

Peddling Policy: Street Vending in Historical and Contemporary Context

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Introduction

In the contemporary setting a street vendor from another galaxy would view with some humor interesting inconsistencies between the views of government officials, policy researchers and social theorists on the question of street vending. Government policy responses to street vending run from encouragement to active persecution but policy research generally favors vendors and vending and social theory incompletely grasps this constantly changing phenomena.

The reasons for these inconsistencies are many, most reducible to different political leanings or places in political processes (Cross, 1998) or in the case of theorists, different explanatory foundations and emphases. But a key problem this article emphasizes is the absence of historical memory in our understanding of vendors and vending.

This article's thesis is twofold: first, that our historical understanding of vendors and vending provides important insight into contemporary policy debates and, second, will enrich our theorization of vendors. The paper starts with a review of the history of a large American street market, Chicago's Maxwell Street Market, and indicates the proximate and implied reasons under which the market was formally supported, recognized and regulated as a normal part of economic life. However, in subsequent years politicians and social scientists have turned to a "problematized other" view of street vending, it is argued that the street market still performs important roles in the lives of Chicagoans and by extension, people around the world.

A Policy Lesson from History

Chicago is a city built on immigration. In the early 20th century Chicago experienced massive immigration, mostly European, but with regional variations depending on the decade (Holli and Jones, 1977).

The near West side neighborhoods were densely populated, ethnically homogeneous islands in a heterogeneous city. From the existing resident's perspective, the neighborhoods surrounding Maxwell Street each had an ethnic character: the Irish established Bridgeport; the Bohemians, Poles and Czechs, Pilsen. Other ethnic neighborhoods were also established in the area: North of Maxwell Street Greeks established Greek Town; the Italians, Taylor street. Newer immigrants congregated in less desirable, lower rent neighborhoods, but the population turnover was high and all these ethnic groups were located in close proximity to street vending on Maxwell street.

Economically the west side employed people in steel, printing and lumber (Cronon, 1991). The Chicago River and extensive railroad yards attracted business and industry to the area between 1833 and 1856. Both Rand McNally, founded in 1856, and Ryerson Steel, founded in 1842 played prominent roles in the west side's economy (Adelman, 1976). These industries employed inexpensive immigrant labor, continuously made more inexpensive due to its great supply (Adelman, 1980). This belt of industry provided nearby employment opportunities, while street car lines afforded residents transportation to work.

Aside from growing industrial employment there was a variety of retail trade employment. There was little reason to distinguish between store front and non-store retail. Custom as much as financial capital provided the information about how to start in retail sales. Many street and indoor markets were founded in these early years. Jewish merchants, employing push carts and street stands, began peddling on the west side (especially on then residential Maxwell street), to provide the various household staples needed by co-ethnics and other immigrants (Eastwood, 1991). Vendors also sold produce and meats from organized wholesale markets: Market Square (Madison and South Wacker Drive), the Haymarket (Randolf between Desplaines and Halsted), South Water Street Market (originally at Wells, Lake and West Wacker Drive then moved south in the 1925 contiguous to Maxwell Street), and finally the Fulton Street Fish Market (Fulton and Desplaines). There was some specialization in these wholesale

markets. For example, South Water market specialized (to this day) in produce and Fulton Street specialized in fish. Maxwell Street however, became famous for its incredible variety of consumer goods and services.

Prior to 1920 few Blacks or Mexicans lived in Chicago. By the second decade of the 20th century European immigration decreased but Blacks began moving into various south and west side neighborhoods (Spear, 1967) close to Maxwell Street. Wirth's interpretation of Black settlement is concise:

The Negro, like the immigrant, is segregated in the city into a racial colony. Economic considerations, race prejudice, and cultural differences combine to set him apart. The Negro drifted to the near West side for precisely the same reason that the Jews and the Italians came there. Unlike the white landlord and residents in other sections of the city, the Jews have offered no appreciable resistance to the invasion by the Negroes. (1928:230)

Mexicans began to replace Bohemians and others in Pilsen (Ano Nuevo Kerr, 1977). Mexican migration, particularly in the 1920s, was largely in response to employment needs of Midwestern industry. Mexicans concentrated in areas proximate to the steel industry of South Chicago and the meat processing industry, near Maxwell Street in the Back of the Yards neighborhood.

This overview paints a picture of relatively diverse, albeit frequently harsh, employment prospects for the residents of these ethnic neighborhoods. Wirth (1928:201) summarizes economic and ethnic changes in the west side neighborhoods between 1850 and 1920: "from substantial residential neighborhood into a slum and finally into a semi industrial area." Until the 20th century city government played little role in regulating economic activity and no role in governing the labor market. The markets, wholesale and retail, were not formally recognized by the City, even though they provided most of early Chicago's produce, meats and dry goods.

In the early part of the 20th century two local processes converged with the national sentiment for "progressive" policies. First, the local

labor market tightened. Second, City academics and politicians began to ride the progressive era wave as they became interested in addressing labor market problems. The labor market tightened as employers moved jobs away from Chicago while migration to Chicago increased. The City Council became interested in employment problems and established a sub-committee that decided to formally sanction and regulate existing wholesale markets. The next part of this section chronicles this policy formation process, beginning with the City of Chicago's formal recognition and demarcation of the Maxwell Street Market, followed by the City's investigation of street vending as a remedy for unemployment.

Maxwell Street's Formal Constitution and Use as a Policy Tool

On November 18, 1912, Chicago's City Council called for a sub-Commission investigation regarding the establishment of public markets in different parts of the city. This ordinance was introduced by three important findings regarding the Maxwell Street Market:

- (1) The Maxwell Street Market can be maintained without interference with the ordinary business and traffic of certain streets.
- (2) The experience of other large cities, both at home and abroad has shown that indoor, outdoor and street markets add greatly to the convenience and health of the people residing in large districts.

Finally, it also recognized that the gathering of large numbers of dealers within a circumscribed area:

- (3) ...makes inspection and enforcement of ordinances related to cleanliness and health more practicable...(1912:2326)

The logic behind the Council's interest is clear and includes three important policy making considerations: 1) a local concern with the non-interference with "ordinary" business and traffic; 2) a global concern with useful sources of information, in this case, the experience of similar cities "both at home and abroad"; and 3) ensuring that licensing street vending did not deter the enforcement of other city ordinances. The City Council action illustrates a practical orientation

in this decision making process, keeping an eye on both local concerns and global sources of information in the decision making process.

During this meeting the City Council resolved to appoint a "Municipal Markets Commission" made up of seven people: five Aldermen appointed by the Mayor, the City Comptroller and the Commissioner of Public Works. The Commission was charged to:

...take up the matter of establishing public markets in different parts of the city where the population is most dense, and report back to the City Council in regard to the establishment of both indoor and outdoor markets in such densely settled districts (1912:2326).

By 1914 the City had been in the business of managing the Market two years. During these two years the Municipal Markets Commission (henceforth, the MMC) studied the problem of organizing public markets. However, in this interim period, the Commission enlarged its policy mandate, adding the growing problem of unemployment in Chicago. How the MMC addressed its new concern and make a linkage between markets and unemployment are the questions to which we now turn.

Maxwell Street as a City Regulated Response to Unemployment

Following its investigation the MMC submitted two policy reports to the City Council: (1) the preliminary report in April, 1914, and (2) the final report in December, 1914. The recommendations section of the Preliminary report states:

Peddlers, hucksters and push carts are an economic necessity and tend greatly to reduce the high cost of living...and should be considered an established and legitimate business...and encouraged by municipal authorities, ...and as such should be subjected only to certain necessary sanitary and police regulations and such rules as may be required to prevent undue congestion of vehicle traffic (1914:52).

The author's contention is that establishing street markets will alleviate cost of living problems. Importantly, however, this section anticipates the final report by establishing the unity and usefulness of different types of income earning activities. The authors imply that

peddling was previously unnoticed or considered illegitimate and rather forcefully call for challenging and changing this perception.

This quote makes the reports first, key, conceptual point. Instead of attempting to legislate away the customary distinction between peddling and store-based retail the authors attempt to expand the customary beliefs of what constituted legitimate income earning activities by indicating the usefulness of peddling. To reinforce their position the authors note that peddling, like any other legitimate enterprise, would be subject to the same sanitary and police regulations as any other business. This initial quote gives us some indication of the report's style and the authors' pragmatic approach. More importantly is the way the authors discourage a cross-sectional approach to legitimate income earning activities, replacing it with a unified historical and contextual examination of income earning processes. Furthermore, the authors method is synthetic, focusing on, questioning and uncovering overlapping decision making processes located in relationships between individuals, and between individuals and appropriate municipal authorities.

Further evidence for this synthetic approach is uncovered as the authors follow their initial questions to other topics over the two years between the formation of the MMC and the two reports it issued. To overlap with markets and street vending, "unemployment and destitution" became a prominent theme in the Commission's work. The final report submitted on December 28, 1914, was titled, "The Chicago Municipal Markets Commission: Report to the Mayor and Aldermen on a Practical Plan for Relieving Destitution and Unemployment in the City of Chicago." The report is no longer focused solely on establishing a policy for markets. Instead Commissioners' experience, research and local circumstances have intersected to produce a report concerned with the overlap of conditions that produce "destitution and unemployment." The final report begins with a fascinating analysis of the problem of unemployment and devotes many sections to the role public markets could play as policy tools for alleviating the unemployment problem.

The reports first section "The Problem of the Unemployed" makes observations that ring true today. It speaks of "periodic recurrences of great industrial and business depressions," that result in "physical and mental suffering," and an increase in the number of "criminals and vagrants." Although the report views unemployment as an individual problem, it goes on to say that:

It is only recently that unemployment has come to be looked upon as a problem peculiarly a part of the industrial organism ...being thus recognized, ...a constructive social program relating to unemployment has been developed...Unemployment is a risk to which wage earners are periodically liable, and the public organization of the labor market has in a large number of countries become one of the chief welfare activities of their respective governments (1914:6).

As a source, or foundation, of policy decision making, this statement could not be more important. It recognizes, as the original sanctioning policy statement above, the overlap, or interaction effects between people, "industry" and government. None stand alone; rather, all might be related in the public organization of the labor market as a welfare activity conducted by government. Again, practically and efficaciously oriented, the authors address comparative experience as a basis for the assessment of the local problems.

The Commission's final report develops the unemployment thesis further by stating:

The City of Chicago has, however, officially assumed no responsibility toward the able bodied employable unemployed. It is only when these unemployed within our midst become ill, destitute and disabled...that the machinery of our government comes into direct contact with them. Instead of providing ways and means whereby the unemployed may remain independent of charitable aid, our City has fostered a policy of caring for these unfortunates only when they are no longer able to aid themselves (1914:6-7).

So, the commission is recognizing and establishing the basis for an anticipatory or proactive, and contextual, stance toward unemployment. This new approach was distinct from the existing machinery which reacted to extremes of deprivation. Persons

previously considered employable yet who were unemployed were ignored in policy since the customary presumption was that unemployment was their own problem. Against this assumption the MMC hoped to provide "ways and means" for the unemployed to help themselves. This acknowledges that the unemployed "may" remain independent and so recognizes people as decision makers, capable of assessing custom and opportunity to make some (thought limited) choices. This recognition was the second key to the MMC's plan.

This point is made more clear by the following where the Commission recommends that:

The method of solving the problem of unemployment should be according to a unified organic treatment, and not by any piecemeal plan...Even should your Honorable Body fail to heed the recommendations of this Commission at this time, the important thing, nevertheless, would be that for the first time in the history of the City of Chicago the problem of unemployment has been placed before our public authorities with a view to having them comprehend its solution according to a methodical, systematic and orderly plan of procedure (1914:7).

This "unified treatment" language goes hand-in-hand with the MMC's unitary and legitimizing view of income earning activity. As long as peddling was subject to regulations then it could be deemed a legitimate activity for anyone to undertake. Thus, the Commission report saw street vending as a viable solution to unemployment.¹

The report was organized to advocate a policy position, but it illustrated a policy method as well. The first procedural and policy making decision the authors made was to make a comparative analysis of street vending in order to make recommendations about the role peddling would play in the city economy. On pages 51 and 52 of the final report we find a detailed comparison of license fees for peddlers employing push carts and horse drawn vehicles in different cities of the US. The report found that license fees in Chicago were "onerous," hence making it difficult for people to enter the peddling business. The authors' comparative analysis concluded that:

If the opportunity of entering the peddling business in the City of Chicago were made financially easier to its people it is believed that a large number of unemployed during times of unemployment or slack periods would enter the peddling business and thus be enable to earn a living (1914:51-52).

The report makes clear that peddling is a job which can be taken up as a substitute for "regular" employment and so reinforces the early mention of peddling as legitimate and the idea of the unity of customary income earning activities. Furthermore, the important methodological points the authors leave implicit are the importance of comparative experience and appropriate assessment techniques. As noted above, policy decisions are not made without assessing the existing experience of similar locals.

The Commission's report situates labor concerns in the Market matrix. People temporarily dislocated from ordinary labor or trades are a social concern (evinced by the creation of the Department of Labor in 1913). Two recommendations regarding markets are made in the Commission's final report. The first is for the reduction of license fees for street peddling to levels comparable with other cities. Second, that three public markets be delimited: the South Water Market, the Fulton Fish Market and the Maxwell Street Market.

This history indicates the importance of overlapping policy concerns. Immigration, a federal policy, provided cheap labor, but the failure of Capitalists to increase employment meant that immigrants caused problems for local jurisdictions. Local politics of the time, reflecting national trends, sought to aid those people most marginalized by fluctuations in the economy. However the context, and linkages within it matter, and so, the formal recognition of street vending was linked to a broader concern with unemployment (Pegram, 1992). We can summarize the policy maker's "theory" in the following way: vending is an "ordinary" business activity, organized by other cities and organizable by Chicago municipal government; it can be regulated as such and with cost-of-living benefits to the community. Vendors can not control the labor market, but vending is an opportunity for them to

respond to problems in the labor market or opportunities they observe in local contexts. In this way policy makers² decided that vending is continuous with other entrepreneurial activities differing only in scale of operation.

This framing of vending was short-lived. Corruption was incompletely anticipated in the regulatory apparatus which governed vending at Maxwell Street and once established became lucrative and was exploited by city appointees and others. Vending continued, but slowly became enveloped in a negative aura that replaced the relatively positive view of vendors and vending of the 1910s. Since the 1920s street markets and vending have lost much of their status as a policy tool and legitimate occupation category.³ I will turn to documenting briefly the decline of vending in the politician's eyes and follow that discussion with a look at divergent interpretations of the "informal" economy in social science.

Politicians, Corruption and Street Vendors

Since the decline of progressive era practices Chicago land politicians have not seen vending as a legitimate occupation and instead have either ignored it or constructed it as fraudulent and even law breaking and without redeeming values. Examples of the attitude and subsequent behavior abound. For instance, in 1921 the area's Alderman, Henry J. Fick (20th), prepared the first recorded accusations of graft and other corruption in the Market and he called for the removal of all of the permanent wooden stands that vendors occupied (Berkow, 1977:85). Later in 1921 Fick charged that the stands presented a fire hazard, but was unable to remove the Market from his ward. In 1926, newspapers reported that Alderman Frick was again "squabbling" with vendors and there were City Council discussions of the graft extorted from vendors, estimated at 250,000 dollars per year. Mayor Lapping warned that he wanted no further trouble regarding the Market, but although "several aldermen" urged the Market's eradication, vending continued (Berkow, 1977:128).

On the other hand corrupt dealings between ward political bosses and vendors were also said to be rampant. One should note that

corruption and Chicago go hand-in-hand in myth and fact, (see for instance Pegrum 1992, especially chapter three). The following will give some feel for how corruption and extortion were organized. These following accounts point to two kinds of political bosses: first, those attached to ward aldermen, and second, the Market Master, the Mayor's political appointee. Weinstein, in a 1929 paper for E. W. Burgess at the University of Chicago, says of Morris Eller, the 20th Ward's political boss:

...a man whose reputation as a scoundrel is known far and wide. He milks the merchants of the Maxwell Street Market as a farmer milks a cow...If a merchant or vendor incurs the wrath of Morris Eller, he may just as well get off the Market, for he will be troubled by the police until chased off.

Weinstein claims the Market Master was an individual actually appointed by Morris Eller, instead of the Mayor. The policemen who patrolled the market were Eller's favorites and "They too are grafters" (The Maxwell Street Market: Section E, Politics and the Market, December, 1929). Ellers is a political boss of the first kind. An alderman, his job in the Chicago political machine was to assure a reliable flow of extorted money (see also Wendt and Kogan, 1943 for a detailed look at two political bosses).

Wirth provides two accounts of graft and corruption in the Market. Wirth lays the corruption problem at the feet of rival politicians:

The Maxwell Street market has been a hotbed of local politics and graft. Rival political leaders vie with each other for control of the administration of the market. The street vendors frequently complain of extortion by politicians. Since it is very difficult to organize the Maxwell Street Merchants because of the many feuds and factions, and the extreme individualism of the community and their village attitudes, it has been easy for politicians to build up a system of private patronage and "protection" (1928:233).

Wirth attributes problems mobilizing the vendors to local feuding and individuality. There are other possible reasons for a lack of a strong vendor organization. One possibility is that vendors exhausted

themselves making a living. Another possibility is that vendor turnover, graduating from this temporary source of income, made mobilization difficult. No matter what the cause the Market and vendors continued to be in the public eye as eyesore, source of ill-got gains or otherwise ignored except as a problem to "education," "development" or "progress" in the current day. In sum, politicians began to turn from their prior orientation and interest in regulation and organization to a simple condemnation of vendors and vending. This move from a considered embrace of complex circumstances to one of adopting stereotypical or oversimplified perceptions to coincide with politician's purposes or interests has played a role in how often this oversimplified social science literature has developed. I shall now provide a few examples.

Social Science and Street Vendors

Social scientists have a mixed record of understanding vendors and vending. In this section I will make a few points indicating some of the strengths and weaknesses of prior positions. Vending is commonly seen as a part of "ie" and so that literatures strong and weak are particularly important. In particular I will emphasize as weak those positions similar to politicians' positions which reduce all vending or vendor behavior to a simple principle or somehow deem it "different" from, inferior to, or not related to other parts of social life.

One example of this strategy is found in Castells and Portes (1989). They offer the following definition of the informal economy, the analytic category commonly used to describe street vending:

The informal economy [is] a process of income-generation characterized by one central feature: *it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated* (1989:12, their emphasis).

This highly influential definition implies that to discover an "informal" economy one must look for income generating processes that ought to be regulated but have not yet been. Notice the logic here: "everything that is not A is therefore B." What this reductionist logic ignores is the fact that *all* income-generating activities are regulated in one form or

another by social institutions.⁴ To define all income-generating activities merely by how they relate to a subset of those activities is to ignore the overlapping social (often economizing) activities that constitute income generating activities (Jones, 1988 is an example of empirical research in this vein). Furthermore, categorizing in this way excludes the provisioning activities that substitute for income-generation (Morales, 1997).⁵ On the other hand, there have been several interesting studies of “informal” economic activities which do not fall prey to this reductionist, analyst centered, mode of thought. Instead, in other work the role the analyst plays is to use/create concepts which will illuminate relationships-in-context and produce an appreciation for how people learn to believe what they are doing is what they should be doing or is the “right” choice in that situation.

Uzzell’s work (1980)⁶ is exemplary of the alternative pragmatist/monist approach to the study of “informal” economies. He begins by asking (1) what useful distinction might be made between “formal” and “informal” means of earning income and (2) what is the most appropriate way to analyze and theorize how people, as members of households, divide their time between different ways of earning income. He emphasizes how people practice multiple roles with predictable consequences for organizing “mixed strategies” for household income earning activities. His work is innovative as the approach is synthetic rather than analytic, considering households and jobs and kinship relations, and suggesting very different sources of information for decision making by people playing different social roles. In this way his treatment of roles and strategies prefigures Granovetter’s widely influential notion of “embedded” relationships.⁷

In a similar vein, Rakowski (1994) suggests how deductive and exclusive strategies have fueled a debate over theoretical categories that diverts attention from the more salient issue of how life is organized and meaning is made. Equally important is her reminder regarding how scholars from a variety of disciplines are interested in “informals.” Rakowski, Uzzell and others remind us of the unity of

social life and challenge the artificiality of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary distinctions.

In sum, despite reviewing contrasting positions in social science I find the arguments somewhat sterile mostly because they produce mutual disinterest or empty criticism, or an over-simple agreement that different approaches are appropriate for different problems. To my thinking, neither outcome is the best possible outcome for social science. These debates are not productive because they are motivated by fundamentally different assumptions (Leaf, 1979; Tamanah, 1997; Morales, 1998b). I would advocate with Peattie (1988, 1990), that researchers analyze the “real” world. That is, researchers should replace the “economy” with decision-making processes; industries and sectors with entrepreneurs; labor and labor markets with employees and workers. Taking this logic a step further, I would argue that social scientists should ground their analyses in the pragmatist stance elaborated elsewhere by a variety of scholars (Leaf, 1979; Tamanah, 1987; Morales, 1998).⁸ The rethinking I am calling for is hard work, as it goes against the typical training of many social scientists, but it is also necessarily epistemic: it is reflection on how we know what we know and then how we convey that knowledge to others.⁹ What would “pragmatist” empirical research look like and would it articulate with the historical context? In the next part of the article I briefly address both of these questions.

Vending at Maxwell Street: Intersecting Levels of Social Organization and Individual Purpose

Vendors are individuals, but vending is an outcome of the choices of many people, each one a part of a variety of social relationships. In the same fashion as Uzzell above I will provide some data which illustrate the complex interaction between different activities and the purposes people pursue. In this way I will document the utility of vending as an activity whose benefits and costs cannot be reduced to a single metric and should be understood over time and, analytically speaking, from the perspective of the studied not of the analyst.

For this purpose I will retell in brief the story of one vending household (From research described in Morales, 1993) to emphasize four reasons to vend, each of which implies the ongoing coordination of purposes and choices between a vendor and a variety of other organizations. First, people vend to make money and increase their autonomy; second, people vend to learn and practice skills; third, people vend to establish new businesses or have a consistent source of income; and finally, people vend to socialize children and as a social event.

Pancho is a permanent resident, originally from Mexico. In Mexico he trained and became a skilled leather worker. He felt his trade would earn more money in the US and so, with his recent wife Angela, joined his parents in Chicago in 1980. His father helped him get low-paying but stable work in a factory. After about six years Pancho felt he grew to play a pseudo-supervisory role because he acted as the intermediary between English speaking supervisors and Spanish speaking labor.

Although he spoke some English, Pancho began to realize he might never be promoted from his job as a factory laborer. His wife and their three children were living in a single-family home cooperatively purchased with another Mexican family. However, the family had material goals and needed more income: Pancho and Angela wanted their own home and they wanted to provide a better education for their children in Catholic schools. Pancho was aware of local flea markets, particularly Maxwell Street. He shopped at these regularly for inexpensive consumer durables. Every few months he would vend at Maxwell Street to help a friend maintain a vending location. Angela would help make time for him to work leather into belts, wallets or other goods.

Angela was aware that the wife of Pancho's vending friend vendd as well, with a business next to her husband but of different merchandise and accounting practices. Angela had heard her friend discuss how important vending was to her as a consistent source of income, unlike the temporary factory jobs she would be fired from as

soon as she became eligible for benefits. Angela did not know if she wanted to vend, but she became confident that vending could be a good source of income.¹⁰

Child care constrained the alternative income opportunities initially. As the children aged, time could be set aside for vending and children became a source of labor in support of vending. Angela took a part-time job in a retail crafts store but it was obvious to her that Pancho's "hobby" had the most earning potential, but was also the riskiest use of household resources. Angela notes:

"I was scared because I knew the machines were expensive but I also knew he had the skill to make many things. We were both working hard but our kids were growing and we needed more money faster than schools or our own work could give us."

In 1990 Angela and Pancho took a risk to invest almost \$2000 (half of 20 months of savings the remainder of which was used to buy a house in cooperation with another couple) for used leather working equipment and supplies and Pancho began to vend every Sunday. The practice of this trade kept the family's income-dependent dreams alive. As time went on, Pancho and Angela organized their efforts and business so that their children could learn about business and at the same time attend the schools believed to provide the children with the best educational opportunities. In 1992, vending 45 or so Sundays each year netted the family almost \$15,000 (increasing gross income to \$53,000).

As we noted at the beginning of this section, vending can provide a number of functions: in this case study, we see income generation, skill development, employment consistency in a discriminatory labor market, and a social life (see also Maisel, 1974; Wiseman, 1979; Belk et al., 1988; Austin, 1994). In the story of Pancho and his family we see reflected many turn-of-the-century concerns. Obviously we see an interest in entrepreneurship and how to start a business, we find concerns with the labor market, the cost-of-living, and the desire to invest in the children's education. But we uncover these connections not by privileging our perspective or beliefs about how parts of society

are related but instead by understanding people's behavior in its context and examining the wide variation in how they come to understand and yet reduce that context to choices.

Conclusion

In the same way a vending household perceives and acts in context, so policy makers and social scientists act. In the face of problems and in the context of habits and perceptions people direct their efforts to what they think will work as they understand a given situation. This article indicates that problems can be reduced to inadequate stereotypes or understood in the variety and complex ways they can be understood from the variety of perspectives party to the problem (Illy, 1986). Complex situations require policy makers and social scientists willing to embrace the complexity, but this article emphasizes that better understandings will require theoretical tools sensitive to chance, choice and context in the lives of those we study. This article has also directed attention to the importance and continuity of history for understanding vending in Chicago. I have argued that the political context matters and that different analytic tools will make a difference in the understanding we have of behavior. Let us eschew complex policy formulations and social theories and embrace instead actionable understandings of social life.

Endnotes

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1. Despite the prevailing poverty, Maxwell Street produced a number of notable alumni: Adm. Hyman Rickover, father of the atomic submarine. Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg; movie mogul Barney Balaban; and William S. Paley, who built the CBS network. Federal Judge Abraham Lincoln Marovitz's mother had a candy store nearby.
2. Diner (1980), Mead (1990), Henderson (1915) are among those who chronicle social scientists involvement in Chicago area social problems.
3. Street Vending was a Census Occupation category until 1940. However, in Los Angeles street vending is gaining a new legitimacy, see for instance the Wall Street Journal, May 1991 and the subsequent passing of a city ordinance in support of street vending.
4. Examples of these studies are too numerous to mention, but from Castells and Portes bibliography I will suggest, Birbeck, 1979; Bromley, 1978; Mingione, 1983 and Pahl, 1984.
5. Essays in Henry (1981) treat economic and other social institutions as distinct but mutually dependent activities. There are many other excellent examples of the "social construction of economy's activities." Gonzalez de la Rocha (1984, 1989), V. Turner (1974, 1986), Leaf (1972, 1984), Romero (1988, 1992), Collins and Gimenez (1990), Cornford (1981), Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), and DeVault (1991), are disparate but telling examples. The papers in this volume cite other kindred examples and finally many of the papers and books cited in this essay are of relevance.
6. Ferman and Ferman (1973) is also an excellent example. For another type of example see Cross (1998) who argues that the informal economy is an alternative choice that is often rational for the poor, and who focuses on the pragmatic political behavior of street vendor

organizations as “another” interest group in society, albeit often an overlooked one.

7. I should note that a number of scholars, Granovetter notable among them, have been interested in developing “socio-economics” or economic sociology as a response to disciplinary and sub-disciplinary overspecialization. In this regard see Granovetter, 1985; Smelser and Swedberg, 1994; Plattner, 1989; Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990 and Harvey and Katovich, 1993.

8. Strauss (1993) provides a recent theoretical presentation of this tradition, referring to pragmatism frequently but he does not call his work “pragmatist or monist.” Other investigators whom one could label monist include Victor Turner (1974; 1986 are good examples).

9. This practice is, or should be, a regular part of intellectual life, especially since most debates often repeat previous debates in slightly different language. So in one sense the informal economy literature mirrors the “formalist-substantivist” debate in anthropology in the late 1960s (see also Averitt, 1987). Recall that debate was about whether abstract conceptions of economic activity were suited to the analysis of ongoing behavior. Then and now arguments for deductive abstractions compete with arguments for how meaning is made, how decisions are reached and how we might understand the ramifications of people’s behavior.

10. In Morales (1998a) I use vendor data to discuss and critique the contemporary reductionist theory on income tax compliance and propose a different model for understanding compliance behavior.

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