SOAS Address: Rethinking Street Vending

Abstract: “What is at stake here?” asks Krishnendu Ray urgently, examining the past, present, and future of marketplaces and street vendors. What lessons can be learned from cities in the Global South—from Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, where the desperate actions and activism of a street vendor helped launch the Arab Spring, to Durban, South Africa, where women street vendors forced their way into urban planning by organizing? Ray, a member of the Gastronomica Editorial Collective, posed historical and contemporary questions about liveliness and livelihoods of global cities and what good taste and good food can mean for the very future of democracy when he delivered the 2019 Distinguished Lecture at the annual event co-sponsored by the SOAS University of London and Gastronomica. The recorded talk is available for free at www.soas.ac.uk/about/. This year, in addition to reprinting the lecture, we extend the London conversation to a global audience, inviting two leading scholars of street vending to respond to Ray’s lecture.

Introduction

My work has mostly been in the domain of mobility and material culture, specifically food. That is at some distance from, if not in opposition to, the rich European-American literature on roots and terroir (Trubek 2008; Parker 2015). Previously, I have worked on immigrant home cooking and migrant restaurateurs, so it is a natural progression to shift attention to migrant lives on the streets of global cities. Hence, my current project on vending focuses on the work done by rural-to-urban migrants in the Global South, and transnational migrants in the Global North, in making food available on the streets. This is also the right moment to turn our attention to the last mile of the food chain because the method of delivery of produce and cooked food is significantly changing in cities such as New York City, and New Delhi, which are the primary loci of my work (Alderman 2019; Ranganna 2019). In this talk, I explore the degrees of continuity and discontinuity in the distribution of food in global cities, and its impact on the lives and claims of poor people, often migrants. I sketch out some of the productive themes emerging in current research, and outline a tentative agenda to a marketplace where chiles en nogada become the linchpin of an ebullient flowering of democratic potential. She agrees with Ray that marketplaces are sites not just of capital accumulation but also of critical social infrastructure. Jane Battersby, as well, notes the role of street vending and marketplaces as social infrastructure. Throughout African cities, street vendors, often women, are crucial to urban food security, yet urban planners continue to regard vendors as symptomatic, even causing urban problems. The future of marketplaces and street vending, and with it an element of life in an urban democracy, depends on vendors’ abilities to demand collective voices in the planning and governance of cities. Finally, in their epilogue, Noah Allison and Jacklyn Rehel note that these conversations about what they, citing Ray, describe as the “last mile of the food chain” are ongoing. Proposing more expansive definitions of vending, they focus attention on the multiple meanings assigned, globally, to urban street vending and on the ways in which those meanings relate to how cities feed themselves.

A Local Market

The sun is setting on a South Delhi colony, around 7 p.m. on a Saturday. An acre of land will soon be lit up by the severe glow of makeshift LED lights. The market sits adjacent to a heavily trafficked road churning dust and smoke. The cacophony of horns and vendor calls produce a surprising envelope of calm. The intersection is set up after 4 p.m. and dismantled in the wee hours of the morning. It has over two hundred fruit and vegetable vendors, clothing and houseware hawkers, and a scattering of cooked-food sellers.
A Y-shaped plot of land with a bulging-O attached to its bottom stem, it is on other days the location of a car repair shop and an auto-rickshaw stand. The two arms of the Y—streets on other days—enclose a working-class settlement of domestic workers, waste pickers, and vendors, all informal workers crucial to the social transformation of food along the last mile of the food chain. Overall estimates put street vendors nationally in India at about 10 million, domestic workers at up to another 50 million, and waste pickers at around 4 million (NASVI 2019; National Domestic Workers Movement 2019; Dandapani 2017).

Across the street is a hospital, behind which is the upper-middle-class Delhi Development Authority colony, scattered with majestic jamun trees. Almost 70 percent of colony residents are customers of the vegetable market. The market is the spatial and social meeting ground of the classes. The better-off and less price-sensitive shop early (6–8 p.m.) while working-class populations shop later to get better deals (9 p.m. onward). It is not only a functional space but also a source of entertainment, heightened late at night, as clusters of maidservants with made-up hair and sparkling attire make their way through the market, talking and loitering, seeking out chow mein (Indo-Chinese lo mein), cholla bhatia (fry bread with spicy chickpea), and jalebis (fermented, fried dough in syrup).

What Is at Stake Here?

In the tumult of current global developments it is easy to forget that what triggered the primary social movement of the early twenty-first century, the Arab Spring, was the question of the lives and livelihoods of street vendors. Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamad Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, after harassment by municipal authorities in Sidi Bouzid, a small town in Tunisia, and the confiscation of about twenty dollars’ worth of vegetables, a pair of scales, and a wheelbarrow. The movement spread ferociously across the southern rim of the Mediterranean after his death. The importance of Mohamad Bouazizi’s rebellion hinges on questions of law and the regulation of public spaces. Sean Basinski, the
FIGURE 2: Jalebi.
PHOTOGRAPH BY RENDEZVOUS WITH RASHMI. IMAGE APPEARS COURTESY OF KRISHNENDU RAY © 2019.

FIGURE 3: Jalebi making.
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founder of the Street Vendor Project in NYC, likes to remind me that one of the important triggers for a recent urban social movement in New York and the United States, Black Lives Matter, was the killing of vendor Eric Garner in Staten Island on July 17, 2014, again unambiguously linking questions of law, public space, and livelihood.

For our collective collaborative work there is thus a series of questions in this moment: What might be the relationship between global conflicts about urban space and livelihoods of the poor? What connects the major legislative victory in Delhi in the enactment of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act (2014) that legalized vending for over 10 million vendors\(^2\) and the Los Angeles law in 2018 that decriminalized street vending to protect about fifty thousand vendors from deportation? What is the lesson for those of us in New York who, in 2018 and 2019, unsuccessfully testified to the city council recommending four thousand more vendor permits over the next ten years?\(^3\) The overarching theme here is lessons across national and urban spaces—a form of cosmopolitanism with local roots. Lessons not only for vendor advocacy groups but also for city planners.

We are scholars and advocates involved in this collaborative project with hopes of enacting two kinds of bridges: between theory and practice and between the academy and various publics. We think pure theoretical critique is inadequate in this moment of peril for democracies, so we have to find a way for the sophisticated analyses undertaken in the academy to reach the public. This is one of the reasons we are building the website www.cityfoodresearch.org.

What is particularly interesting, within the scholarly frame, about the attention to street food in Food Studies is that it adds a new locus to the triad of rurality, domesticity, and haute cuisine that otherwise dominates the field. That is partly because cooked food has become rarer on the streets in the Global North, a decrease that has gone hand in hand with the reach and power of the modern welfare state and stringent municipal regulation. Because so much of Food Studies has been built around Euro-American concerns, it has avoided engaging with street food (other than as studies of the vanishing past) because eating on the street has been in decline in Europe and North America for the last half century. Provisioning from the street also throws a critical light on the drift toward corporate supermarkets as the preferred model of supplying the city, whereas the older model of public markets in a rhizomatic relationship with mobile vendors may in fact have been a useful framework of food distribution that the developmentalist illusion seeks to erase from our memory.

So this new attention to street food has the potential to change the flavor of the politics and poetics of good taste. It also opens up a new theoretical frame toward an urban food socio-ecology that attends to a visceral materiality structured into the built environment of a living and livable city, where local markets can be remembered and reinstated as the locus of a pre-corporate past and post-liberal future.

I am personally interested in the interclass relations around street vending that occur at multiple levels: first, in the domain of law and regulation (in the making, breaking, and working around laws, including the domain of public interest litigation that has been opened up in places such as India and South Africa as I will discuss); second, in the area of everyday practice (as in shopping for food, which is how, for instance, the Indian middle class still feeds itself); and third, in the leadership structure of advocacy organizations, such as NASVI (National Association of Street Vendors of India), WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association), and SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Union). In these three domains—law, everyday practice, and advocacy—classes are obviously working together even when they are embroiled in routine miscomprehension. That is what Mendiola Garcia has characterized as the potential for street democracy in her eponymous book on Puebla, Mexico (2017). I am interested in these collaborative scripts and mechanisms—the convening power of food is one way to think about it—as a window into the working of participatory democracies. Thus, I am interested in studying markets not only as a part of the urban system but also as part of the social infrastructure upon which democracy is built through everyday negotiations and engagement with difference—what Alex Rhys-Taylor in his study of East London has called the “traffic between cities, sociality and the senses” (2017: 139).

In Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality (2018), Eric Klinenberg suggests that the future of democratic societies rests not simply on shared values but also on shared spaces: libraries, childcare centers, bookstores, and parks. These are places where people gather and linger, making friends across group lines and strengthening the entire community. Klinenberg calls these spaces the “social infrastructure.” I would add street corners and marketplaces to these proposed sites to expand the ambit of his theorization to the Global South. Jeffrey Pilcher (2016: 105) has already named these a part of the “culinary infrastructure.” He writes, “Culinary infrastructure refers to the basic facilities and technologies used to convey food, and knowledge about food,” not only from field to fork but also across continents and cultures. Tiana Bakić Hayden (2017) has placed
the approximately five hundred thousand vendors at the very heart of the “infrastructure” feeding residents of Mexico City. In Delhi, most people, including the middle and upper classes, buy their produce from street vendors, with domestic servants often buying the produce for middle-class households. Indian cities are, in fact, at a moment of bifurcation. Will they move toward provisioning cities by corporate grocery stores as has happened in the Global North or will they retain the high employment generation prospect of wholesale and local markets? Will they move toward a new system of digital delivery for the last mile with companies such as Milkbasket (see Roncaglia 2013 for the dabbawalla case)? Will the architecture of the system be retained with its rhizomic economy of produce vendors, small store owners, and municipal ward markets (about six wholesale and hundreds of NDMC markets in Delhi) (see Srivastav 2019)?

Predictably, there is much excitement about delivery across the last mile in the venture capital arena (Khatri 2019). Flipkart Supermart, Walmart-Flipkart’s online grocery arm, is already operating in all major PIN codes of Bengaluru with plans to expand to half-a-dozen other cities (Khatri 2018). Amazon Pantry, Amazon Prime Now, and Google-backed Dunzo are some of the other big players making their way into the online grocery segment in India (Agarwal 2018). We are at a moment of reckoning between the digital delivery age and the street vendor age in Indian cities: Are they going to be integrated into each other or will the former overwhelm the latter, undermining the precarious livelihoods and the relative autonomy of poor people? That will depend on the discount rate for delivery over the last mile, the power of capital, the regulatory regime instituted by city governments, and the capacity of vendors and their advocates to intercede between the weight of capital and the power of the state.

This raises the central question regarding the socio-materiality of infrastructure. In The Promise of Infrastructure, leading anthropological theorists show how communities have to fight for resources and for the infrastructure necessary for their physical and social reproduction. In the process, they illustrate that infrastructure is a dense social fact, banal and essential to participatory democracies (Anand, Gupta, and...
FIGURE 5: Peas.
PHOTOGRAPH BY RENDEZVOUS WITH RASHMI. IMAGE APPEARS COURTESY OF KRISHNENDU RAY © 2019

FIGURE 6: Veggies with status.
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Appel, eds. 2018: 2). In Delhi, the Aam Admi Party–led government has posed the question acutely by proposing to make mass transit free for women, which has provoked a rich debate. “Making a public transit system like the Delhi Metro free is seen as being ‘uneconomical’ and an ‘unnecessary burden’ on taxpayers. But why is the road space—which is built entirely using public funds—not viewed with the same lens when it is being used by private transport virtually free of cost?” asks Godse (2019). Similar questions can be raised about street vendor systems for the last mile. Our project is an engagement with the rich emerging literature and public discussion on the materiality and sociality of infrastructure, clarifying the uses of public markets and vendors at a time when corporations threaten the provisioning of cities, already enacted in places such as Shanghai, ordained in Bangkok, and fantasized by developmentists and consultants of the Smart City in places such as Delhi and Bengaluru. It is becoming obvious to many of us that we could build cities with laws and materials that have more give and flexibility. The question is: Could good food be made congruent with good livelihoods for poor people and a lively city?

Liveliness of the City

The underdeveloped idea so far is the liveliness of the city. Liveliness is what Jane Jacobs gestured to as active, interactional, mixed-use sites of residence, play, recuperation, and business. Only when cities are created for everybody can they provide something for everybody, Jacobs insisted (1992: 81, 238). Walter Benjamin (1999: 243) told us that “Streets are the dwelling place of the collective,” an effervescent social group in excess of the functionalist logic of capitalist urban planning, held together by an improvisational mode of street life. Liveliness is what is generated in the shared use of a public space by different groups of people. Liveliness includes the opportunity to walk and observe, the life of foot and pedal. Jessica B. Harris recalls her visit to the Dan-Topka Market in Benin, which startled her with its vitality (2011: 7). Even after years of travel she continued to be amazed at how this large neighborhood market is transformed overnight into a small city of purveyors, each with his own clientele and all trying to hawk their wares. Enormous snails that look like escargots on steroids are piled on mats in one section. In another, the air is pungent with the funk of dried smoked shrimp that are used for seasoning dishes. Bulging hula punch overflow with gari, or cassava meal, a major local starch. Earthenware cooking pots and calabash bowls are displayed in all sizes and shapes. Familiar leafy greens, tomatoes, and chilies are sold as well, albeit in different varieties and with unfamiliar names. Everywhere the eye glances there is a celebration of the food of West Africa. (2011: 7–8)

Analogous liveliness can be observed in the souks of Marrakesh, the winding alleys of Mombasa, or the gorgeous boat-markets of Southeast Asian river systems. Liveliness is often a result of unplanned, but ordered everyday social interactions across difference.

Drawing on urban planning and sensory urbanism literature, we can find a number of nested aspects to liveliness: (1) engaging the urban food system with attention to access, everyday aesthetics, and sensory aspirations of multiplicity of publics in the city; (2) observing and recording the local vernaculars of good taste across various social groups in different parts of the city; and (3) noting the processual, planning, and market mechanisms of sorting through and living in energetic but peaceful disagreement among these constituents. Trade-offs have to be mediated creatively. The overall ambition is to observe and record the dynamic, participatory, and inclusive projects, and to register and underline the life-giving activities occurring in every neighborhood.

Furthermore, within the research group there is agreement that it is clearly not a good idea to abolish street food prematurely if we want to protect poor peoples’ livelihoods. For that we need a new infrastructure of postliberal legal innovations. In the long run it might even be better to revive street foods in the Global North in light of the lessons from the South, perhaps as seasonal fairs and local public markets (as is happening in NYC with sites such as Essex Crossings, a collaboration between the New York City Economic Development Corporation and private interests), hopefully without too much heavy-handed aesthetic curation. David Zetland (2012) observes, “I think, that ‘developed’ countries could borrow habits from developing countries—more street vendors, shared-taxis, and mixed-use buildings—to improve street and urban life.” In the Global North, the informal sector is smaller than in the Global South, but not altogether irrelevant as underlined in a recent study, The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor (Mukhiya and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014), that investigates garage sales, informal parking lots, community gardens, and so on.

Yet today we are in the throes of new regulatory offensives launched in cities such as Bangkok and Shanghai to push back, if not eliminate, street vending. The new regime in Thailand, for instance, is once again trying to clear the streets of their food vendors. A recent policy brief penned by WIEGO (Yasmeen and Nirathron 2017) notes alarmingly: “Since 2014, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority has led a
FIGURE 7: Spices.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RENDEZVOUS WITH RASHMI. IMAGE APPEARS COURTESY OF KRISHNENDU RAJ © 2019.
campaign to reduce the number of vendors under the motto "Return the footpath to pedestrians." They have reduced the number of licensed vendors by more than 17,000, and have removed more than 500 of some 700 designated vending areas. The new regime appears to be returning to historically narrow dreams of urban development.

The **Longue Durée**

Hasia Diner (2015) has extended the contemporary analysis backward to hundreds of thousands of peddlers from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean in the long nineteenth century. In the process, she shows how Jewish peddlers were engaging Christian women, shaping each other’s notions of the Jew and the Gentile, commodity and culture, provincialism and cosmopolitanism. Analogously, Jessica B. Harris (2011: 126) notes: “Blacks, both free and enslaved, dominated street vending [in the United States] until the newly arriving European immigrants made inroads in the mid-nineteenth century. African Americans street vending in both the North and the South gave the fledgling city streets an African air, as vendors hawked their wares with loud cries designed to lure customers.” Diner’s and Harris’s work on peddlers raises questions about the relevance of comparison between the peddlers of Early Modern Europe and North America, and street vendors in the Global South today. Laurence Fontaine’s *History of Pedlars in Europe* (1906) shows how the word *pedlar* and its various synonyms reveal a hidden social history. In early modern England the word was “chapman” (from *cheapman*) and a hierarchy developed between well-off merchants of Manchester and Yorkshire, who traveled all over the country to supply shopkeepers, and the lowly peddlers with packs on their back traveling to the villages and small towns. In Spain he was the *gabacho*, “the coarse man from the mountains of the North” (Fontaine 1996: 2). In northern India, the *qalandars*, the *bazigars*, the *madaris*, the *minasis*, the *fakirs*, the *gadiyya lohars*, were often equally condemned by sedentary folks and administrators as trickster, rogue or thief, as the historian Neeladri Bhattacharya (2006) underlines in his work on itinerant peddlers in the nineteenth century. This pattern is no different from tracing back the Syleti hotdog sellers of New York and New Orleans to the mountains of Bangladesh that Vivek Bald (2013) has executed in *Bengali Harlem*. 8

The exemplar of the developmentalist dream is Singapore. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew noted in his autobiography, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story*, how in “the 1960s thousands would sell cooked food on the pavements and streets in total disregard of traffic, health or other considerations” (Yew 2013: 174). In shifting them to hawker centers, he would take credit for moving Singapore decisively “from the third world to the first.” But that could be done only by a combination of police action and substantial investment in the development of Hawker Centers—providing potable water, toilet facilities, and a ready-made market base in the residents of the residential buildings above and around them (Huat 2016). 9 The much-discussed “Singapore model” of dealing with street vendors was devised with a strong role of the state in provisioning the city, opposite of the “American model” that was premised on the decaying role of city government in feeding its population.

By 1870, though New York’s downtown population had declined, all ten public markets were stranded below 14th Street, while 90 percent of food was consumed above it (Tangires 2003: 143). Thomas De Voe, a butcher turned commissioner of markets and pragmatic mid-nineteenth-century supporter of public markets, critical of their inefficiency and corruption, noted that the system would have worked if a public market were planned in every ward with some foresight (Baics 2016). Since the 1930s—especially around the New York World’s Fair of 1939—New York City has targeted vendors for clearance and removal, successfully reducing them by the end of the twentieth century, primarily on account of the formal economy’s expansion in the postwar era, to an estimated total of about twenty thousand today, only half of whom are food vendors. This history of peddling in the *longue durée* reinvigorates the question: Is the demise of street vending the inevitable future, as has happened in most of northern Europe and North America?

The dream of cleaning up the streets in the hope of fabricating a “world-class city” is going to falter in places such as Bangkok, Delhi, Kolkata, and Mexico City in the short run because it goes against the very logic of the demographic transition these cities are undergoing (Roy 2004). Cities of the South have fifteen to thirty times more vendors by population compared to even a relatively liberal Northern standard such as New York City. Countries such as India need almost 13 million new jobs a year, while its economy is producing about 8 million low-paying jobs annually (Mohan and Madgavkar 2017). Urban self-employment is essential to the mix of economic opportunities for the poor and in Southern cities in particular, which are in the throes of a massive rural-to-urban migration, often due to high birth rates conjoined with the unviability of rural livelihoods, itself related to insecure land tenure; high debt exposure produced
by increasing costs of agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, and water; and low returns on cereal crops due to subsidies in the Global North.

One of the most ubiquitous occupations people have when they move from the country to the city, small town to large city, or even across nations, is street vending because it requires relatively little money or credit or social or cultural capital to get into the business of selling food, most often by the poor to the poor. Street vending provides livelihoods to about one percent of the population of a city in the Global South (contra Bhowmik 2010: xvii, 49, who estimated it at about two percent). Thus, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) recommends that urban employment provided by vendors to be factored into urban planning so that city planners build vending spaces into the architecture of the street, the sidewalk, and the street-front (FAO n.d.). This is an argument against the simplistic developmentalist illusion that seeks to drive food off the street. It is a presumption carried from the regime of the twentieth-century welfare state in the cities of the Global North that has thrust food into households, cafeterias, schools, messes, and canteens, and off the street.

Rather than eliminate street vending, a better pathway to a livable city would be a nuanced balancing of the laws, which can account for livelihoods of poor people in the short and the medium run, along with the liveliness of cities for all, allowing a slow fruitful traffic in life-sustaining activities on the street (see the special issue of Cityscapes edited by Bostic, Kim, and Valenzuela, Jr. 2016). Yet the developmentalist delusion continues in the imagination and implementation of the “Smart City” project in India, for instance, where almost every one of the seventy-nine smart-city plans submitted by city planners to Bloomberg Philanthropies for funding seeks to constrain vending to improve traffic flows rather than work with it as the major source of employment and sustenance (Bloomberg Philanthropies 2015; Government of India n.d.). Why don’t we plan cities, especially in the Global South, with the assumption that there will be hundreds of thousands of street vendors, who will be necessary to feed the city?

**Street Vending Is Here to Stay**

Street vendors bring life to dull streets, yet urban planners “often describe street vending as a manifestation of both poverty and underdevelopment, so that its disappearance is viewed as progress toward the brave new developed world of universal prosperity” (Bromley 2000; Castells 1983). That is the developmentalist delusion. Subtle work is coming from scholars working in cities such as Mumbai, Ho Chi Minh City, and Cochabamba who share a new normative realism deployed against that developmentalist delusion. They argue that street vendors are everywhere, so we need to focus on the best ways to record their presence, describe their function and role, and theoretically explain their persistence. These scholars sidestep the questions typically asked about whether street vending flourishes because it is state policy or because it exceeds the capacity of the state to provide livelihoods and govern urban spaces.

Annette Miae Kim’s (2015) demographic and topographic maps of Ho Chi Minh City, for instance, are overlaid with desire paths of everyday unplanned use. What she finds exemplary in the developing world is its rich, milling, sensuous public life that has been lost with development and automobility in the North. She also suggests, interestingly, that framing access to the city as a right may in fact be too limiting to account for the population growth that exceeds public service provision. Trade-offs and compromises are required rather than absolute rights of either property or mobility or livelihood.

Daniel M. Goldstein’s Owners of the Sidewalk (2016), a study of street vending in Cochabamba, and Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria’s The Slow Boil (2016) on Mumbai confirm Miae Kim’s interviews showing that local police often help vendors skirt the law so that they can continue to vend and that property abutters often provide free water and electricity to street vendors and store their goods. If urban informality preceded this conjuncture of neoliberalism, Anjaria sharply asks, can neoliberalism be made to stick as a causal argument? He insists that what really needs explaining is why street vending persists in spite of all the ambitious and repeated attempts at clearing the streets.

What ensures livelihoods and liveliness in Mumbai, Cochabamba, and Ho Chi Minh City are mixed-use sidewalks, negotiated between different kinds of owners and purveyors of properties, between usufructuary and property claims. Instead of the straitjacket of developed cities, with their massive infrastructural costs and unsustainable consumption patterns, we might benefit from inquiring into the conditions of the survival and efflorescence of the cities of the Global South with their frugal per-capita ecological and infrastructural imprint and visible environmental costs (Gouverneur 2015). Nothing is hidden or whisked away in these cities of the South. In those contexts, street vending is a symptom of the quiet encroachment of the ordinary under conditions of precarity.
Good Food for Better Livelihoods?

Street foods have become quite attractive for culinary enthusiasts lately. That is partly due to democratization of taste and partly because of the increasingly competitive omnivorouss of gastronomes, who acquire cultural capital by showing fluency in consuming local food globally. Lonely Planet now has both a web-based and print-based guidebook called The World’s Best Street Food (March 2016). The height of haute cuisine chefs’ interest in this subject is marked by the Culinary Institute of America’s Street Foods tome (Von Bargen 2016; Weisberg 2018). Their popularity also has something to do with the materiality of street foods and their capacity for visual representation on Instagram and Pinterest: street foods make beautiful pictures. Compared to domestic cookery, street foods tend to be visually attractive; that is, they tend to stand up compared to peasant cuisines, with their stewed yellows and browns, because they are often raw foods that retain their color (fruits and vegetables, such as mangoes, coconuts, corn, and peanuts, or ceviches); fried and sweet foods, such as empanadas, tostadas, samosas, falafel, tacos; baked goods, such as tarte flambés, pizzas, and sweetened breads; or treated meats such as sausages and hot dogs. They are all portable, visually attractive, rare foods of the poor that stand out visually. They are often crispy, crunchy, spicy, sour, sweet, and typically eaten in small bites.

The recently insurgent power of food as an object of gustatory and aesthetic interest has not gone unnoticed by advocacy groups for street vendors in New York and New Delhi, who were initially suspicious of gastronomic interest. For instance, the Street Vendor Project, founded by Sean Basinski in 2001, was mostly indifferent to the nature and quality of the food served by its vendors until hosting the Vendy Awards for the first time in 2005. Since then Basinski has been eager to cultivate the attention garnered by good food for the benefit of the livelihoods of the vendors and in seeking changes in the law.

Similarly, the NASVI leadership is also working with gastronomic interest. They have hosted an annual street food festival since 2008 to draw attention to the relationship between livelihood, law, hygiene, and good taste. So the question of good food cannot be ignored as a possible cultural resource for improving the lives of the urban poor and reforming the legal framework for trade on the streets. The street food festival I attended in Delhi, January 2018, had about 170 stalls and hosted over five hundred vendors, serving foods from across urban India, with over sixty-thousand mostly young professionals and student visitors, who came to eat and listen to celebrity chef Sanjeev Kapoor. Many street food vendors earned five hundred times more than their regular income during the three-day festival. Indian states are replicating the model in their capital cities, and the various ministries of tourism now invite NASVI to their programs. The work of advocacy groups for informal worker rights in Delhi provides some interesting examples of how good food and a beautiful city can be aligned to improve vendor livelihoods.15

Legal Innovation in Southern Cities

Few of these initiatives protecting the livelihood of the urban poor could have been consolidated without a major legal innovation in Indian jurisprudence that emerged since the late 1970s. That was done by expanding access and lowering the demand for standing via public interest litigation (PIL) (see Chandra 2018; Gauri 2009; Holladay 2012). Nandita Haksar (2018) highlights the right to food campaign, which led to the distribution of cooked meals in schools following a Supreme Court order in April 2004, the passing of the National Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in August 2005, and the passing of the National Food Security Act of 2013. Gautam Bhan (2016) shows, in contrast, how by the twenty-first century, especially in the domains of slum clearance, environmental protection, and evictions, the court’s more restrictive class character may have come fully into view. The crucial question is whether an opening, such as the expansion of standing and shortcuts to access to the courts by the poor—not just as individuals but as collective groups, as prisoners, bonded laborers, women, slum dwellers, and as street vendors—could be used to secure their rights collectively in law and in the space of the built environment? Based on the Delhi experience the answer is a qualified yes, especially in the domain of the right to vendor livelihood. The postliberal, postcolonial legal order may in fact be more flexible than the standard liberal architecture of individual rights and individualized standing as enshrined in American law we face in New York City.17

In Closing

To shift from the dour and pessimistic mood of his previous work on Neoliberalism (2007), David Harvey had to leave behind Lefebvre’s imagined Paris of 1968 and travel South, to Porto Alegre, Brazil, where he found the strange collision between neoliberalism and democratization (2012: xii). The case of the Warwick Junction street vendors in Durban, South Africa, is a particularly apt instance of collective action in such a postliberal world.18 It is a compelling story of about how eight thousand street vendors (many of them women) forced
their way into a collaborative urban planning process. “An exhilarating proof of how poor people, in sensitive collaboration with urban planners, can enliven a city centre,” as Keith Hart, the original theorist of informality, put it (in Skinner 2009: 101). Much of the early organizing work in Warwick Junction was done by the Self Employed Women’s Union (SEWU), which was launched in Durban in 1994, modeled after the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, an excellent example of South-to-South modeling and collaboration. SEWU was successful in securing agreement with the Durban city council to install water supplies and temporary toilet facilities for the vendors. We have a similar example in Delhi from SEWA’s work at the Ladies Market (Sankrit 2015). That opening in Durban into collaborative and participatory planning was threatened by a proposed lease of the site to a private company. That plan was rescinded in 2011 as a result of collective pressure and public interest litigation by the Legal Resources Centre.19 Academics wrote to newspapers, opposing the plan for the private mall.20 Two former city workers resigned and formed AeT (Asiye eTafuleni) in 2008 to launch the Inclusive Cities Project.21 This class-collaborative agitation and planning transformed the city, changing the potential toward a new kind of city beautiful that accounts for the choices and the needs of the poor.22

Harvey (2012: xiii) notes that the right to the city does not arise from intellectual fads and fascinations but “from the streets, out from the neighborhoods, as a cry for help and sustenance by the oppressed peoples in desperate times. How, then, do academics and intellectuals (both organic and traditional kinds, as Gramsci would put it) respond to that cry and that demand?” That is our question and we hope to respond in ways that are useful to the people who are generating new, inclusive, postliberal visions of the city. In Harvey’s words, “the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of life we desire, what aesthetic value we hold” (2012: 4). It may not be necessary to insist on the gap between what is good to eat and what is good for people, especially poor people.

**FIGURE 8: Fish.**

PHOTOGRAPH BY RENDEZVOUS WITH RASHMI. IMAGE APPEARS COURTESY OF KRISHNENDU RAY © 2019
In closing, it is worth spending a couple of minutes on clarifying a potential theoretical relationship between sustainability, aesthetic beauty, and social justice, because the point is routinely missed. The beauty of an object, such as a street food or a produce, lies in the appreciation of the skill necessary to produce it, the collaboration necessary to develop that proficiency in bodies, in consort with nature. It underlines the cooperation necessary to appreciate good food in a relational aesthetic, the balancing of mind and body, reason and emotion, aroma and texture, pleasure and care, between the individual and the community. Good food, especially street food, can remind us of justice, connecting the needs of those who have to the needs of those who have-not (Scarry 2001). Food can connect the sovereign necessity of being good and the unselving (in Iris Murdoch’s felicitous phrasing [1997]) necessary to appreciate something beautiful, not to own or possess it, as typically argued for in a consumer society, but to share it. What we need is the radical acknowledgment of the plurality, the vernacularity, the multiplicity of good food and good taste, where the street food of that local market in South Delhi with which I opened this talk, becomes an exemplar of local affinity and enjoyment, pressing us to social justice.23

NOTES

1. This market is one of over hundreds of markets in Delhi (some estimate over 550 of these). I have initiated work with Shalini Sinha, who works with an organization called Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).
4. It is estimated that there are anywhere between 100,000 to 500,000 street vendors in Delhi, while the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) officially recognizes about 25,000 vendors and 268 weekly markets.
5. “For over a decade now, Walmart had been trying to expand its presence in the lucrative Indian retail industry, which is expected to reach 11.25 trillion by 2019. The Flipkart acquisition has given Walmart’s retail fabric and finally get a piece of its growing retail market” (Khatri 2018).
6. Complicated trade-offs have to be worked out as illustrated in the case of the Berlin Thaipark.
7. To put another wrinkle in that discussion, it is estimated that about 3 trillion dollars of the U.S. economy goes unreported, mostly by the super-rich, which questions the presumption that informality is a marginal thing (cited in Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014: 6).
8. According to Claude Markovits (2008) these peddlers may add up to a quarter million merchants and financiers operating outside the subcontinent, mostly in the Indian Ocean world, between 1870 and 1950. Caroline Adams (1987) provides us with an analogous handful of Bengali pioneers in UK.
9. Today malls are threatening to replace the hawker centers as incomes are rising, the hawking population is aging out, and hawking is becoming a less remunerative occupation (Cheung 2013; Tan 2017; Tarulevicz 2018). The 2017 Hawker Center 3.0 Committee Report seeks to transform the beleaguered hawker as the heroic entrepreneur this time around, having failed to kill him off the first time around (Ministry of Environment and Water Resources, Singapore 2017).
10. “The Committee [of Public Health] was also influential in the citywide cleanup effort in preparation for the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia declared April 1939 ‘dress up paint up’ month, and launched a broad beautification effort which included removal of litter, dog waste, and even ‘beggars, vagrants and peddlers’” (Peabody 2019).
11. The Lucknow plan, for instance, notes the following objectives: SG1: To reduce traffic congestion, travel time, and road accidents; SG2: To encourage walkability and cyclability; SG3: To provide technology-enabled smart solutions to encourage public transportation; SG4: To reduce on-street parking; SG5: To provide seamless last-mile connectivity. G1: CLEAN – SWACHH LUCKNOW SG1: To introduce effective solid waste management solutions; SG2: To ensure proper treatment and disposal of sewage generated; SG3: To eradicate open defecation… etc. There is almost nothing in these plans that either incorporates the services provided by street vendors, or identifies the amenities they would require, such as a space between cars and pedestrians, a source of potable water, and toilets, in the imagined future of the city.
17. The Indian case is similar to the South African case, where in spite of a constitutional right to food, there is no comprehensive food security policy in place (see Battersby, Marshak, and Mugабhisa 2017).
18. A 1997 census found “9,521 street traders in the Durban Area, over 10,000 of whom were operating in the inner-city. Within the inner-city, 4,063 were located in and around the Warwick Triangle Area. The census registered that the majority of traders—59.3%—were women and nearly one in every two reported selling food” (Skinner 2009: 102).
22. What Kandice Chuh (2019) characterizes as the necessity of “illiberal humanism” at the demise of universal “Man.” I in fact think postilliberal humanism is a better term for what she is seeking to do in that book, which is to extend liberalization to cover historically subaltern human subjects.

REFERENCES


