

Street Vending: Politics and Possibilities for Inclusion  
Street Vendors & Engagement with the State

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Much of what I will say in this brief text is based on my experiences, observations, and reflections on research I have conducted concerning the micro-scale politics of street vending in the context of Mexico City. Much of my knowledge on the subject comes from my own disciplinary background as an urban geographer. Hence, most of what I will allude to is a product of my engagement with geography and urban studies. I do not expect to provide a model that can be applied to the entire region of Latin America, nor the entire range of studies on this matter within the social sciences.

***Do existing theories about the relationship between street traders and the state match the realities of this relationship today?***

Theories on the relationship between street vending and the state have mostly been framed within the study of informality more broadly. Although there have been a range of studies that have looked specifically at the phenomena of street vending, few have developed as grand theories, but have rather explored the multiple ways and the conditions under which state institutions are associated with so-called informal activities. Hence, it is difficult to detach notions of street vending from broader and more abstract concepts as the informal sector. The study of street vending and other practices associated with the so-called informal sector has traditionally been carried out within the broad disciplinary realm of development studies. Viewed originally as an activity geographically confined to developing countries, the informal or pre-modern sector was defined as a series of economic activities that did not contribute to the growth of national economies. Much of this work was dominated by a “culture of poverty” approach, which was very much in line with classic modernization theory. The underlying assumption was that informal activities had to be pushed into the formal sphere in order for a nation to transition into the modern economy, in line with developed nations. Within this general interest on informality relative to linear and colonial understandings of modernity and development, a subsector within urban studies also showed an interest in the rise of this form of economic livelihood but within the context of important changes in the composition of cities. Following a similar culture of poverty approach which drew from the Chicago School, this work developed a perspective which saw life outside the margins of the state (primarily in relation to housing) as a product of the incapacity of rural migrants to completely become urbanites, thus living in limbo between the urban-rural and the formal-informal.

Particular focus was placed on Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, where cities in the region were dealing with unprecedented levels of growth due, among other things, to rural-urban migration. Wide ranges of studies were produced in order to understand the mechanisms developed by recent migrants to survive in a context of unemployment and general urban poverty, and whether those mechanisms existed at the margins of the state. Early work in the informal sector tended to provide a dualist framework based on different and sometimes contrasting definitions of “the informal” and “the formal”. Whether it was self-employed vs. wage earner, unprotected vs. protected, poorly organized vs. well organized, at issue was to differentiate what was evidently a type of work that was not accounted for by formal political and economic

structures of society. Hence, informality was defined as what formality was not, but not in relation to each other. Indeed, these first approaches to informality in general, and also to street vending specifically rarely explored street vending in relation to the formal institutions of the state or as a product of the existing fissures within the state. The state was conceived as a formal entity, which put forward a series of policies to deal with the phenomena. The state was never put into question.

During the 1980s these early dualist frameworks were made more complex through what Rakowski (1994) identifies as four approaches grouped into the structuralist and the legalist perspective. The first perspective emerged from some of the concerns of the International Labour Organization and eventually incorporated neo-Marxist theories and dependency theories. For this group, the informal sector was a product of the structural inequalities inherent in the capitalist mode of production. From this perspective, informality acts as a *survival strategy* or socio-economic safety-net for those living in precarious conditions. Individuals who partake in informal activities have no other option as they are squeezed out of the formal economy. As Portes and Castells explain, the informal sector should be understood as a direct product of the flexibilization of the labor force in order to achieve higher rates of competitiveness within globalizing national economies. In this sense, the production of un- and underemployment were analyzed as core strategies in the development of wealth and capitalist accumulation. Here, the classic ideas of dependency theory played a fundamental role in explaining the emergence and growth of the informal economy and street vending in cities.

For the second group, the legalists, the informal economy was a product of a complex and bureaucratic legal system, which made it easier to live at the margins of a regulatory framework than to be officially part of a political-economic system. Too much regulation was considered the primary cause of informal activities. De Soto (1986), whose work is considered emblematic of this legalist framework, views the informal economy as comprised of self-driven entrepreneurs who have been pushed by the state's excessive regulatory framework. Seen through a neo-classical lens, De Soto (1986) regards the so-called "informals" as a gateway for progress and development (Rakowsky, 1994: 40). Although during this period the study of the informal economy and street vending, in particular, was appreciated in relation to some of the characteristics of the state – overly bureaucratic, for instance – the state once again was never questioned as an entity which itself could participate and engage in informal practices. The state was by definition formal, even though many of its practices could result in the growth of informal practices.

More recently, in the last decade or so, informality has returned to the international development and urban planning agenda. Currently, a strand of postcolonial urban scholars calling for new geographies of (urban) theory are pushing the politics of informality another step. For example, Roy (2005; 2009) provides a fascinating account of the relationship between informality and the so-called formal structures of the state. While her objective, as MacLeod and Jones state, is to recalibrate the geographies of authoritative knowledge (MacLeod and Jones, 2011: 2449), she also wishes to reconceptualize informality. Rather than view informality as synonymous with poverty and as a practice confined exclusively to marginalized groups, Roy, taking the case of the Indian planning system, argues that the state itself is an informalized entity characterized by deregulation, ambiguity, and exception (Roy, 2009). Hence while authors have acknowledged that the state can act in ways that fall into "informal" practices, Roy suggests that the form of governing is itself permeated by the logic of informality (p.82). In other words, informal practices by the state are not random, atomized actions taken by actors who fall in

between the cracks of formality, rather they are actions which are calculated and that involve purposive action and planning (Roy, 2009: 83). At issue is what type of informality is considered legitimate. As she argues, the distinction should be not between “formality and informality but rather by a differentiation within informality” (Roy, 2005: 149).

***In what ways do these theories need to be modified?***

In the last two decades, the study of street vending takes on new forms and different theoretical paths. This change is partly linked to the proliferation of urban policies identified under the rubric of “recovery of public space”, which has involved, among other things, the displacement of large sectors of the urban population who engage in so-called informal activities. Street vendors have been primary targets and constructed as detrimental to the creation of vibrant urban public spaces. Indeed, in a number of cities, street vendors and other visible participants of informal activities have come to embody a profound set of socio-economic and cultural anxieties linked to fear and fury towards the poor urban other. For many authors interested in the subject, street vending has served as an analytical showcase for addressing more deeply rooted social processes such as different conceptions of (dis)order in a changing urban context (Meneses, 2011; Silva, 2011). Research on street vending has transitioned from being the subject itself to constituting the means for exploring the ways in which a political, cultural, social and economic order is established and reproduced in everyday life. This implies an important turnaround, with both epistemological and methodological implications. It is not that street vending as an analytical reality ceases to be important for understanding an urban social order, but that order is approached from the concrete realities and the multiple voices of the vendors themselves. Although many of the original discussions about, for example, the formal / informal binary remain a matter of debate, the nature of these issues begins to be approached from different theoretical angles. Thus, it is no longer formal-informal as two distinct categories of analysis, but as part of a complex set of interrelations that overlap, fragment, multiply and unite at different times. In this way it could be said that the study of street vending and informality in general goes from being analyzed as a static condition linked to structural problems such as poverty and marginalization to be a highly dynamic practice that is in continuous negotiation in daily life involving multiple urban actors, from state regulatory actors - such as political-administrative units, police - to neighbors, consumers, other street vendors, established merchants, and tourists.

Despite the valuable insight provided by these contemporary approaches, there is still much scope for enhancing and delving deeper into many of the concerns posed by these approximations. Concretely, here I want to argue for the importance of thinking about four ways in which theories of street vending and its relation to the state can be further explored:

- a) *Spatial systems of management*: By this, I mean the normative and extra-normative processes that regulate particular spaces. The question here is how is space regulated and controlled by multiple agents, including the state, street-vending organizations, street vendors (and their systems of organization – the use of labor for the setting of stalls, their costs, and so on). Every vendor, every organization has its own spatial organization and territorial control, depending on the location, the nature of what is sold, and so on. These spatial systems of management have to be thought of always in conjunction with normative and legal frameworks. Furthermore, these formal frameworks must be

explored not only in normative terms but also in its manifestations in everyday life, through the role of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), who mediate, negotiate, and function as intermediaries between what is stipulated by law, in all of its manifestations, and its application on the street.

- b) *Accounting for difference*: Stress the importance of recognizing heterogeneity among street vendors, rather than only seeing a homogenous and cohesive body of spatially and temporally fixed individuals with similar concerns, backgrounds, and needs; a group comprising individuals conceived as part of a totality in which internal differences are ignored or even considered a potential threat to the integrity of the ‘whole’. Street vending is an extremely diverse activity, comprising of individuals and groups who are themselves internally differentiated, resulting in different degrees of exclusion, power, resources, mechanisms of exclusion, and practices of negotiation and resistance. De-homogenizing the politics of the informal sector highlights different types of social groups involved in the activity.
- c) *Relational analysis*: Relational thinking places emphasis on the interconnections that shape people and places. Rather than accepting pre-constituted identities, relational thinking emphasizes the connections, interrelations, and power relations through which identities are constructed and practices are framed. A relational approach for understanding street vending can be approached in two ways:
  - a. Breaking binary analyses of formal=state vs. informal=street vending. Rather, a relational approach would value the multiple ways in which so-called formal activities are consolidated through the reproduction of so-called informal practices. For example, in Mexico, the precarious nature of the formal economy (extremely low salaries, no benefits, etc) necessarily requires the existence of an informal economy; of street vendors to offer food and products at a low cost (matching the salaries); of an informal service sector that allows for social reproduction (nannies, domestic workers, caretakers). In many cases, a precarious formal labor market is precisely what facilitates the consolidation of an informal economy.
  - b. Systems of exchange and reciprocity at the level of everyday life, between multiple actors: Within an organization of street vendors; between the leader of an organization and street-level bureaucrats; between the leader of an organization and street vendors; between street vendors and other urban actors (established merchants, neighbors, clients); among street vendors themselves. A fundamental issue here is how systems of exchange have changed historically and under what political, economic, and cultural conditions have these transformations taken place. In Mexico, for example, there are intergenerational links between different leaders of street vending organizations that are juxtaposed in complex and sometimes conflicting ways with the political structure of the state.
- d) *Symbolic and discursive construction of urban order*: Street vending as an “urban problem” is defined not only by the state and its multiple institutions, but also by citizens themselves who deposit particular social anxieties around notions of order, hygiene, chaos, and aesthetics on street vendors. Indeed, street vendors represent the most visible notion of chaos for many urban dwellers, especially the upper-middle urban class. Some important questions that should be answered are: how are discourses around chaos/order constructed and reproduced in everyday life among different sectors of the urban

population, including of course discourses produced by the state itself? How do citizens participate in the reproduction of such discourses? How is the notion of order symbolically and morally constructed, and what role do street vendors play in these constructions? (Discourse analysis – of newspapers, for example, or of public policy, of the political rhetoric around public order and street vending)

***What research is needed to inform the rethinking that is needed?***

This question is connected to many of the issues discussed in the answer above. However, here I will focus specifically on methodological approaches that may help inform the ways in which existing theories can be modified, or reworked in order to account for the complexities involved in the relationship between street vending and the state. The call is for qualitative research that is sensitive to the nuances and multiple contexts within which urban transformations occur. This form of inquiry involves a combination of different methods including observation, discussion, interactions, performance, and conversations. It also requires the participation of individuals from various groups to discuss, share, and debate over issues and events pertaining to, in this case, changes in street vendors' daily lives.

Concretely, I would argue that the type of research needed to inform the rethinking that is needed entails an ethnographic approach. By this, I mean research that can sometimes be slow (ethnography is, by definition slow), but that can allow us to understand a specific place, the geography of a locality, the history of its people, and more importantly, the changing relations that have developed among people in the area. Ethnography entails becoming involved in the intricacies of people's everyday lives, their relations, interactions, modes of subsistence, and the ways in which people make sense of their multiple realities. While the specific methodological tools may vary within ethnography, the use of triangulation is extremely rich, especially information gathered from a combination of archival work; interviews (for instance open-ended discussions through the use of narratives<sup>1</sup>); discourse analysis, participant observation; and focus groups<sup>2</sup>. A rich ethnographic approach can be framed by looking specifically at the combination of the four themes presented above.

**References:**

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<sup>1</sup> In critical ethnography, this approach that provides spaces for individuals to voice their experiences, knowledge, concerns, and necessities that are often unheard and overlooked by policy circles and legal discussions.

<sup>2</sup> Focus groups enable the understanding of alternative narratives, and conflicts within and between groups, which may challenge the power of existing discourses and aid in the creation of new subjectivities.

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