

The historical and global struggles of women street traders

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Abstract

This study tests Michel Foucault's observation that even well-intentioned policies may oppress. This phenomenon is readily observed in cities when seemingly innocuous programs such as gentrification is undertaken to address the needs of citizens by promoting business and cleaning up inner cities. Gentrification is, however, a neoliberal privileging of the needs of the macroeconomy and developers; urban public space is shaped for private gain, and the urban poor are pushed further into the margins. Urban street trade, historically and globally, is the domain of poor women, and their visibility makes them vulnerable under gentrification. They are visual reminders of the failures of the state and the economy as providers, and an eyesore to large-scale commercial interests, and upscale city dwellers.

This paper demonstrates how creating what Foucault terms a 'history of the present' informs the past, and highlights contemporary struggles over public space. An exploration of established theories on gender, gentrification, and social class delineates how it is that these three potential areas of inequality merge to further disadvantage women street traders. In my study, qualitative and quantitative data was gathered on women street traders in 1920s Ireland to determine the

impact of new legislation enacted as part of gentrification efforts. When triangulated with contemporary data on women street traders in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, it was established how, across time and space, governance structures, and the tyranny of the abstract market and its privileging of the macroeconomy, deepen the marginalisation of the women who count among the urban poor.

KEYWORDS: Foucault; genealogy; gentrification; gender; urban poor; street traders.

Introduction

Michel Foucault (1988) observed that even a well-intentioned program created for the common good may result in oppression. This phenomenon is readily observed in cities when seemingly innocuous programmes of governance touted as beneficial are undertaken. Gentrification, with its incremental consignment of public space to private interests, is one example: it is neoliberal in nature when it privileges the needs of the macroeconomy and, in turn, privatises urban public space to exclude the urban poor. Street-based markets have become casualties of gentrification; this trend persists despite common knowledge that they are vital for the poor as workers and consumers. In the rush to create world-class cities and global financial hubs, poor women in urban centres are disproportionately affected by the hyper-regulation of street-based markets. Politicians, using the law, push these women deeper into the economic and social margins by embracing counter-modern constructions of street traders as unhygienic, litterbugs, and impediments to the flow of goods and automobiles. This trend, which started in the affluent

countries early in the twentieth century, has since spread to debtor nations in the global south now modernising by criteria established in North America and Europe. Policies seeking to limit street trading are best conceptualised as those that create a policy paradox: they are developed with the intention of fairness and the public good but in practice these policies are market-based (Stone, 2002).

This study demonstrates how the practices that flow from the official narratives about street trading shape policy and regulations to create a policy-practice divide in outcomes for women street traders. The first section sets out the theoretical framework that demonstrates how class, gender, and modernity intersect to exclude women street traders as stakeholders in the planning of what is class world-class city, or a global financial hub, and how gentrification is understood in social terms. The section that follows examines the historical underpinnings of their persecution, and examines contemporary studies of persecution under gentrification and economic restructuring. The next sets out historical data I gathered in a study of women street traders in Ireland in the 1920s, to determine the impact of hyper-regulation that commenced following the Anglo-Irish war and the rebuilding of the cities of Cork and Dublin. It concludes with a discussion that shows how the triangulation of this historic data with findings from contemporary research helps to fill holes left in a historical study.

Class, Gender, and Gentrification in the ‘Modern’ City Across Time

Conceptualising class in “generic terms”, Lane (2010, pg. 3) cites the importance of Lerner’s (1997) insistence that class describes “multilayered locations, relations and experiences” that have, historically, been different for men and women. When middle-class constructions of what constitutes “respectability” (Lane, 2010) emerge, class and gender further complicate the lives of poor women who try to earn a subsistence living by street trading. It is the moral complications and notions of respectability that Skeggs (2013; 2005) identifies as being connected to class, and to both class and modernity (Nicholas, 2009; Parkins, 2010), that are synonymous with historical and current constructions of women street traders as deviant.

As a bourgeois construct, class produces subjects through moral, economic, and political exchanges; with time, middle-class constructions of the value or liability of the working-classes attached moral judgements to economic utility (Skeggs, 2013). Economic utility, hygiene, and respectability align with the gentrification impulse under modernity. Nicholas (2009, pg. 251) calls modernity a “knot” that includes “capitalism, consumer culture, urban life”. Adding to this definition the claim by Parkins (2010, pg. 104) that modernity was built on “social exclusions” points to how modernity impacts on the lives of poor women street traders. Progress and political rationality, working with modernity, unite the political, the economic, and the social. Thus, political action that seeks to regulate and contain street trading marks an encounter between this form of work and modernity.

Gentrification, as an institutionalised form of modernity, is a process through which progress, prosperity, and propriety transform urban centres, articulate appropriate uses for public spaces,

and re-articulate particular forms of trade as valid. According to Zukin (1993, Ch. 7, paragraph 23) gentrification is indicative of the social transformation of a city's centre "in terms of an international market culture". A commonality of gentrification efforts across locations and eras is, she insists, intended to appropriate the city centre for "a new urban middle-class" (Zukin, 1993, Ch. 7, para. 24). To justify this appropriation, gentrifiers are often thought of as renaissance figures, perpetuating the idea that gentrification is neutral and progressive. Cross (2000) asserts that modern planning has been viewed as preventing shapelessness, wilfulness, and poverty. Street trading, a microeconomic activity that serves the poor, is dependent upon shifting marketplaces in public spaces. Consequently, it is seen to exist in what Cross terms the "fringes of modern society", and is subject to "crackdowns" geared to "ideals of public order" (2000, pg. 29). In contrast, ideals of public order do include conventional supermarkets, malls, and department stores, whether privately owned or corporate ventures, all sanctioned via the public planning process. In theoretical terms, conventional shopping venues are what Cross and Morales (2007, pg. 8) term "larger hygienic commercial establishments". Disorder and inefficiency are anathema to modernity (Berman, 1988; Zukin, 1993; Nicholas, 2009; Parkins, 2010), thus street trading is frequently characterized as counter modern. As for poverty, street trading was, historically, the domain of poor women in Ireland, and it remains the domain of poor women in debtor nations in the global south (Martin, 2015). When a state articulates its economy as modern, with corresponding gentrification efforts, women street traders make shapelessness, wilfulness, and poverty visible. Their trading and proliferation represent a contagion as their market spreads across public space.

The Street Trading Evil

The historical underpinnings of the world-class city and the erasure of street-based markets are best delineated by the collision between modernity and poor street traders in the city of New York. The movements of impoverished people into the city in search of work in the 19th century increased the demands of a growing poor consumer base, and many turned to street trading when work was not found (Stansall, 1986). Street traders selling from pushcarts continued on New York's streets into the twentieth century even when their presence did not conform to what Berman (1988) and Bluestone (1997) have described as the official vision of modern New York, America's commercial capital. Across the 1930s, when New York was affected by the world-wide depression, the proliferation of pushcart traders became what Bluestone (1997) believes officials viewed as an inconvenient indicator of America's economic instability and failures. In 1939, as the staging of the World's Fair approached, New York's Mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, moved to abolish all street trading, even if licensed, to showcase what Bluestone (1997) calls the city of the future. In a report compiled in 1936, LaGuardia's Commissioner of Public Markets wrote that in "modern times" the pushcart for traders had "outlived its usefulness" (Bluestone, 1997, pg. 287). In his exhibit at the World's Fair in 1939, the Commissioner of Public Markets included a section in his exhibit entitled "The Life and Death of the Pushcart" (Bluestone, 1997, pg. 307).

A similar hostility is noted in efforts later in the 20th century in Vietnam after the government initiated macroeconomic restructuring, re-articulated the country's economy as developed, and labelled its cities modern and organised. The move to a partially capitalist economy, allowed for

international trade and a free domestic market. The corresponding growth in consumerism and emphasis on property ownership diminished the previous emphasis on cooperative or communal life, and the sense of social responsibility among citizens (Fahey, 1998). This is evident in the story of economically marginalised Vietnamese women: they dominated street trading, but were excluded as stakeholders from the process of creating regulations (Fahey, 1998; Lincoln, 2008). According to Leshkovich (2005, cited Milgram 2011), after embracing capitalism in 1984, leaders in Ho Chi Minh City consistently characterised street trading as an undesirable relic of the past, and the local authority's efforts to eliminate it became symbolic of clearing away the past to make way for their vision of the future. In July 2008, the Mayor of Hanoi banned street trading after characterising it as a marker of "underdevelopment" (quoted Lincoln 2008, pg. 263). According to Lincoln (2008), these sentiments echoed the feelings of the city's growing middle-class residents who viewed street trading as an undisciplined form of urban commercial activity that highlighted the country's uneven development. A direct ban was soon pitched as an effort to create a sanitary urban space, coinciding with the local authority's scapegoating of street traders for a cholera outbreak, despite allegations that the absence of a water treatment facility and Hanoi's antiquated sewer system were more likely to blame (Lincoln, 2008).

In 1990s Baguio, a major commercial hub in the Philippines, the government focused on macroeconomic policies to remedy unemployment in 1997, but work was not generated on the scale needed and street trading became essential for poor women (Milgram, 2011). The global economic downturn in 2008 saw a renewed growth of street trade in Baguio, and the rationalisation of urban space commenced: the local authority consistently responded to pressure

from large-scale retailers and complaints from wealthy urban residents to have traders banned, and street vendors were deliberately excluded from the planning process (Milgram, 2011). Milgram (2011) found that national discourses of modernity deny poor women access to work that is classed as “alternative” or informal; these narratives prompted regulations to modernise cities in the Philippines, and urban growth when combined with neoliberal economic policies heightened the contestation over uses of public space. In Manilla specifically, efforts to control street traders included exorbitant fines and destroying goods, and a general clamp down encompassed all vendors, including those who had previously secured street-based pitches. A key point that emerges from Milgram’s (2011) study is the deepened economic vulnerability of women traders under hyper-regulation that includes fines they cannot afford, the loss of their goods, and their removal from concentrations of customers in city centres.

Studies conducted in Mozambique (Companion, 2010) and Bolivia (Agadjanian, 2002) do not address the impact of gentrification, but do provide insight into why poor women in cities continue to choose this form of work despite open hostility from the state and larger economic interests. As with the studies of Vietnam and the Philippines, both Agadjanian (2002) and Companion (2010) learned that the uncertainty of political and economic restructuring, unemployment, and government austerity measures to deal with state debt will increase the number of women who turn to street trading. According to Companion (2010), poor women who are head of a household, and females in female-led households, are particularly vulnerable through initial economic shocks, and continue to be vulnerable to successive shocks even when they have been continuously trading. Agadjanian (2002) found that married women will be

forced into street trading when their spouses are left unemployed because of structural changes in the industrial sector, or when governments reduce public services in sectors where men have typically found employment.

Both researchers also learned that poor women will turn to street trading because of the low costs of startup and low educational requirements. In Agadjanian's (2002) study, only 20% of the women street traders interviewed in the two Bolivian cities where he conducted his research had basic literacy skills. Companion (2010) also learned that low social capital prompts a need to be able to trade because these women do not have access to business contacts, own property, nor can they access bank loans. Both studies also found a link between domestic service and street trading. Agadjanian (2002) learned that many women started trading when they were too old to continue in domestic service. Companion (2010) found that a flooded market of women available for domestic service, traditional employment for poor women in Mozambique, meant those who could not find work turned to street trading.

Thus, the need to enter public space and trade is magnified for economically disadvantaged women under the economic and social ruptures that flow from neoliberal governance and the structural adjustment policies designed by international financial institutions (Agadjanian, 2002; Companion, 2010). The gentrification programs that coincide with economic restructuring put women who are dependent upon street trading for an income at-risk of not being able to earn when local authorities limit their access to public space and consumers (Lincoln, 2008; Milgram, 2011). The data gathered in these studies illustrates why, ultimately, gentrification and the

clearing of street-based markets increases the vulnerability of poor women with few opportunities in the mainstream economy when the state's social priorities are dictated by macroeconomic interests.

Emancipating The Struggle of Women Street Traders in 1920s Ireland

The foregoing data on both contemporary studies and the historical underpinnings of the persecution of street traders was gathered to make sense of a phenomenon I observed while living in Cork City, Ireland. A neighbourhood known as the Coal Quay was the site of a once-vibrant street market that had existed for centuries but was, by the early twenty-first century, struggling and home to only a handful of stalls. Both its vibrancy and the unmistakable dominance over trade in the market by women known as the Shawlies, named for the distinctive black shawls they wore while working, was captured in photographs, local histories, and public art including a statue known as 'the Onion Seller'. The question that haunted my comparison of the streetscape of the past with the contemporary streetscape was why had the Shawlies and their marketplace disappeared? I set out to answer this question using the archival methods of Michel Foucault.

The important works of Michel Foucault, including studies of the prison and imprisoned, were compiled using archival research to assemble genealogies. He claimed he wanted to give an opportunity to "those absolutely undistinguished people to emerge from their place amid the dead multitudes, to gesticulate again" (quoted Gidley, 2004, pg. 261). In addition to giving

voices to the marginalised, some of his observers assert that genealogy, as a method, allows for the study of the history of a problem and the swirl of power around and within the problem (Hunt and Wickham, 1998). In Foucault's words, genealogy is an "attempt to emancipate historical knowledges" or to "reactivate local knowledges" from subjection (1980, pg. 85). The possibility then exists for these 'emancipated' voices to stand in opposition to the coercion that existed in the past, that which came from the voices of the privileged and powerful.

Prior to compiling this genealogy, I discovered that street traders were not formally regulated in Ireland prior to 1926, and they were exercising what had been established as their market right to conduct small trade in public spaces where markets had operated for centuries. However, the first government of the Irish Free State moved to regulate street trading only four years after the country had gained independence from Great Britain, and only two years after a ceasefire in the Irish Civil War. Questions that quickly came to mind were why, exactly, did the government of the new state move to regulate so quickly? And, why were the regulations introduced in 1925 so sweeping, comprehensive, and punitive?

In order to restore the voices of these marginalised women, I created a genealogy of the legislation using primary documentary sources, including legislation and newspaper accounts of the implementation of the Act, and planning reports. I also conducted archival research, drawing on council and committee minutes in Cork, and correspondence between the local authority and the first government of the Irish Free State. I quickly learned that the voices of the women themselves were not available in the public record, and had to find another means to hear their

stories. This was done by compiling qualitative and quantitative data from the documents that did exist: a registry compiled in 1928 by the Free State's policing authority, Ireland's digitized census records of 1901 and 1911, and newspaper accounts. The gaps and unanswered questions remaining were then addressed using the foregoing contemporary studies. This triangulation was facilitated by the fact that the data gathered to reveal the quality of life of Ireland's women street traders (i.e., literacy, family status, poverty) aligned closely with that of the contemporary women street traders in debtor nations.

Across historical eras poor women had dominated street trading in Ireland (Martin, 2015) as they do today in developing countries. However, similar to the situation in New York and Hanoi, Dublin's leadership in the 1920s was transforming the city into a modern capital (Flanagan, 2009). While articulating its image as a commercial capital, women street traders were characterised in the country's newspaper of record, the *Irish Times*, as a "blot on the city", "evil", and "disgraceful". In October 1921, an amalgamation of incorporated businesses, calling itself the Dublin's Citizens' Association, began pressuring the government for a ban citing street trading as being unfair to businesses paying taxes (Martin, 2015).

Similarly, in Cork City on 25 September 1924, the *Cork Examiner* reported on a meeting of a local authority committee to address street trading. A solicitor representing the Musgrave Brothers, Ltd., a large and prestigious grocer based in Cork, spoke to the committee. He reported that at the firm's Annual General Meeting, a considerable sum was approved for the purchase of buildings on a street where women had, for centuries, traded on the street and sidewalks. The

building, he proposed, would house the offices and warehouse of Ireland's first wholesale grocery supplier. He claimed that women street traders, including those trading on adjoining streets, interfered with the business of his clients, and that street trading results in litter, creating a further financial hardship on tax-paying businesses to conduct their trade in what he termed "the ordinary way". A prohibition on street trading by the local authority following the guidelines requested was passed (Martin, 2015).

In December 1925 the Irish Free State's Minister of Justice, in response to ongoing complaints in Dublin, introduced Ireland's first comprehensive legislation to regulate street trading in the Irish parliament, insisting it was not a ban and would create a fair trading environment. However, it introduced licensing and fees, fines for trading outside of designated areas, introduced powers of arrest for violations, and allowed for the police to seize a trader's goods including her earnings. Women trading on Dublin's streets were immediately subject to widespread harassment and arrests following the Act's implementation in 1926. According to transcripts of the debates in the Irish Parliament, the government ignored complaints and calls for repeal raised by members of the opposition who were advocating for the rights of women street traders facing persecution and prosecution (Martin, 2015).

Originally only 15 streets, those comprising the core of Dublin's commercial centre, were subject to a ban. However, by January 1927, that list was expanded to over 250 streets labelled Dublin's "major show streets," to wipe away what was characterised by a civic leader as "tawdriness" to create a "clean, hygienic, and beautiful" capital city (quoted Martin, 2015). In

June 1928, it was announced in the Irish Times that The Street Trading Act, 1926, would be implemented in Cork to follow Dublin's example. The geographical boundaries designated for street trading extended the prohibition on the city's women street traders established in 1924, effectively corralled on a few streets in the rundown medieval city centre, but they were no longer allowed to trade in front of 'bricks and mortar' businesses. This also marked containment that was well away from the upscale retail centre of the city which planning documents, prepared by local commercial interests, had designated for gentrification (Martin, 2015).

What was lost in the narrative about the threat they posed to the business community and the life of Cork and Dublin was the truth about the lives of these women. A closer look reveals they were impoverished and working-class women. The transcripts of the debate in Ireland's parliament, and the newspaper coverage that followed, reveal that it was common knowledge among politicians, journalists, and magistrates, that these women were poor (Martin, 2015). Quantitative data gathered from the 1901 Census provides insight into the personal lives of the more desperate among Cork's women street traders. Of the 23 women who listed their profession as onion seller, all were sole supporting, earning to provide for themselves or for themselves and dependents. All resided in tenements and the majority lived in conditions classified as unfit for human habitation. More than half were aged under 20-years and the two oldest were aged more than 60-years. Only 30% had basic literacy skills, but they were the minority (Martin, 2015). In 1928, following the announcement to implement the Act in Cork, a registry of street traders was compiled; it lists their names, ages, addresses, the location where they traded, what they sold, and the length of time they had been trading. The quantitative data culled from this registry

confirms that street trading in Cork was both gendered and classed: of the 199 traders listed, all were women, all lived in the city's working-class neighbourhoods, and the majority, 147, traded from makeshift stalls on the streets in the rundown medieval city centre (Martin, 2015). Of those 147, 80% were in prime earning years, aged 18 to 59 years, an indication that this was a primary means of earning over other employment. Approximately 35% had begun trading when they were under 18 years of age, and 61% began trading when they were aged between 18 and 39 years. As for the frequency of trading, 84% reported trading daily, Monday to Saturday, a further indication that this was an important, full-time occupation for these women. When considered in conjunction with the data on the age when they entered trading, it is likely street trading was the only work the majority of these women had ever done (Martin, 2015) making the transition to new employment, if available, more difficult.

Just as the turn in Cork's official position on women street traders aligns with the negative shift in the official narrative on street traders that occurred in New York City earlier in the twentieth century, it also aligns with the ethos surrounding the gentrification processes at work in contemporary developing countries on the cusp of the twenty-first century. The historic data gathered reveals the potential this legislation and the corresponding gentrification had for the further social and economic marginalisation of poor Irish women who depended on street trading for basic survival. Thus, The Street Trading Act, 1926, provides a lens through which to re-evaluate what has been characterised by some observers as the first Irish government's privileging of the middle-classes and big business (Meehan, 2010) and the country's urban

middle-classes (Ó Gráda, 1994), a privileging that continues to haunt the regulation of street trading in contemporary Ireland (Martin, 2015).

Discussion and Conclusions

The triangulation of the data between this study of the Shawlies, with those of New York and the contemporary studies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, contributes to an understanding of the struggles the Shawlies had with power—social, political, and economic—that prevailed in Ireland at the founding of the state. The hyper-rationalisation of locations where trading could be legally conducted, and the resulting containment, increased the chance that significant numbers of women became offenders. The combination of prohibitions which created fines, licensing fees, and the seizure of goods by police, would have increased the costs these women incurred to earn a living. Finally, crowding into a sanctioned but considerably reduced street market would have increased competition among the established traders, and limited the opportunities for women trying to enter the street trading market.

Emancipating the story of Ireland's women street traders in a Foucaultian genealogy required an alignment of data from contemporary studies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia to address 'hunches' about why trading was so critical to poor Irish women, and why they persisted despite hostility. This alignment also contributes to an understanding of the struggles they had with the social, political, and economic powers seeking to articulate the appropriate uses of urban public

space for vested private interests, and the trickle-down effect privileging the macroeconomy has on lived experience at street level.

As with the evidence culled in Bolivia, Mozambique, the Philippines, and Vietnam, it is likely that large numbers of women in Cork and Dublin were turning to street trading in the 1920s because of increased unemployment for women (Martin, 2015). The noticeable increase in unemployment among Irish women was not a concern to the government of the day (Jones; 1988; Lee, 1989), making access to trade particularly critical for poor women. Frequently in the public record they were referred to as “poor women”, and their poverty was noted by advocates among elected officials who were concerned that a ban would further impoverish these women and their families.

This alignment also substantiates why the hyper-regulation of street trade would deepen the vulnerability of Ireland’s women street traders at a time when more women needed to trade to survive. The regulations in Cork stipulated that they could only trade in limited venues next to established traders. It is clear their displacement would likely reduce their earnings due to significant crowding and competition. From a policy perspective, the data available on both the Irish women and those in the contemporary studies, combined with the vulnerable social contexts in which they trade, reveal the degree to which regulations and prohibitions have, historically, threatened the survival of women street traders.

The cases presented by New York, Vietnam, and the Philippines demonstrate how the privileging of modern, order, urban gentrification, and class-based interests position the

rationalisation of public space as beneficial and prohibit the urban poor from earning in the margins of the micro-economy. It is clear that pressure from retailers and businesses in the neighbourhood influenced the local authorities in both Dublin and Cork: the emphasis was on what was fair to ratepayers as opposed to citizens, just as it was in the Philippines and Vietnam. In Cork, Musgrave Brothers, Ltd., was critical in deciding the future of street traders when this private interest was allowed to shape the streetscape in Cork, decide its uses, and to articulate what constituted legitimate trade.

The qualitative and quantitative data in the studies conducted in Bolivia and Mozambique provide possible explanations as to why street trading was exclusively the domain of women in Cork through 1928, and some insight into why poor women continued to pursue this livelihood into advanced age. The low costs at start up and reduced social capital (Agadjanian, 2002; Companion, 2010), aligns with what was learned about the economic circumstances and the literacy information contained in Ireland's census data. Furthermore, the close connection between domestic service and street trading for poor women (Agadjanian, 2002; Companion, 2010) is particularly relevant considering how important this sector was to Irish women. According to Powell (1992), in 1926, 60% of Irish women were employed as domestics or farm labourers. The unemployment rate in these two sectors in this era was 17%, and both sectors were excluded from receiving unemployment insurance (Lee, 1989).

Repetition of statements about women street traders and their work by politically and socially powerful men transforms the political discourse about their work into what Foucault (1980) conceptualises as truth spoken by power, that which draws on knowledge to underpin right, the

legal apparatus reflecting that truth. Regulation was justified as an act of governance to create fairness and to protect the common good; however, the gendered poverty that proliferated street trading, and the potential of regulation to push these women further into poverty, continued to be ignored.

Foucault (1980) calls a genealogy such as this a history of the present that elucidates present-day struggles. An understanding of how The Street Trading Act, 1926 created a policy to limit street trading in response to calls for gentrification also informs the ongoing struggles of poor women trading on urban streets in countries touted as emerging markets. The present revealed here cautions that adopting a street trading policy with a foundation in the affluent West makes possible the erasure of women street traders as neoliberal gentrification articulates who are valid economic actors in urban public space.

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