Ball on Bleynat, 'Vendors' Capitalism: A Political Economy of Public Markets in Mexico City'

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Visiting a Latin American market is a fully sentient experience: the sights, the smells, and the sounds are unforgettable, not to mention the tastes of delicious street food. Caught up in the experience, one may not stop to think about who failed to gain a stall, how stalls were organized, or why the market was even built in a certain location. The answers to these questions, however, provide remarkable insight into relationships between vendors, wholesalers, customers, municipal officials, and the state. In centering her study on fixed markets and vendors in Mexico City from the Porfiriato to the heyday of the Partido Revolucionario Institutional (PRI) in the mid-twentieth century, Ingrid Bleynat’s Vendors’ Capitalism: A Political Economy of Public Markets in Mexico City addresses these questions historically, demonstrating that through intricate relationships and negotiations, vendors played an important role in Mexico City’s modern political economy.

Bleynat’s attention to market vendors provides a much-needed focus on an often overlooked group and complements existing studies of Mexico’s industrial workers, peasants, and middle-class professionals. It dialogues well with works like Pablo Piccato’s City of Suspects (2001), Aurora Gómez-Galvarriato’s Industry and Revolution (2013), and Susie Porter’s From Angel to Office Worker (2018), and provides a point of comparison to Sandra Mendiola García’s Street Democracy (2017). Bleynat argues that focusing on markets and vendors demonstrates how a proprietary mode of production coexisted alongside capitalism. While the division between capitalists, propriety vendors, and workers is sometimes murky, Bleynat successfully establishes market vendors’ unique position in Mexico’s political economy.

Mexico City’s market history predates the colonial period, but Bleynat’s study astutely commences in 1867, when markets became seen as a public good and service. It ends at the height of market construction in 1966, where 160 markets and 52,000 stalls were inaugurated in the city within fourteen years. A short epilogue reveals the continued role of markets in the city through 2019. The period spans the rise and fall of Porfirio Díaz, the tumultuous years of the Mexican Revolution and subsequent Calles years, the rise of corporatism during the populist Enrique Cárdenas era, and the birth and rise of the PRI political machine. Bleynat skillfully and succinctly explains these complicated events to readers, taking care to illustrate how each impacted Mexico City’s markets and its vendors and the ways that “public markets were the nexus of a cast of historical agents” (p. 5).

In 1868, Mexico City had six public markets where most residents came to buy their food. During the
early years of the Porfirian era, vendors paid rental fees to the municipal government, representing 10 percent of municipal revenue. As Mexico City’s population ballooned over the next century, official market construction and renovation struggled to keep pace. Vendors were not passive bystanders but actively lobbied the appropriate officials, be it the market administrator, the municipal council, the governor, or even the president, when they felt the economic squeeze. On the one hand, vendors felt undercut by semi-informal and informal vendors who did not have to pay rental fees. On the other hand, it was often proprietary vendors, rather than wholesalers or capitalist vendors, who bore the brunt of government-imposed price ceilings intended to lessen the consumers’ burdens amid rising inflation. It is no wonder that Cárdenas’s initiatives failed to receive vendor support. At the end of Bleynat’s study, readers understand how rival vendor groups and unions were outmaneuvered by the Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (CNOP) and the PRI. While rival groups were targeted and displaced from markets, those supporting the CNOP and PRI benefited from the incredible market expansion and investment between 1952 and 1966.

Vendors’ Capitalism fits within a growing trend among economic historians to showcase how marginalized groups impacted and responded to broad political and economic developments. Each chapter examines the roles of a range of actors influencing market development and regulation in a set period and culminates in a section highlighting vendors’ own thoughts and concerns. Bleynat achieves this by combing through various document series related to markets scattered in Mexico City’s archives. Chapter 1, for example, explores direct petitions to the ayuntamiento housed at the Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México to show how vendors maneuvered to secure stall-fee reductions and used the press to influence local politics. Chapter 3 uses the Archivo General de la Nación’s presidential series to illustrate how vendors adopted the revolutionary spirit and organized unions. The final chapter capitalizes on federal security records to demonstrate how vendors and their organizations impacted city councils, corporatism, and the PRI’s patronage system in the 1950s and 60s. Men’s voices are by far the most prominent in these records, but market-fee reductions for women and increasing union demands for childcare facilities in markets in the pre- and post-Revolutionary eras, respectively, suggest women’s influence was considerable. Bleynat’s study is also largely bounded to official markets, as discussion of peddlers and itinerant vendors is mostly limited to fee-paying vendors operating within the markets’ walls. There is also no mention of how tianguis, open-air markets of precolonial origin that remain popular today, entered these conversations and negotiations in Mexico City.

Bleynat carefully notes that the experience of Mexico City market vendors was not necessarily replicated in other Mexican cities, let alone in other countries, but this does not diminish the work’s broad impact. Vendors’ positioning was essential to the historical development of these incredibly vibrant spaces, which emanated culture and also reflected the political landscape. Non-economic historians would benefit from reading Bleynat’s careful study to appreciate these intersections rendered in enjoyable prose. Vendors’ Capitalism will also appeal to scholars and students interested in development, urban, and economic history. In highlighting markets’ crucial role in the political economy of Latin America’s most populous city, Bleynat’s study articulates a need to more closely investigate the experiences and impact of individuals and sectors that do not neatly fit within the capitalist framework. Latin America, which has a proliferation of not only fixed markets but also of street markets, itinerant artisans, and informality in sectors ranging from transportation to housing, does not want for spaces to explore these themes.

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