

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Valverde, Mariana, *Everyday Law on the Street: City Governance in an Age of Diversity*. 2012, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 272 pp. \$27.50 paper (9780226921907)

Any social formation that aspires to long-term persistence complemented by social justice, including a concern with the issue of diversity and social inclusion, requires a system of governance grounded in an ethics of collective well-being, and facilitated by regulations and practices that are suitably responsive to the exigencies of collective life and its complexity. Indeed, good governance is a *sine qua non* in an age of: mobile capital, goods and people; increasing social diversity as a consequence of that mobility; globalized competition; and more. And of course, cities across the globe are at the epicentre of this rapidly metabolizing world. Consequently, it is arguable that good governance at the level of the urban is more important today than ever. It is that recognition that might be said to be one important animating variable for this very engaging, illuminating, and relevant work by the socio-legal scholar, Marianne Valverde, which examines “mundane details of how cities regulate space, settle disputes, and interpret ordinances and regulations,” (2) in the context of multiculturalism and increasing social diversity, directed to bringing to view the dynamics of urban governance and the “complex network of legal and administrative mechanisms” (11) by which it is constituted. Here it is important to note that while Valverde takes as her case study the city of Toronto, her objective is to secure findings that are relevant for urban governance in general.

A second motivation for this work is Valverde’s desire to correct for what she argues has been the neglect, in urban studies, of the role of the law and its power—those legal and regulatory mechanisms that give shape to the routine dimensions of everyday urban infrastructure and practices—such as, “paving roads, maintaining parks, dictating the size of yards, inspecting homes and public buildings, regulating city traffic, and issuing marriage licenses, taxi plates, and building permits” (7-8).

Thus, the first substantive chapter of the book, chapter two, discloses and analyzes “how urban space is put together by the city’s legal tools” (28). Here, she reminds us that both the physical and social dimensions of city sidewalks are deeply regulated by the law. For example, she reveals that the street foods available in the city are strictly regulated in

terms of what and where they can be sold, and who and how many are licensed to perform this service (this issue will be taken in more detail in chapter six). Because these rules and regulations do not have the force of the criminal code behind them, many of us are unaware of their existence, and typically only become aware of them when they have been breached.

However, it is in chapters three through nine that we really come to understand, via rich ethnographic detail, the dynamics, dilemmas, and often times, dysfunctions of urban governance. For instance, chapter four examines and brings into focus three unsettling aspects of the city's administration. The first pertains to the limitations of an exceedingly complex and patch-work municipal legal edifice that easily invites mistakes on the part of city employees and adjudicators charged with its interpretation and enforcement (85-89). The second concern highlights the quasi-feudal power that such a dysfunctional system gives to local councilors to act as village-elders (fixers and defenders) of their constituency and thus secure gratitude and, more importantly, support at the ballot box, and thus almost impossible to unseat (96-99). Third, the chapter reveals and examines the disproportionate power of "squeaky wheels" and local champions in influencing--through their acquaintance with the planning process, and considerable resources and know-how to get attention from councilors and city staff--the sometimes wasteful deployment of city regulatory resources. For example, city inspectors were repeatedly and fruitlessly sent out, by the local councilor, to address "squeaky wheel" concerns around noise in the Entertainment district of the city where loud sounds are to be expected since it is after all, the entertainment district! Ultimately, Valverde reminds us that such a system sacrifices diversity and inclusion, as it is largely reflective of the interests and concerns of "...white, well educated, and mostly gray-haired folk who already feel a sense of entitlement, and whose claims to urban citizen are confirmed and reinforced by the village-elder political system..." (103).

It is important to note that this study is largely facilitated by first hand observation of, and interaction with, governance at work, whether drive-a-longs with Property Standards officers, interviewing city officials, or attending community consultation and planning-related meetings. Through these close-up examinations of urban governance in action, Valverde crucially reveals the variety of ways in which the "regulatory arsenal" of the city of Toronto is very susceptible to being compromised and abused in ways that are inimical to what is good for the city as a whole. Such susceptibility, she tells us, is largely a function of the following maladies: (i) remarkable influence by local politicians and

special interests in matters of urban governance; (ii) “seat-of-the-pants” decision making; (iii) parochial and short-sighted tendency in those actions, and (iv) unresponsiveness to the social diversity of the city.

Like Aristotle’s *Politics*, Valverde is ultimately calling for a perspective that asks after the good of the city. “Planning,” she concludes, “is the organization of activities and spaces to maximize aggregate well-being (what municipal codes have long called “public welfare,” *salus populi*)” (217). However, she tells us, for the city of Toronto, “nearly all civic energy is spent either on micro-local issues (improving or preserving this or that amenity or streetscape) or in single-issue campaigns, say to create bike lanes or set up farmers’ markets” (210). While such issues might be important in themselves, they are rarely incorporated into larger strategic undertakings that require thinking about the good of the city as a whole and the ways in which any issue must be measured for its relevance to the life of the city and its implications for citizenship. Further, she proposes that city governance is practiced in ways that are exclusive and ultimately fails to be responsive to the social diversity of the city. In her words, “The study has shown that cities rarely use their legal and regulatory tools to promote inclusion” (210). Ultimately, and fundamentally, Valverde proposes, in this work, that the city lacks a mechanism for stimulating stakeholders into thinking of the good of the city (whole), rather than what is good for the individual (the part).

While this book is deeply revealing about the intricacies and maladies of urban governance, it does carry the risk of inviting cynicism in the face of the seeming implacability of the rules and habitual practices of city planning that are piece-meal, ad hoc, dominated on a ward-by-ward basis by a coalition of local city councilors and “local champions” and/or “squeaky wheels,” and thus short-sighted and parochial, and works to reinforce inequality and exclusion.

This work represents a strong contribution to the study of urban governance. The interdisciplinary nature of the scholarship exemplified in this work makes it terribly relevant reading for urban sociology and urban studies, the sociology of the law, and, indeed, political science.

York University

Saeed Hydaralli

Saeed Hydaralli (Ph.D.), a sociologist by training, is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Equity Studies at York University. In September of 2015, he will take up his new appointment as an Assistant Professor in Sociology with the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Roger Williams University. The focus of his research and analysis brings together his interest in the city

and the variety of policies, regulations and practices that inform and/or govern everyday urban life and well-being.

Email: shydar@yorku.ca