

BOOK REVIEWS

Kristina Graaf and Noa Ha (eds). 2015. *Street Vending in the Neoliberal City: A Global Perspective on the Practices and Policies of a Marginalized Economy*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

The latest UN-HABITAT (2016) global report shows that urban informality is exponentially spreading, and socially disadvantaged groups and individuals find it increasingly hard to experience the urban public space, especially the city centre, as a resource and an opportunity. This is the main background against which *Street Vending in the Neoliberal City* appears as timely and unique. While the overall aim of the work is to ‘demonstrate the ongoing importance of the practice [of street vending] in the Southern hemisphere and the growing relevance of informalized labour in the North’ (p. 12), the impression I had after reading it was that of a much more comprehensive accomplishment — a way richer variety of arguments, reasonings, new data and global connections than the relevance of street vending across the world resonated in my thoughts.

Street vending, while being the key phenomenon under scrutiny, ultimately emerged from my reading as a heuristic angle from which to approach numerous social phenomena, including a) the various and variable, but always present, intersections between racialisation and the making of gender hierarchies in (informal) labour; b) the meanings and significance of urban public space, structured and produced around the dialectic between repressive strategies and resisting tactics; c) key 21st-century transformations in urban

governance in the very city centre; d) the connections between gentrification, racialization and gender inequalities within and across families and groups, and finally e) the value of ethnography as a uniquely positioned optic and practice for investigating global urban phenomena, and a critical correction to generalizing claims. How can an edited collection cover such a wide range of intersecting issues? This question was haunting me while I was reading each chapter, and in what follows I would like to propose an answer in the form of critical appraisal.

The four parts in which the volume is organized already give a sense of this variety: Responses to neoliberal policies; Street vending and ethnicity; Spatial mobility; and Historical perspectives. And yet, the impressive variety of themes and topics deceives any short title. Chapter 1, for example, by Dunn, traces not only the ways in which family organization in Brooklyn becomes a handy tool for resisting exclusionary policies on the urban space, but also the pivotal role of women in the informalized economy of street vending. The informal economy scholarship, as the author points out, has overall overlooked the large proportion of women in the sector — 30 to 90 per cent, according to the ILO (2002; quoted in Dunn: 23). Indeed, for instance, Harvey’s (1989) highly influential essay on urban entrepreneurialism left gender and race out of the picture.

The second part of the volume foregrounds and unpacks the relevance of multidimensional analyses. Ha’s essay on Berlin’s city centre, for example, discusses racial inequalities between sausage sellers, typically white German, and souvenir and jewels sellers, typically people of colour.

Under the recent law prohibiting portable trays to lay on the ground, this division of labour becomes racially unequal as souvenir trays are on average heavier than sausage trays, and police checks occur way more frequently on souvenir vendors. Munoz's essay on Los Angeles and Graaf's work on New York City complete the section by showing how selling books in the street articulates a 'sense of place' and engenders 'Latino cultural citizenship' (Los Angeles) and how West African and African American book sellers inhabits separate circles and networks (NY City).

Space and mobility is the focus of the subsequent section, in which Cupers' sharp analysis of how both Los Angeles vendors' strategic use of mobility and the state regulation of mobility articulate two different and antagonistic conceptions of urbanism. Etzold's documented analysis of how most food vendors in Dhaka live constantly under threat of eviction accounts for everyday violence and insecurity. And Bandyopadhyay's engaging analysis of street vending in Calcutta 'beyond the optic of the "informal economy"' (p. 191) proposes to foreground the concept of 'pedestrianism' (borrowed from Blomley 2011) as a post-human normative ideology according to which the sidewalk should only serve the orderly movement of pedestrians. This last section closes the entire volume, and no closing chapter is proposed. This appears as a limitation, as a conclusion would have allowed the reader to pull all different and precious strings together and see the whole picture in its variable and multiple dimensions.

To answer my question about what makes it possible to have such a variety of dimensions and phenomena, it is probably

the value of focusing on urban phenomena across the world — not on 'the city', but *obliquely* on cities — i.e. on urban issues such as street vending. How many studies have shown from a global urban perspective the multiple ways in which urban life, politics, class, space, race and gender come together? To my knowledge, very few have even tried. I can only think of Nightingale (2012) on racial segregation, Bowser (1995) on racism and anti-racist movements, and Davis (2006), partially, on class and race. There certainly are works which I ignore, but the relevance and uniqueness of Graff and Ha's edited volume makes it a must read for anyone interested in the complex intersections of social dimensions and phenomena in the study of cities from a global perspective.

References

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