

BOOK REVIEW

NEGOTIATING URBAN CONFLICT – CONFLICTS AS OPPORTUNITY FOR URBAN DEMOCRACY by Nanke VERLOO

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Abstract

This review critiques Nanke Verloo's book 'Negotiating Urban Conflict – Conflicts as Opportunity for Urban Democracy'. The book mixes elements of ethnography and narrative analysis to investigate three urban conflicts that took place in Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Verloo utilizes a remarkable research approach that focuses on learning from people rather than learning about people. The conclusions include notions about the importance of gestures, public ownership and listening to people. The book does not sufficiently elaborate on the dangers of becoming affiliated with the people's views while conducting ethnographic research and contradicts its bottom-up approach by being not accessible to the broader public due to unnecessarily sophisticated language and an overloaded theory chapter. However, its unique research approach with bottom-up focus and narration-like case studies make it an outstanding book with high practical relevance for urban policy makers that are involved in conflict resolution.

Keywords: urban conflict, urban democracy, conflict resolution, ethnography, street-level research.

A Tale of Three Cities: Urban Conflicts in Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht

„Whenever I happen to be in a city of any size, I marvel that riots do not break out every day: Massacres, unspeakable carnage, a doomsday chaos. How can so many human beings coexist in a space so confined without hating each other to death?“ – Emil M. Cioran in ‚History and Utopia‘

This quote might reveal more about Cioran's pessimism, summarising in a remarkable way the source of urban conflicts. Before everything else, cities differ from other locations by their higher population density. People of different cultural and societal backgrounds across all age groups are forced to live next door to each other, preferably without the above-mentioned massacres and carnages. While everybody has the possibility to set the rules in their private living spaces, the public space must be shared amongst all of them. The diversity of people living in a city leads inevitably to clashes of interest. How well the conflicts of interest are managed and contained depends on the one hand on how well conflict resolution practices are embedded in one city's culture and on the other hand on the existence of talented mediators.

In 'Negotiating Urban Conflict – Conflicts as Opportunity for Urban Democracy' Nanke Verloo investigates how urban conflicts unfolded in three different cases and what dynamics have been influential. The book distinguishes itself from other books in the urban conflict domain by the use of a different frame for conflict. Verloo wants conflict to be understood as a moment of democratic opportunity, rather than just something that has to be managed. Conflicts can have a very activating nature, which results in people becoming politicised, organised and starting to participate (p. 17). Therefore, it is worth analysing conflicts not only focusing on ways to resolve them.

For her investigation, she uses an outstanding research approach that combines elements of ethnography and narrative analysis. Verloo embraces the analytical importance and symbolic power of street-level performances, such as occupying, marching, hanging, celebrating and threatening (p. 58). She sees these street-level actions and interactions as very influential for discursive dynamics and attempts to reveal how these performances affect identities, events and power relations (p. 60). For this purpose, Verloo develops the Social-Spatial Narrative (SSN) framework which focuses both on what people say and what they do (p. 59). To adopt a narrative perspective means to acknowledge that different actors perceive situations in subjective ways. They regard different things as important and attribute different meanings to events. But only listening to people's stories would not create a full account of events (p. 68). Therefore, Verloo analyses performances of people in order to increase the understanding of conflicts' dynamics and also to grasp the viewpoints of people who have problems communicating their stories verbally. People's performances are also of importance because they often trigger critical moments, a concept that plays a central role in Verloo's analytical framework. Critical moments disrupt the narrative of at least one of the involved parties and can alter the power dynamics or relations of stakeholder groups (p. 68). Their analysis is therefore crucial for understanding how different narratives unfold and change over time and 'how conflicts provide opportunities for negotiation in democratic governance' (p. 87). Verloo developed her SSN framework following the concept of grounded theory which encourages the inductive construction of a theoretical framework by evaluating the gathered data. This ensures that the used theoretical foundation is best capable of analysing the present cases or data.

The book is based on ethnographical field research which was conducted over several years in three different Dutch cities. It is essential to understand the subjective views of different actors in order to be able to analyse the different unfolding and changing narratives. This requires a researcher to submerge into the worlds of the people in order to make sense of their stories. Verloo calls this way of doing research 'learning-in-action'. The goal of this research practice is not to learn about people but to learn from people (p. 90). It includes semi-structured interviews with involved people, participation in everyday activities like dog-walking and also the organisation of reflective sessions with people from the field (p.

91). The last-mentioned practice is especially outstanding, since it gives the involved actors the possibility to highlight gaps or misinterpretations in the reconstructed narratives (p. 113).

The analysed cases are set in Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Each of the three cases represents a different form of urban conflict, namely crisis, controversy and latent conflict (p. 20). The crisis in Amsterdam is based in the context of the death of a boy of Moroccan descent who died while stealing a purse after the woman he had robbed was trying to stop him with her car. The analysis of the case focuses on several critical moments: the death of the boy, the removal of the mourning site by local governmental officials only a couple of days after the initial incident, the call for protest of the Moroccan community, the negotiation of a protest march between the Moroccan community and the local government and the march itself. Verloo analyses how members of the Moroccan community and local policy practitioners have perceived the critical moments, how they responded to them and how these responses were understood by others. The other two cases involve a controversy about the responsibility for a community center called 'The Cockpit' in The Hague and a latent conflict concerning issues about ownership of public spaces in Utrecht.

Verloo draws several conclusions from the analysis of these three cases. Conflicts are likely to escalate if one story becomes too dominant while other stories become marginal (p. 298). While this is undoubtedly a logical conclusion, especially from the case set in Amsterdam, it also appears to be a subliminal self-affirmation of her research approach which focuses on less dominant narratives. Verloo also re-emphasises the importance of critical moments as a unit of analysis (p. 308). The lack of critical moments is what makes latent conflicts so dangerous: it makes it difficult for all sides to understand the perspective of the other conflict party. The three cases also highlight how important the symbolism behind seemingly insignificant street-level actions and gestures can be (p. 310). Especially the clearing of the mourning site in Amsterdam had such a strong symbolic power that it was able to completely reshape the further course of the conflict.

'Negotiating Urban Conflict – Conflicts as Opportunity for Urban Democracy' is in several ways a unique book. Especially its learning-in-action approach is remarkable. Verloo uses bottom-up not only as a method of analysis but makes it the overarching idea of her research. The whole book is about paying attention to people who usually have problems getting their voices heard in public. How serious Verloo takes the opinions of the people in the field is shown by her organisation of reflection sessions which give the people the chance to stay involved in the research project beyond the interview stage. Her guideline, attempting to learn from people rather than to learn about people, is a refreshing variety within the often rather theory and data driven social sciences. The book will give most readers the feeling that they have not read anything comparable before. Verloo's bottom-up approach requires her to submerge into the social worlds the conflicts are settled in. This is best illustrated by the occasionally

displayed narrative accounts of her every-day contacts with involved people, like taking the train to The Hague together with David or joining Mr and Mrs Lavender taking their dog for a walk. By displaying deeply personal activities and thoughts of the people in the field, the book creates an emotional relationship between the reader and the subjects of the research. I wonder how Mr and Mrs Lavender from Utrecht or Sjaan from the Cockpit group are doing today.

But this genuinely positive side-effect of the book shows an important risk: how can researchers with learning-in-action approaches make sure that they do not become affiliated with the subjective worldviews of the people in the field? If a social scientist conducts ethnographical field research, the danger of 'going native' is always present. Verloo claims that she has reflected on her 'own role as a researcher in relation to the field' (p. 309), but these reflections only included how lucrative it can be to leave the desk and dive into the crowds and omitted the dangers that this abandoning of an objective position can involve. It is hard to understand why Verloo does not explain at all how she dealt with this danger during her research and in the subsequent writing process. All cases focus on allegedly less dominant narratives – which are without exception the narratives of the residents/local people and not of the local authorities. How do we know that the framing of the resident's narratives as 'less dominant' is not primarily a result of Verloo adopting the residents' perceptions that they are not being heard? This is only one example how the potential loss of objectivity could have influenced Verloo's research.

Ignoring this issue is especially hard to understand since the theoretical and methodological chapters of the book include a lot of information which is not or only hardly relevant for the book's line of argument. The whole first chapter covers three different methods of contemporary local governance (control/rule, collaboration, contention) to which Verloo does not refer at all anymore at later stages. The function of this chapter within the book remains unclear. Other examples include references to positioning theory (p. 73 et seq.) and Bent Flyvbjerg's arguments for the general usefulness of case studies (p. 95). As a consequence, the theoretical and methodological chapters appear a bit bloated and overloaded. Narrowing down these chapters to the actual essential components also would have contributed to making the book more accessible to a broader public. To be easily accessible should not necessarily be the goal of a dissertation, but Verloo's very complicated and sophisticated elaborations of a theoretically very comprehensible research approach (listening to people) potentially contradicts her bottom-up idea of doing research by excluding non-academic people from enjoying her book.

Verloo's book is of great value for all practitioners and researchers who have to deal with or investigate urban conflict. Her advice to practitioners includes to talk with and not only about people, to pay attention to gestures and to create public ownership by fostering real self-organisation (p. 311). In her theoretical foundation, Verloo lost in part the focus on what is genuinely important, but this does not

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change the fact that Verloo has written an outstanding and remarkable book which is especially convincing because of its narration-like case studies.

To come back to Cioran's initial question, why are most cities not characterised by continuous 'massacres and doomsday chaos', although they are inhabited by so many different people? In his opinion, humans are simply too weak and bland for constant fury. Instead of relying on that, Verloo's book teaches us that listening to each other and taking each other's perspectives seriously could already contribute to preventing massacres and maintaining the social peace in the future.