

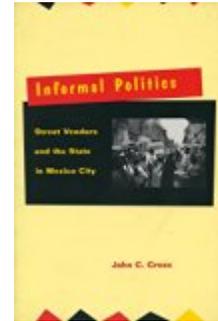
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John C. Cross. *Informal Politics: Street Vendors and the State in Mexico City*. Stanford, Cal: Stanford University Press, 1998. x + 272 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-3060-0.

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Street Vendors as Political Actors

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The author is right to emphasize that he is filling a void in the literature on the informal sector by focusing on how street vendors have influenced state policy. Cross's study answers three interrelated questions: How is it possible for street vendors, generally regarded as politically marginal, to influence state action? Why is the state not willing to enforce formal regulations and instead enters into negotiations over the application of the law? Why has the informal sector continued to grow and what are the possibilities for the future? Cross's methodology (which included conducting ethnographic fieldwork among street vendors, administering a questionnaire, interviewing government officials, and accompanying low-level government officials on inspections) is especially suited for understanding the conflicts between formal state policy and on-the-ground state action as well as the processes by which street vendors negotiate for space and access to markets. This is an excellent book not only for the richness of its analysis but also because of the questions it raises.

In the first chapter, "Organizing the Poor: Informal Economic Actors and the State," Cross ably reviews the literature on the informal sector showing how most authors have not taken into account the specifics of state action and organizing among members of the informal sector. Indeed, most writing on the informal sector—which encompasses "semi-legal" economic activities such as street vending, covert sweatshops, and micro-enterprises

that are not regulated—focuses on its articulation with the formal sector. Cross discusses the ways in which informal firms evade regulatory control and how this creates a minimalist dilemma, since such firms "cannot grow without attracting attention and raising their costs" (p. 38). Organizing among members of the informal sector thus emerges out of economic interests since such actors "attempt to manipulate the enforcement system and thus reduce the costs of informality (particularly the cost of harassment) while approximating some of the benefits of formality (such as comparative stability)" (p. 39).

In the second chapter, "State Integration and 'Informal' Social Movements," Cross argues that the state has not been able to take decisive action against street vendors because of low state integration. Thus, state officials can better serve their interests by gaining the support of street vendor organizations rather than applying laws aimed at limiting street vending. Cross rightly argues that organizing, including marches, strikes, and protests, is often aimed against the implementation of state policy while in support of policy makers. For Cross, then, the two major issues become; a) how to explain the historical moments when the Mexican state has taken action against street vendors and, b) how street vendor organizations have balanced their opposition to policy with strategic support of government officials.

Before developing these arguments, Cross provides informative chapters on the Mexican state and the role of street vending in the Mexican economy. In the third

chapter, “The Mexican State: Cliques and Competition,” Cross nicely describes the workings of the Mexican state in terms of powerful *camarillas* or cliques and elaborates on the notion of low state integration. In the fourth, “The Commercial Role of Street Vending: Problems and Practices,” Cross argues that street vendors see their job as a profession that often pays much more than the minimum wage. Cross also shows that even though street vending plays an important role in the economy, calls are often made by government officials and formal sector interests to eliminate street vending, especially around the downtown historical district. Street vending is often criticized because of evasion of taxes, traffic flow, and the state’s general lack of control over the sector.

In chapter five, “Street Vendors and the State: Co-optation, Competition, and Resistance,” the author gives an overview of street vending organizations and provides four case examples of how these organizations have resisted relocation. Cross further develops his argument that state bureaucrats and political middlemen are better served by gaining the support of street vendor organizations that provide both political and monetary support to their patrons within government.

In the next two chapters, Cross discusses the two historical moments during which the state acted against street vending, during Uruchurtu’s reign as mayor (regente), 1952-1966, and Camacho Solis’s, 1988-1993. In the sixth chapter, “The Legacy of Uruchurtu: Repression and Renewal,” Cross describes how the “Regent of Iron,” well-known for his heavy hand against urban squatters and street vendors, was able to maintain a policy of repressing street vending. Cross also emphasizes that it was these very policies that led to organizing among street vendors and the expansion of this sector in the 1970s. In chapter seven, “The Historical Center: Repression and Resistance,” Cross describes Camacho Solis’s attempt to move street vendors into “plazas” where they would have legal recognition and ownership of a market stall. This attempt to remove vendors from the downtown Historical Center was, according to Cross, a farce because it traded short-term success for a long-term solution. Because of the poor location of the plazas, the disadvantage of being legally recognized (i.e., subject to fees and taxes), and the cost of purchasing a stall, many vendors returned to the street and government banks were left holding millions of dollars in bad debt as vendors defaulted on their payments for stalls in the plazas.

In the last chapter, “Conclusion: The Political Economy of Informality,” Cross reiterates his goal of explor-

ing the social-political processes that have made street vending possible. This includes discussion of the relationship between opposition parties and street vendors as well as the political economy of street vending. While I laud Cross’s project, I would have found it engaging to hear more about Cross’s views on the “relative merits of street vending” and possible policy options. At the very end, Cross opens up by arguing that we, as researchers, have to change our notions of political organizing—from disinterested leaders and independent democratic movements to creating interest structures that give the poor the ability to negotiate their own access to power. He also begins to argue for the promise of the informal sector in terms of its help in redistributing wealth, providing opportunity, and negotiating power. The author suggests that regulations must be written with the involvement of street vendor organizations. I found Cross’s arguments to be worthy of greater attention. By introducing them at the very end of the book, Cross does not leave himself room to develop them more fully. By including these views at the start of the book, Cross could have developed these points, without taking away from the power of his analysis of social processes, in a way that would have made his book more exciting and perhaps controversial.

Cross is right to emphasize how organizing emerges out of economic interest. While Cross’s analysis is on the mark, there are two puzzling aspects to his discussion. First, he avoids discussion of gender relations in the informal economy. Cross does not cite important work done, for example, by Benería and Roldan on women in the informal sector in Mexico City (Lourdes Benería and Martha Roldan, *The Crossroads of Class and Gender: Industrial Homework, Subcontracting, and Household Dynamics in Mexico City*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). He dismisses Lourdes Arizpe’s study of Mazahua women working as maids and street vendors, because she overly emphasizes the marginality of these workers (p. 24). Second, while Cross refers to actors in the informal sector as a whole, he is clearly referring to street vendors. There are huge differences in the situations of women (and men) working in informal sweatshops, as maids, and/or as organized street vendors. The gender dynamics behind how economic interests are structured, and the ways in which certain economic activities become “gendered,” is a question that would have complicated Cross’s discussion of the informal sector. Indeed, by using the “firm” as the unit of analysis, Cross overlooks the role that gender and household dynamics play in defining economic interest and possible conflicts

of interest between employees and employers in informal firms.

As a description and analysis of the application of state policy and organizing among street vendors, this book is a needed addition to the literature on the informal sector. The book, while carefully limiting its claims to the informal sector in Mexico City, should be of interest to scholars interested in urban dynamics in other parts of

the world. Indeed, much more attention is needed to the political and organizational dynamics of workers in the informal sector.

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