyond the local and amplified their statements to the national level. Representing the collective voices of traders, the trade union proclaimed the discrimination of traders in the retail sector. From this institutional position, traders eventually were able to translate their discursive legitimacy into legal actions by filing summary proceedings to convince the judge that the decision to close markets in the region of Rotterdam should be reversed (CVAH, 2020). Similarly, in the UK, traders in the National Market Trader Federation became active in sometimes confrontational dialogues with the National Association of British Market Authorities. The demands they were making, such as securing compensation for lost rents and fees during the pandemic, were well responded to by many of the local authorities (NABMA, 2020).

Because of the strict mobility restrictions imposed in Spain, street protests were prohibited in line with the suppression of markets. In contrast to the Netherlands, Spanish protesters could not “stake out” a space that would allow them to gain visibility in the public eye (Mitchell, 1995, p. 115). The Spanish traders had to move the debate to the virtual public sphere, using social media platforms to campaign for the reopening of markets. During that time, Twitter served as such a virtual platform to make the interests of the traders and agricultural producers heard. Mercat de Pagès, a Barcelona-based union of privately organized farmers markets, used their institutional account on Twitter to exert their limited power by strategically bombing the social media accounts of several governmental institutions with demands that had earlier fallen on deaf ears. Their 24-hour Twitter campaign, in which local authorities were tagged to involve them in the public threads, was used for collecting signatures to support the reopening of markets. This strategy culminated in a public letter sent to the mayor of Barcelona in which the legitimacy of closing food markets was questioned. The successful protest led to the licenses of the five markets being reinstated so that traders could resume

their work on the markets. The shift of the debate into cyberspace substituted the political dimension of markets when public space as “the ground within and from which political activity flows” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 117) was not physically accessible. This allowed the struggle for access to public space to continue online.

Conclusion

Looking back over the period since the start of the pandemic in 2020, we see a number of longer term impacts on markets as public spaces and some continuities. On the one hand, as soon as markets were allowed to open up, many of the traders returned to the market, setting up their stalls with often only limited changes to the spatial layout of their stalls, depending on local regulations. Visits to the markets more recently have also revealed a return of the customers to the markets, creating a familiar buzz of sociality and a vibrant public space.

Contrary to the exponential growth in online shopping, many shoppers, particularly older people and single parents for whom the market offers an important space of social connection, have returned to the market. So too ethnic minorities, for whom markets offer goods – particularly food – hard to find elsewhere, have returned to the markets in numbers equal to before the pandemic. Many of the goods sold in markets are not easily available in an online shopping environment also mitigating against their demise.

There are nevertheless traders for whom the pandemic has had a longer-term impact. Some traders could not afford to reopen their stalls due to the debts accrued through lockdown and the renewed costs of setting up their stalls. Others have moved their business to online selling competing in the new highly competitive world of online shopping.

What we have seen in this brief vignette of markets as public space during the pandemic overall is their resilience despite their periodic closure during 2020/1. Traders themselves turned out to play important roles in reconfiguring the social and political elements of public spaces when the physical sites of markets no longer sufficiently served their needs. By transforming their location-based businesses into delivery services as an important tactic, they made practical choices to keep their businesses running. Most importantly, traders’ visits carried along the “market spirit” and spatially transformed the social relations of the market to new places, such as to customers’ doorsteps.

Other activities that define a space as “public”, such as political-identical manifestations and struggles for representation (Mitchell, 1995), depended on more collective mobilizations and were thus difficult to perform during the peak of the pandemic. As discussed above, such collective gatherings were met with regulatory constraints, to which online protests turned out to provide a solution. As the public spaces where market traders normally operate were under stricter control and not accessible to all traders, the shift to online forums provided an alternative base from which the traders could assert their claims, needs and interests. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to fully question this online shift, as such social media platforms are also criticized for the oligopoly of tech giants, offering merely a “weak” form of democratic participation to the members of virtual communities (Dahlberg, 2001). However, our findings illustrate that the use of Twitter has been beneficial for performing collective strategies aiming for institutional change on the ground.

Whereas Van Eck et al. (2020) argued that COVID-19-related regulations in combination with accelerated surveillance practices have reduced the potentialities for inter-subjective interactions in markets, this paper has offered a complementary analysis. We have shown how this (temporary) “end of public space” (Sorkin, 1992) should not be understood as a generalizable and complete diagnosis, but rather as an inherently contested process. This process is defined by actors’ tactics and strategies which remain powerful tools for maintaining accessibility to public space; both in its social and political meaning.

Note

1. This is an international research collaboration entitled Moving MarketPlaces (MMP): Following the Everyday Production of Inclusive Public Spaces. For more information, see: <https://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/moving-marketplaces>

Acknowledgements

Moving Marketplaces (MMP) has involved 10 people - five established academics and five research fellows. This has been a remarkably collaborative team, where each of the individuals have contributed to the research outputs and discussion in different ways. Rather than follow the usual academic practice of authorship being attributed alphabetically or in proportion to specific contribution, we have decided to publish some of our outputs under the collective author MMP. This decision is to reflect the different and valuable contribution of all team members and also to challenge the individualism of some academic practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The project Moving MarketPlaces is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme (www.heranet.info) which is co-funded by NWO “Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek” / Dutch Research Council (the Netherlands), AHRC “Arts and Humanities Research Council” (United Kingdom), AEI “Agencia Estatal de Investigación” / State Research Agency (Spain), SNF “Swiss National Science Foundation” (Switzerland) and the European Commission through Horizon 2020 [grant number: Hera.2.015].

ORCID

Markus Breines  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7570-9354>

Janine Dahinden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1806-3520>

Gunvor Jónsson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2462-2843>

Maria Lindmäe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1573-722X>

Marco Madella  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9324-1545>

Joanna Menet  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3778-3024>

Joris Schapendonk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6099-0841>

Emil Van Eck  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3689-9399>

Rianne Van Melik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6475-7008>

Sophie Watson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2981-8490>

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