Since Vietnam’s doi moi (“Renovation”) reforms of 1986, the nation’s nominally communist political economy now permits a domestic free market, private ownership, and participation in international free trade. Some epiphenomena of doi moi—urbanization, tourism, and the burgeoning informal economy—were brought into view this summer during a state campaign to rationalize urban space by eliminating street vending from several sectors of Hanoi. As Regina Austin points out in her discussion of African American street vendors in Philadelphia: “Cities have a long history of trying to drive vendors from the streets or to restrict their access” (Austin 1994, p. 2121). Contests over informal trade in the public sphere are not new, globally or in Hanoi, but each struggle is uniquely shaped by local history, political economic forces, and ideological contests. In this brief discussion, I inquire what is at stake materially and symbolically in the Hanoi government’s ban on street vending.

The informal economy in Hanoi is heavily staffed, energetic, and ubiquitous. In the Old Quarter, women with shoulder poles carry meat, fish, eggs, bread, vegetables, bananas, mangoes, fresh coconuts, flowers, and plastic bags of sliced pineapple all over town; tourists sometimes borrow the vendor’s baskets and conical hat to pose for a photograph. From early morning to midnight, vendors maneuver bicycles, carts, and wagons stacked with merchandise through traffic. Vending is highly specialized and the goods are diverse: baskets, feather dusters, lottery tickets, incense, haircuts, chewing gum, and motorbike taxis; for tourists, postcards, purses, and photocopy editions of Bao Ninh’s The Sorrow of War and Graham Greene’s The Quiet American are on offer. In July 2008, citing an imperative to “beautify the city,” Hanoi’s city government announced a partial ban on street vendors and sidewalk-based commerce. Authorities generated a list of 62 streets—commercial
arteries and streets bordering tourist destinations—where street vending and the operation of sidewalk-based businesses would be forbidden.

Street vending represents a small but highly visible part of Hanoi’s economy. Census data collected in 2006 indicate that some 5,600 mobile fruit and vegetable vendors operate in Hanoi, 90% of whom travel into the city from neighboring rural provinces to vend. Their numbers indicate the size of the gap between earning potential in rural and urban spaces. Street vending—a time-consuming, physically demanding occupation—helps poor and rural families to assemble a living wage. In a report by the Department for International Development (DFID) program “Making Markets Work Better for the Poor,” a typical Hanoian vendor said: “My family has a small area for agricultural production. Earnings from that are quite low and insufficient for the family expenditures. I started to become involved in street vending work in the spare time during cultivation and after harvest. Street vending is the means to help us make ends meet.” (M4P 2008).

As a form of small-scale populist capitalism, street vending is cited approvingly by pro-market sources like the DFID and the Asian Development Bank, who point out that street vendors embody capitalist “self-help” and also serve as a lifeline for poor and working people. In this vein, Vietnamese street vending is figured as a form of “microbusiness” and, as such, a subject of study for economists, business and management researchers, and contributors to journals like Vietnam Investment Review. These reports portray the uneducated, rural, and feminized vendor workforce not as the struggling victims of globalization and market reform, but as the local representatives of grassroots economic development. Participators in “an important source of livelihoods,” street vendors are understood to create “a pro-poor distribution chain for produce grown in Hanoi’s peri-urban outskirts” (Gorman 2008). Authors from the “development” paradigm interpret street vending as evidence that Vietnam’s economy is trending energetically upwards (Ferguson 1994).

However, this gloss on the significance of street vending optimistically interprets their activities as indicators of a kind of inborn entrepreneurship, and obscures the enormous pressures on rural migrants to the city. As Saskia Sassen suggests in her theorization of the global rise of urban informal economies:

The specific mediating processes that promote informalization of work are: (1) increased earnings inequality, and the concomitant restructuring of consumption in high-income and very-low-income strata; and (2) the inability of providers of many of the goods and services that are part of the new consumption to compete for necessary resources in urban contexts, where leading sectors have sharply bid up the prices of commercial space, labor, auxiliary services, and other factors of production (Sassen 1994, p. 2290).

Reading the significance of Hanoi’s informal economy along these lines clearly implicates Vietnam’s doi moi reforms, which have accelerated national economic growth impressively while increasing the gaps between classes. Though the reforms have been lauded as “pro-poor,” numerous assessments of doi moi’s impact have commented on their contribution to an increasingly stratified society. Arguing emphatically against the argument for informal workers’ entrepreneurial ingenuity,
Sassen states: “The informal economy in global cities is becoming a ‘spirit’ of the new millennium, even in the richest such as New York. (...) The new informality in the Northern big cities, and now also in the South, isn’t an invention of the poor to survive but a substantial characteristic of advanced capitalism.” (Sassen 2004) The demand for food made on the spot is also an indication of the pressures on laboring people to intensify the pace of work and to extend the duration of the working day. The informal sector assumes an increasingly important share of Hanoi’s reproductive labor: convenient, inexpensive meals enable migrant workers and commuters to eat during an extended work shift, and to go without the long afternoon break that is customarily afforded to office workers.

Vending makes the Vietnamese authorities uncomfortable, though not for these reasons. Street vending is associated with premodern, undisciplined urban commercial patterns, and may also prompt category confusion by bringing peasant traders into urban spaces. Further, street vendors are effectively untaxable—though since the announcement of the ban, vendors in Hanoi have been subject to heavy fines ($1.50–$5.00 US); police also regularly confiscate merchandise. It seems that street vendors may also be a convenient scapegoat for public health concerns: during an outbreak of cholera in Hanoi, health officials cited street food and roadside restaurants as the principal sources of contagion, though other sources suggested that it was Hanoi’s antiquated sewer system and the lack of water treatment facilities that were to blame.

The state’s present-day anxiety about the corrupting influence of informal trade expresses a logic of foreigner-friendly urban rationalization. An official from the Hanoi Trade Management Division stated in summer 2008, the ban on vending was instituted in order to “beautify the city,” as well as to “improve urban sanitation, food hygiene, and ... congestion.” Nguyen The Thao, the mayor of Hanoi, qualified street vending as “a characteristic of underdevelopment,” and made no effort to conceal the legislation’s intended beneficiaries when he stated to press that “Foreign tourists will be happier and appreciate our management.” (AFP 2008).

Curiously, the recent ban on street trading is at cross purposes with the desires of many tourists themselves, who worry that the picturesque quality of Hanoi’s streets will be lost if vendors are excluded. In a 2006 interview, a French agricultural economist remarked that: “For many people, both Vietnamese and foreigners, the street vendors add to the beauty of the city, because it is so nice to see women in conical hats on their bikes and motorbikes, and very colorful products, vegetables, and flowers. It is quite biased that the Vietnamese administration (...) says they are harmful to the beauty of the city” (Steinglass 2006).

Foreign visitors appreciate street vending because it appears “traditional” and nostalgic, incorrectly imagining it has always thrived in Hanoi. But prior to doi moi, street vending was at best semilegal, and traders were subject to moral sanctions. In the anti-Communist novel Paradise of the Blind, Party members term the protagonist’s street-vendor mother a “parasite” (Hung 2002, p. 50). A historical lack of sympathy for street vending is audible in the mayor’s response to concerns that Hanoi’s urban quintessence may disappear with the dispersal of vendors: Thao has stated that “tradition can be kept by filming and photographing” (AFP 2008). If street vending is, for the middle classes, an anachronism and a symbol of Vietnam’s
uneven development, the real, live vendor may—the mayor seems to suggest—be replaced by her image.

However, the aesthetic appeal of vendors is not solely visual: the consumption of street fare is literal as well as symbolic. Local and tourist opinions judge Vietnamese street food as uniquely delectable; travel writers fetishize it as a locus not only of gustatory pleasure, but of authenticity and exoticism. Between the onset of “fast food” and the incursion of supermarkets in urban Vietnam, and the Hanoi government’s campaign against street vendors, international “foodies” are worrying online that Vietnamese street food will become denatured (Steinglass 2006). The author of the “Viet World Kitchen” weblog expressed the fear that the street vendors of Vietnam might be transferred into “mall-like hawker centers” like their counterparts in Singapore (Nguyen 2008). In the food blog “Serious Eats,” a contributor mused, “Whenever street eating is in trouble, a part of every food lover dies. We hope Hanoi doesn’t lose too much culinary soul” (Zimmer 2008). To note that these remarks express the prerogative of the cosmopolitan consumer is relatively straightforward; perhaps more interesting is the way that street food has become, for its foreign appreciators, an apparently natural vehicle for both authentic Vietnamese “tradition” and Western-style entrepreneurship and “development.”

The negative image of “soulful” Vietnamese street food is, according to food journalists, globalized “fast food” arriving in the wake of doi moi and free trade. Over the last ten years, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have welcomed the Malaysian chicken emporium Jollibee, the Korean hamburger chain Lotteria, and North America’s Pizza Hut. In Ho Chi Minh City’s Pham Ngú Lò district, a two-story Kentucky Fried Chicken looms on Le Lai Boulevard, overlooking a half-built New Brutalist edifice that is, as I was informed, a police station left unfinished for lack of funds.

Though “fast food” proliferates in urban Vietnam, the phrase does not signify speed or convenience by local standards: it only takes a minute to get a pho ga or bun bo as the cao (take-out) in a plastic bag from a soup stand set up on a corner, to purchase fruit from a woman strolling with heavy shoulder baskets, or to buy a pate sandwich or a rice confection from a traveling cart in the street. “Fast food” in Hanoi is a signifier of luxury and disposable income, bright lighting and permanent fixtures, and other material, environmental, and affective artifacts of foreign cosmopolitan capital. A schoolchild’s father interviewed in Viet Nam News—apparently one among many middle-class parents who capitulate to their child’s requests for fried chicken—said “My son loves fast-food restaurants because they are always splendid and beautifully decorated.” An eighth grader interviewed at KFC stated “All my friends come here. Those who don’t are thought out of date” (Viet Nam News 2008).

Conclusion

In the background of these struggles over street food and its significance are enormous transformations in Vietnam’s political economy. Street vending, as a particularly visible part of the informal sector, lies on the fault line between
contradictory impulses in a newly capitalist country with a fast-growing GDP. The Vietnamese state’s attempt to limit the geographic presence of street vendors is an attempt to reconcile the entrepreneurial energies of petty traders with the city’s desire to appear attractive and “modern” for foreign visitors. However, controlling the informal sector is apparently proving difficult, as vending appears to have been interrupted very little by the new regulations. If an informal economy is, as Sassen suggests, a design feature of capitalist cities, street vending cannot be eliminated, though its operators will be forced to assume more mobile forms to evade the repressive state apparatus. As a rice vendor named Hoa told journalists this summer, she planned to outrun the police when the ban went into effect (IRIN News 2008). The fastest food and the most flexible labor in Hanoi may no longer be found at KFC, but in the form of a street vendor with her produce running from the cops.

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References


