Sporting Space and Governmentality: The Modernization of Wrigley Field

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Wrigley Field and the rooftop space surrounding the venue symbolize a quintessential golden age, as well as a simpler and purer time of American baseball and leisure activity (Twietmeyer, 2008). The rooftop used to be a private space for residents to watch the Chicago Cubs play, symbolizing a degree of boundary-less-ness between the residential neighborhood and the baseball stadium as a synergistic sporting spectacle. Towards the late 1980's, the rooftop space took a turn toward commercialization, a reconfiguration of which was at first operated with spatial and economic sovereignty by the owners. To fulfill the agenda of modernizing and expanding Wrigley Field, however, the spatial as well as socio-economic order established on the rooftop space were increasingly seen as a space to govern by the Chicago Cubs. Modernization, famously characterized by Gruneau (1988) as involving innovation with sport products and services that represent “capitalist social processes” is a preferred lens as it represents the result of “an expression of class power, social control, and the dominant ideology” (p. 9, 23-24).

By employing Foucault’s theory of governmentality and disciplinary power (1979, 1991, 2007), this study seeks to investigate the contested power struggles over the rooftop space in the modernization and renovation of Wrigley Field. Specifically, there are three folds of research questions: (a). what spatial control have been employed by the sport franchise in its practices of governmentality; (b). how have other techniques – such as the normalization of rhetoric dynamics as well as economic control - been used to facilitate comprehensive interplays of ‘truths’, rationalities and power; (c). how can the dynamics provide insights and challenges to a larger process of sport governance in relation to communities and stakeholders.

Literature Review

Sporting space is a critical component which brings together human bodies, sporting activities, and meanings of experiences (Friedman, 2010; van Ingen, 2003). In the sport literature, Bale (1987, 1993) employed Foucault’s (1995) concept of panopticon to explain how the English football stadiums changed from a relatively open structure to enclosed and segmented space, thus having increasingly placed sport fans under surveillance. Furthermore, Friedman (2010), echoing van Ingen’s (2003) proposal to use Lefebvre’s theories to examine the social production of sporting space,examined how the construction of Washington’s Nationals Park initiates social marginalization and exclusion. Within these works and others, the social dynamics of sporting space remain under-investigated and under-theorized (Jarvie, 2013, Silk & Andrews, 2006).

In this study, Foucault’s governmentality (1979, 1991) is employed as a theoretical framework. Specifically, governmentality is concerned with how everyday activity is sensible in terms of techniques of power by which the conduct of citizens is conducted (Foucault, 2000). Space is integral to governmentality – an object of management and control, and a site for punishment (Foucault, 1991). Furthermore, Foucault (1977, 1981) stressed that an array of spatial management techniques can facilitate the holding of order and discipline, such as enclosure of space, partitioning, and functional sites. Finally, the material arrangement and physical structures of space are connected to many other types of discourse in contributing to the regime of governance; under the control of which, the individuals adopt appropriate, regulated behaviors and subjectivities (Foucault, 1980).

Method

This study approaches the research questions through a hermeneutic analysis of newspaper articles published by the Chicago Tribune that contained discussion and representation of rooftops around Wrigley Field in the time period of 1970 to 2015. In this study, each text examined is approached as a part in the overall development of the expansion and modernization of Wrigley Field; emphasizing the hermeneutic philosophy that the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole (Heidegger, 1984) which reveals and verifies the
researchers’ inter-subjectivities (Gadamer 1976; Klafki, 1971). In so doing, it aims to make sense of the overall relationship between different parties involved, the sport organization, and the practices of governmentality.

Analysis and Conclusions

The analysis reveals a gradual process where the sporting spectacle has become exclusively governed and controlled by the sport franchise. As this is manifested in spatial dynamics, an array of technologies embodied in the material arrangements, physical structures, as well as bodily regimes have been employed to procure governmentality. For instance, one major theme focuses on the formation of physical boundary between Wrigley Field and the residential neighborhood. In April 2002, to battle the city of Chicago and rooftop owners in opposing the expansion of Wrigley Field, the Chicago Cubs implemented a windsreen attached by chain-link fencing. Although this structure did not indeed physically block the rooftop view, its existence nevertheless highlighted a symbolic punishment where viewing the Cubs was framed as a trespass. The boundary started to take physical shape from the installation of one commercial sign inside Wrigley Field to an ultimate systematic modernization plan of installing six commercial signs, two video scoreboards, as well as expanded bleachers at a scale that controls and erodes the access to the view rooftops patrons previously enjoyed.

In providing internalized logic to spatial changes, establishing rhetoric control on normalizing stadium modernization was also deeply embedded in this process. According to Foucault, “normalization is one of the great instruments of power” (Foucault, 1977, p.183). It was done through relating the need of modernization to the poor performance of the Cubs, the renovation at another historical stadium Fenway Park, as well as the framing of Wrigley as a site of business instead of museum. Not only did such process intend to impose homogeneous understanding of space and Wrigley modernization, but also created power dynamics where rooftop owners were increasingly placed under surveillance, isolated, and labeled as “thieves, pirates, and bloodsuckers” (Rick, 2002). Furthermore, it enabled various stakeholders to adopt subjectivities that embrace the modernization agenda of the sport franchise, manifesting the effect of governmentality and disciplinary power.

The analysis of this study implies that investigation of sport governance needs to follow a more complex, interpretive, and dynamic view of sport organizations. Foucault’s theories of governmentality and disciplinary power also have wider applications in other sporting contexts that involve individuals, organizational behavior, and power. One limitation is that Foucault’s emphasis is less attentive to those who enact them and how it molds their actions, which means that the incorporation of theories and practices from different angles shall also be considered.