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Abstract

The structurally uneven nature of capitalist development has led to extremely heterogeneous patterns of social and political group formation in distinct regions of the world economy. In Latin America the vast size of the informal economy has demonstrated the fallacies associated with the adoption of political models and legislation taken from “advanced” capitalist societies and implemented in socio-political contexts that are vastly different (de Soto 1989, 2000; Portes 1994). Such a situation, apart from attesting to the failures of this politico-economic program, also means that trade unions and worker movements in general need to theorise on new strategies for both organising this mass of informal workers as well as restructuring their organisations to accommodate their needs and, at times, their “non-class-based” worker identities (Oxhorn 1994).

In the region, alongside the neoliberal turn there has been a significant move towards political decentralisation and new Constitutionalism, as a means of restructuring the State and reinvigorating the terrain of citizenship. These developments have led to the reconfiguration of state-societal relationships and a re-scaling of political levels, creating new arenas of political participation for previously marginalised social groups and also intensifying, in many cases, class tensions regarding political themes and decision-making processes. Such political transformations can be well illustrated taken alongside the economic impacts of neoliberalism, particularly concerning the labour market and the large-scale “de-proletarianisation” (Munck 2004) of workers, leading to an “invasion” of city streets as workers fight for the right of economic survival as “informal” street vendors.

This paper takes the case of Colombia, South America, to illustrate the way in which the State-impelled macro-level deterioration of the formal labour market and, thereafter, of working conditions has brought about new struggles on the local level, as street workers fight to protect their fundamental right to work in the face of local administrations which have become structured within the competitive paradigm of “beautifying” their cities as a means of attracting transnational financial and productive investment as well as creating a new niche of tourism, based on European-style urban planning projects and the “recapturing” of public space as a Constitutionally-grounded collective good. Such a struggle which has centred on two seemingly contradictory rights (the right to dignified work against the right to public space) is also implicitly tied to conceptions of citizenship and community that are detached from the local socio-political realities. While the “formal” and institutional trade union movement has been slow to react to such avenues for political contestation, street vendor organisations in the two major cities of Bogotá and Medellín have been earnest and energetic in the forms with which they have confronted what they see as a threat to their livelihoods.

Adopting what some critical geography scholars have termed “scale jumping” (Brenner 2002; Jessop 2002, 2006), many street vendors and their associational leaders have managed to advance their concrete interests via contesting local politics in the national Constitutional Court, demonstrating that at times macro-political transformations that have the general goal of disenfranchising workers of their right to protest can also, inadvertently, open up new spaces of contestation. The paper will outline the manifestations of this debate, examining the changing jurisdictional and political responsibilities that have appeared after decentralisation and the inauguration of the Political Constitution of 1991, and the way in which they have impacted on the street vendor population and working activities/conditions of the country’s two major cities.

Methodology

For the empirical part of the paper, the information obtained is derived from three complementary methodologies/techniques:

1. Analysis of the legal and Constitutional amendments post-1989 and their impacts on street trading in Bogotá and Medellín (Colombia), as well as analysing previous studies of this phenomenon and the data measuring the extent of informal street trading and its evolution in both cities;

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2. Participant observation of street vending in Bogotá and Medellín (February-October 2008);
3. Large-scale street vendor survey (in Medellín) and open-ended interviews of street traders (in both cities), local government officials and trade unionists (at the local and national level).