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Anthropology Book Forum

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Redefining Street Vending as a Global Practice

Review by Megan B. Hinrichsen

Street Vending in the Neoliberal City: A Global Perspective on the Practices and Policies of a Marginalized Economy

by Kristina Graaff and Noa Ha

Berghahn Press, 2015

In the increasingly urban landscape of the twenty-first century, cities are becoming centers of cultural interaction and settings in which the challenges of future human and economic development are writ large. In *Street Vending in the Neoliberal City*, the authors of the volume's eleven chapters edited by Kristina Graaff and Noa Ha center on our increasingly urban lives and livelihoods through the lens of street vending. Scholars of urban life have a long history of interest in the broader "informal sector" of labor that includes activities like street vending. Broadly, street vending is typically cast as a traditional, or even regressive, economic activity of the developing world. The long-held assumption was that street vending would decline as countries in the Global South went through the process of "development." In the modern industrialized context, labor is synonymous with full-time, stable, and regulated (formal) work. The authors in *Street Vending in the Neoliberal City* rebut this common conceptualization that sees street vending disappearing. Indeed, they recognize that street vending persists and is growing not only in the Global South, but in the "developed" world as well.

This volume is an analysis of street vending from an interdisciplinary and global perspective looking at the dynamics of this informal, and often marginalized, activity in the cities of New York, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, Calcutta, and Dhaka. The themes that emerge from this volume include urban planning as a hegemonic project that "[amplifies] structural discrimination (95)," the use and (re)claiming of urban space, strategies of resistance to urban planning projects that limit or criminalize street vending, and new challenges and barriers that street vendors must contend with in the contemporary world. Although focused on different vending activities among members of different ethnic groups in diverse urban settings, the chapters in this volume all add to the knowledge that street vending is precarious, urban spaces are contested, and that local lives are shaped by global developments.

Like other research focused on the use of urban space for informal activities, several chapters in this volume focus on urban planning and policies as hegemonic projects that discriminate against marginalized peoples. Patricia Acerbi, the author of the book's final chapter, gives a historical view of this project in her chapter on street vending regulation in Rio de Janeiro. In the early twentieth century, policies of urban renewal authoritatively declared that street vending was a "backward" practice (245). Over a century later, the marginalization of street vending continues. Writing about contemporary Mexico City, Veronica Crossa portrays the rhetoric of revamping and revitalizing urban spaces by driving out vendors and artisans as a force of social erasure. Rather than addressing the socioeconomic issues that bring people to engage in informal labor, government policies "push them into spaces where they are less visible, not heard, smelled, and felt" (74). In Dhaka, Benjamin Etzold writes that street vendors face more overt forms of violence in addition to the "cultural violence of the hegemonic discourse" about street vending that adds legitimacy to discrimination against vendors (165). Not only is street vending declared illegal and forced removal of street vendors disguised as ensuring public security, but the people who make their living through vending are also made illegal and vulnerable to direct violence and discrimination. Other authors, such as Noa Ha's chapter about vending in Berlin, also demonstrate that the regulation of street vending is complicit in the structural discrimination. These regulations, often under the guise of promoting safety and hygiene, mostly target people who are already marginalized in their societies.

Another important theme that emerges from this volume is the use and (re)claiming of urban space. While street vendors across the world face the challenges of public declarations, policies, and scrutiny that further marginalize them, street vendors also engage in the act of using and claiming public space on their own. Chapters in this volume document these actions from above, and also from below. Laws and policies attempt to remake space. Street vendors do, too. In his chapter about a vendor advocacy group in New York City, Ryan Thomas Devlin demonstrates how the Street Vendor Project uses neoliberal discourses of self-reliance and entrepreneurialism to skillfully argue against restrictions placed on vendors. Devlin, however, notes that using the dominant discourse might reinforce the same structures they are challenging. Devlin writes that vendors in this group do not "value public space outright for its open and inclusive nature" but as a way for them to reach their individual goals in a capitalist society (56). Veronica Crossa's chapter based in Mexico City goes against this approach. Vendors and artisans there made strides to prove that their neighborhood of Coyoacán is where "an alternative lifestyle is possible" (60). Despite the disparate approaches and contradictory narratives utilized by the vendors in each city, they are actively involved in remaking the case for their use of urban space.

Both the hegemonic messages of urban planning and the contested use of urban space are well established lines of study. A contribution the authors of this volume make to take our understanding of informal street vending further is their documentation on the ongoing patterns of resistance that street vendors employ to protect themselves and claim their (rights to) space. One of the unique contributions of this volume is its focus on the United States where street vendors are involved in (re)claiming urban space through vending on their own terms. In a chapter by Lorena Muñoz, immigrant street vendors in Los Angeles use informal economic opportunities to create a sense of place as they reproduce "vending landscapes that remind them of 'back home'" (101). Also writing on Los Angeles, Kenny Cupers explains how the mobile strategies of street vending in this sprawling, car-based city not only allow vendors to adapt to the city but also actively shape the rhythms of life in the city. Harlem is the setting

for Kristina Graaf's chapter on street literature and Mark Naison's historical account of street vending as community building. Naison declares that street vendors remain on the "front lines of community struggles" and that street vendors in Harlem should continue their historical role as activists for their community. Other strategies of resistance include drawing upon social resources and working cooperatively instead of in competition, with other vendors like the vendors in Kathleen Dunn's chapter on Brooklyn.

A final major theme, and particular strength of this volume, is identifying some of the new challenges and barriers that street vendors must endure in the twenty-first century. In Brooklyn, Dunn writes about the rise of the food truck as a legitimized form of street commerce and the associated rising costs of vending permits. Graaf, writing about contemporary Harlem, explains the competing claims for space and market saturation affecting vendors from different ethnic backgrounds. These two examples show how challenges in the lives of street vendors will continue to be in flux, especially in an urbanizing world. The varied contexts, interpretations, and theoretical views of each of the author's in this volume show the strength of the accumulated knowledge on street vending as a global practice and show new directions that future research can take. Indeed, many of the resistance strategies featured in this volume are ongoing.

The volume is divided into four sections: Responding to Urban and Global Neoliberal Policies, Street Vending and Ethnicity, The Spatial Mobility of Urban Street Vending, and Historical Accounts of Street Vending. I did not find these headings particularly useful, mostly because each of the eleven chapters brings in several of these concepts. Most chapters involve racial and ethnic minorities and the use of urban space in the historical and contemporary context of neoliberalism. Nevertheless, this interdisciplinary volume is a strong contribution to our understanding on the lives of street vendors. The authors featured in this book are from many fields including sociology, urban studies, history, public administration, geography, and architecture. Although none of the chapters were written by an anthropologist, anthropologists interested in the topic covered will find compelling additions to our theoretical and conceptual understanding of life in the "informal sector" and how it is changing in the twenty-first century.

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