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Catalogue Essay

### The Right to Navigate and Work the Streets of Los Angeles

In thinking about the myriad of ways people navigate Los Angeles, how do low wage workers or migrant workers navigate the city? More specifically, how do street vendors navigate public space in Los Angeles when their occupation is an increasingly contentious issue? Driving or walking down the streets of Los Angeles, one can see that street vendors are omnipresent on sidewalks and streets as well as other informal sector workers like day laborers. Out of eleven million undocumented immigrants, Los Angeles currently hosts 1 million making the city especially fertile ground for informal sector work (Milkman 2010) like street vending. Considering that Los Angeles is home to the nation's highest concentration of undocumented immigrants, it is not a surprise that "in no city in the United States have vendors become more commonplace than in Los Angeles, California" (Kettles 2004). Yet, despite the prevalence of street vending, it is not legalized and vendors face many obstacles with the constant surveillance of the police. With the Foucauldian disciplining of populations in public space, how do street vendors defend their right to shape and navigate the city?

Informal sector work in the public sphere such as street vending and day laboring show how 'relations of power and discipline are inscribed onto the apparently innocent spatiality of social life' (Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris 2009). Street vendors whose presence is constantly visible, present a cultural "problem" to merchants and established populations. The presence and visible navigation of the Latino population in the public sphere creates discomfort about changing demographics for established populations. Vendors' ethnicity and class differences largely explain "the opposition by established business owners who resent the increasing Latino immigrant population and 'Latinization' of Los Angeles" (Weber 2001).

Although street vending in Los Angeles has been prohibited since the 1930's it was not a significant area of concern until the surge of immigrants to the U.S. from Latin America during the 1980's. During this decade, "the Latino population grew by 62%" (Kettles 2004). As the population grew, so did the number of street vendors. Moreover, in the 1980s, economic downturns increased the resurgence of informal activities like street vending: local plants shut down and the manufacturing sector took a downfall (Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Siders 2009). By the end of the 1980's street vending had become an increased problem for the city and street vendors began to experience repression and resistance from the city and police. During this decade many merchants began to insist that local police take action against street vendors (Weber 2001). In the rare instance when Los Angeles Council members did support the labor of street vendors, they were often pressured by local business to stop the encroachment of vendors on their neighborhoods. In the time period between "November 1986 and early 1987, 150 vendors were arrested along Broadway, located in the heart of the Civic Center" (Weber 2001). Further, in the year 1990, "there were 2,700 arrests, nearly double that of the year before" amongst street vendors (Kettles 2004). These various conditions exacerbated the enforcement of municipal codes which stated that

No person...shall on any sidewalk or street offer for sale, solicit sale of, announce by any means the availability of, or have in his or her possession, control or custody, whether upon his or her person or upon some other animate or inanimate object, any goods, wares, or merchandise which the public may purchase at any time. (Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Siders 151).

The Los Angeles Municipal Code states that street vending is a misdemeanor that is punishable by up to a \$ 1,000 dollar fine and no more than six months in jail (Kettles 9).

Street vendors are denied space and rights in Los Angeles by the police and merchants who the law accords esteem to. However, street vendors do not simply allow city ordinances to restrict their means of making a living. Ordinances, laws, policing, and architecture are not the only definers and shapers of urban public space. Street vendors, day laborers, or protesters on sidewalks show how public space, rather than being fixed in time and space, is constantly changing, as people reorganize, shape, contest, and reinterpret public space. De Certeau in “Walking in the City” describes how simply walking shapes public space:

First if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements (1984: 98).

De Certeau points out that public space is not solely created by architecture but by people who shape, contest, and create public space by their use of architecture and the way they move around the built environment. Furthermore, the spaces that street vendors use are often sites of struggle and contestation that help overturn the ideologies that pervade normative public spaces that seek to reproduce existing ideologies. Street vending shows how urban space and its politics can be shaped from the bottom up not simply from the top down. Through their resiliency and agency, “street vendors and day laborers, driven by economic need, have negotiated their presence, evading or challenging regulations and asserting claims to the city in the process” (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009).

Street vendors' daily struggles articulate new demands for rights to the city that are "outside of the normative and institutional definitions of the state and its legal codes" (Crawford 1995). Taking a close look at Los Angeles, we can see how street vendors are reappropriating urban space through their economic practices. This past year, Los Angeles held the first annual Street Vendor Awards at MacArthur Park. This event, was sponsored by the Street Vendor Project of New York as well as the UCLA downtown Labor Center. Not only did this event aim to recognize and award various street vendors who are loved and sought after by the community, but it also sought to raise funds for various organizations in Los Angeles who seek to work collaboratively with street vendors to garner more rights in the city. This event held at MacArthur park, a historic park for street vendors in Los Angeles and the site of the only street vending district ever created in Los Angeles, shows how public places reclaimed by migrant groups, the poor, the marginalized have "become sites where public debates about the meaning of democracy, the nature of economic participation, and the public assertion of identity are acted out on a daily basis" (Crawford 1995). In looking at the navigation of street vendors through public space, we can begin to see how street vendors create vibrant urban cultures and social movements that can develop an alternative form of democracy that is more inclusive and egalitarian.