

Feeding the Fight: Organising Across Ethnic Boundaries Among Street Vendors in New York

Andrew Osborne

Sociology, Goldsmiths University

Student Ref: 33108790

September 26, 2022

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my partner Melanie Gilligan for all her support in this endeavour and without whom this inquiry would not be possible. I am also grateful to both my parents for their unfailing encouragement and likewise, thankful to my supervisors Alberto Toscano and Sara Farris for their patience, acuity and guidance throughout. Acknowledgments to Jacob Lesniewski, Sébastien Chauvin, Jose Rosales, Sam Menefee-Libey, Wendy Trevino, Jamie Woodcock and Paul Apostolidis, who each helped me sort the concepts contained in this dissertation. I also greatly appreciate the assistance of Danyal Kade Doyle Griffiths Dingani and Suzanne Adely for putting me in touch with the hard-working staff, organisers and vendor members of Street Vendor Project and in this regard, I would especially like to mention both Tirtho Dutta and Crystal Stella Becerril from whom I learned so much. Finally, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to New York's tenacious street vendors whose struggle is an inspiration to all. Vendor Power!

Abstract

This thesis explores how multiethnic organising is conducted at the New York-based worker centre Street Vendor Project (SVP) which for nearly two decades has organised across multiple ethnic boundaries among a highly diverse workforce. To date, US worker centres have successfully won rights for immigrant workers by organising in casual labor markets segmented by race, gender and ethnicity. Historically, these gains were mostly achieved through monoethnic organisation, an advocacy-led approach that leverages immigrant identity to win legislative reform, yet such approaches have been known to limit organisational capacity in multiethnic sectors and in response, this study seeks to evaluate the collective potential for multiethnic organising at SVP.

Accordingly, this inquiry asks two principal questions: (i) does multiethnic organising at SVP enhance political participation; and (ii) can such organising increase the collective power of the project's vendor members in their fight for recognition. Legislative informality and administrative harassment have until now disrupted SVP's ongoing efforts to build solidarity among the vendors, and while diversity at the project is a strength to be celebrated, it is also an organisational limit that needs to be overcome.

Since 1983, New York has operated a hard cap on the issuance of new vending licences, which in turn has created an illegal market for permits. As a result, reform of the permit system has been the most generalisable of legislative issues around which to engage the project's diverse membership. Over time, however, this appeal has underperformed in terms of sustaining participation and therefore, this inquiry attempts to contrast SVP's major campaign to Lift the Caps with a discrete subset of social reproduction issues specifically affecting Latina vendors, and whose primary concerns, until recently, were not considered to be directly vending-related. Yet by conducting intensive and emotional work within the newly formed Women's Committee, SVP has enabled this vulnerable section of the membership to address important social reproduction issues, building strong intersubjective commitments among the women, while also providing a solid participatory foundation that SVP can build upon.

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Introduction

This ethnographic study was conducted at Street Vendor Project (SVP), a New York worker centre where I volunteered as a researcher and intern organiser for a period of sixteen months between 2018-20. US immigrant worker centres are non-profit “community-based mediating institutions that provide support to low-wage workers” (Fine 2006, 2) and as a result, generally organise among immigrant workers from a single ethnic background, while politically leveraging ethnic identity to win legislative gains for their members (Milkman *et al.* 2010). By contrast, however, SVP attempts to simultaneously organise multiple ethnicities under one roof and in this regard, the project’s vendor members are predominantly people of colour and immigrant small businesses who due to New York’s “quality of life” crackdown have been denied licences by the city’s administrators and consequently, “struggle to make ends meet.”¹

Founded in 2002, SVP is based in the offices of the Urban Justice Centre (UJC) situated at 40 Rector Street, Lower Manhattan. While the project serves more than 2,000 vendor members, there are estimated overall to be around 20,000 street vendors in New York and as such, SVP attempts to connect with every class of vendor across all five boroughs of the city, serving both immigrant and native-born vendors alike.² It is this broad diversity, found among the membership, that subsequently provided me with a unique opportunity to study multiethnic organising within a single setting.

Since ethnicity at the project is defined in several contrasting ways, SVP’s *multiethnic* dimension needs further explanation. For everyday purposes, ethnicity at the project is chiefly

¹ The Street Vendor Project website, accessed here 16 May 2022: <http://streetvendor.org/>

² Basinski, S. & Sluzska, S., ‘Peddling Uphill: A Report on the Conditions of Street Vendors in New York City,’ Street Vendor Project (2006). Accessed here: <https://www.scribd.com/document/18948529/Peddling-Uphill>

defined by language-group, partly due to the project's reliance on translation services. The languages used most regularly at the project are therefore Arabic, Bengali, English, Mandarin and Spanish, each representing the largest ethnic contingents found among the membership. In addition, SVP publishes organising materials in a further ten languages, including: French, Turkish, Greek, Tibetan, Tamil, Korean, Wolof, Farsi, Russian and Afghani. Yet, beyond such language-based descriptors (e.g. 'Spanish-speaker' or 'Arabic-speaker') there are further subgroups designated by citizenship-status, class, race, indigeneity, disability and gender. Moreover, within the broader vending community there are a significant number of native-born vendors, including a portion who are US military veterans, many of whom are African Americans as well as other people of colour. As a result of this stratification, different groups of vendors have observably different commitments, and I will later describe how each section of the vending community relates to one another and how interaction between these different vendor groups affects participation at the project (see Section 3.3).

This heterogeneity thus reflects the overall diversity of New York's vending community, wherein ethnicity greatly determines which branch of the industry vendors initially enter into and ultimately, the degree of market access they are each able to achieve. To this end, the ethnic gradations found within the 'vending ladder' are not only occupational categories, but also cultural ones, further complicating the process of organising. Hence, responding to this diversity, my research proceeds along two intersecting lines, asking:

1. Does multiethnic organising at Street Vendor Project enhance political participation among the vendors?
2. Does such organising increase the collective power of SVP's vendor-members?

These two overlapping questions, however, require further elaboration in order produce a definition of terms meaningful to this inquiry and from here on, I will use the term *participation* to refer to the recruitment, retention and engagement of vendor members over time, since active

participation is crucial for any worker centre that hopes to achieve its permanent goals.

At present, most worker centres recruit by offering immediate legal redress for injustices encountered at work, yet to sustain engagement, they must also offer valuable strategic orientations that alleviate the collective conditions of their worker members. As the second part of my question therefore implies, sustained participation at any worker centre is reliant upon the capacity to build *collective power*, which in practical terms, means permanently altering the power balance between the membership and institutions that dominate them. Accordingly, developing solidarity among the membership is one of the principal goals of every worker centre if they wish to enforce any of the legislative gains they aspire to.

In recent decades, worker centres have clearly demonstrated the capacity to build meaningful political engagement among low-wage immigrant constituencies (Gordon 2005; Fine 2006; Milkman *et al.* 2010; Moody 2014) and typically, this engagement is secured through language-based legal assistance, offered to a single ethnic group working within a specific locale (see Section 1.4 for an up-to-date survey of worker centre strategies). As such, worker centres tend to initially recruit members on an individual basis, offering immediate relief from common workplace abuses such as wage theft and other discriminatory practices. The development of group cohesion among worker centre members, therefore, tends to rest on pre-existing cultural and linguistic ties, and it is by growing such capacities that worker centres have been able to make inroads within informal labour markets by making use of the affordances therein to “leverage individual interventions for collective benefit” (Lesniewski 2013, 11).

While the leveraging of immigrant identity for the purposes of engaging a target demographic is an efficient use of limited resources, according to some, *monoethnic* organising presents an obstacle to winning collective benefits for diverse groups of workers (see Milkman *et al.* 2010, Osuji; Narro 2005). In turn, this limitation calls into question the growth and sustainability of the worker centre movement, since overall, without the capacity to wield

decisive social power, it remains difficult for worker centres with marginal grassroots constituencies to affect bottom-up social change (Fine 2006; Jenkins 2002; Lesniewski & Canon 2016).

Since SVP's vendor members are mainly undocumented and cannot vote, they have little of the common political suasion available to fully enfranchised citizens, yet contrary to popular consensus, immigrant workers in the US are not entirely rightless and in subsequent chapters, I will provide examples of what it means for immigrants and other non-rights bearers to participate as *citizens in practice* (an advocacy-based approach that will from now on be referred to as "non-citizen citizenship" [Gordon 2005]). While over the short-term, the performance of non-citizen citizenship has certainly helped worker centres to make significant gains, this mode of civic engagement tends to rely on professional expertise, which in turn perpetuates the division of labour between expert legal staff and ordinary worker members. As a result, the overreliance of worker centres on advocacy-based techniques too often consigns their members to a passive symbolic role (Gordon 2005; Jenkins 2002).

Moreover, because monoethnic campaigns tend to be legislative in character, their gains are often difficult to enforce, especially if the membership are not sufficiently engaged (Jenkins 2002; Lesniewski 2013). To this end, Steve Jenkins (formerly of Make the Road [MRNY]) has criticised the advocacy campaign as a mainstay of worker centre organisational practice, judging such approaches to be concessionary, since rather than developing the collective agency of worker members, advocacy campaigns instead typically draw their "power from elites" (Jenkins 2002, 63) and as a result, teach worker members the wrong lessons about building sustained collective power among the working class.³

³ As Jacob Lesniewski summarises, expert-led advocacy efforts that solely rely on the leveraging of ethnic identity merely encourages worker members "to learn the language of elites" (Lesniewski 2013, 27).

This emphasis on advocacy is not simply the result of poor strategic choices, but instead the cumulative outcome of worker centres attempting to exploit salient features of the heavily racialised US labour market (Davis 1986; Maldonado 2009; Waldinger & Lichter 2003). In fact, many of the first worker centres were set-up in the 1970s by immigrant workers of colour, dissatisfied with the inadequate representation they received from majority-white nativist unions (see Moody 2014; Brenner, Brenner & Winslow et al. 2010). It was thus in response to these inclement conditions that dissenting immigrant workers often established their own autonomous institutions to prioritise ethnic-specific labour issues within their own enclave communities.

Due to this historical patterning, most worker centres therefore cater to a single ethnic group working within a distinct geographic locale and by convention, have tended to name themselves after: (a) the nationality of their members and (b) the location of the centre (Fine 2006). This signifies how both geography and ethnicity are two of the most important factors when attempting to win benefits for immigrant workers. Yet, as Jennifer Gordon explains in her exemplary account of the Workplace Project's (WPP) efforts to organise immigrant day labourers on Long Island, the project first sought to organise around location and ethnic identity, not because these two factors "are somehow the answer to the riddle of organising," but chiefly because many "occupations were filled almost entirely by Latino immigrants who changed jobs frequently [and thus] tended to look for work within the bounds of Long Island" (Gordon 2005, 283-4). This observation thus holds for most worker centres, inclined as they are to serve a bounded geographic locale rather than specific industries or sectors of work, and hence, as Janice Fine succinctly puts it: worker centres are "place-based rather than worksite-based" (Fine 2006, 13).

This emphasis on ethnicity and location has subsequently shaped the institutional form of worker centres, the content of their workshops and the crafting of their campaigns. The success of worker centres is therefore predominantly down to the recognition that worker

members “suffer under a double burden—as low-wage workers and as immigrants and/or people of colour” (7) and accordingly, in response to this “dual oppression,” most worker centres correctly advocate, educate and organise around strong ethnic and racial ties, since as Fine notes, “[e]thnicity, rather than occupation or industry, is the primary identity through which workers come into a relationship with centres” (13).

Despite the relative success of monoethnic worker centre strategies, however, organising around a single ethnicity still presents “a paradox for immigrant worker collective action in general,” since many worker centres must operate “across ethnicity in industries in which more than one ethnic group is employed” (4). As a result, monoethnic organising generates an inherent tension, particularly within multiethnic sectors of work (Milkman *et al.* 2010, Osuji; Narro 2005) such as New York’s heavily striated vending industry and consequently, my research into organising at SVP aims to examine how multiethnic solidarity might be further developed among the project’s vendor members for the collective benefit of all.

In Chapter 1, the literature review, I begin with a general description of worker centres and how they make use of the social relations between low-wage workers for the purposes of organising. This is then followed in Section 1.1 by a description of how worker centres engage in popular education based around the principles provided by Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy; a successful approach to building solidaristic commitments among oppressed people through the praxis of participatory consciousness-raising. Section 1.2 contains an account of the way in which worker centre campaigns leverage immigrant identity through the generalised practice of *non-citizen citizenship* (Milkman 2010; Gordon 2005; Shklar 1989), while also providing an account of how the presumption of pre-existing community among ethnic groups in the US, such as among Latinxs, can at times thwart political organising (Béltran 2010, Oboler 1995). Moreover, because rights-based advocacy campaigns tend to rely on professional legal staff, the resulting division of labour typically reduces engagement levels among worker members

and subsequently, in Section 1.3, I attempt to address this asymmetry by introducing Steve Jenkins' (2005) power-analysis of worker centres. Appropriately, Jenkins' polemic takes aim at the mainstay of worker centre activity, the advocacy campaign, which in his view, disempowers worker members, leaving engagement shallow. As a rejoinder to these criticisms, however, Jane McAlevey argues that the tension between advocacy and organising is not irresolvable, but instead requires the correct mix of professional expertise and community-based organising to enhance the active participation of ordinary members (Milkman *et al.* 2010; McAlevey). Consequently, this critical yet productive dialogue between Jenkins and McAlevey generates a set of practical concerns for my research which, hereafter, assists in determining what collective power might look like for SVP's vendor members. Yet since these early discussions, the worker centre movement has broadened its repertoire and in response, Section 1.4 examines innovations in worker centre organising, networking and partnering, developments which have in recent years, allowed the centres to be both more combative and activism-focused, thereby winning considerable gains in multiethnic sectors.

Taking into consideration the heterogeneity of New York's vending community, Section 1.5 describes how the fiscal crisis of the 1970's further disaggregated the city's working class along racial and ethnic lines (Phillips-Fein 2017; Moody 2007). This crisis would, however, only be resolved through market-oriented reforms, aimed at radically reorganising the local state for the purposes of profit maximisation; a novel paradigmatic shift towards the experimental mode of value formation that David Harvey (1990) calls "flexible accumulation." Enacted as class war from above, this significant metamorphosis would hereafter incentivise city administrators to explore novel regimes of spatial governance, whereby the subsequent securitisation of public space led to whole districts of the city being closed to vendors at the behest of powerful private interests.

To better describe the everyday implications of flexible accumulation, I next consider

Ryan Thomas Devlin's (2010) analysis of the complex, yet informally interpreted laws that govern street vending, the ambiguity of which, often leaves vendors vulnerable to discretionary harassment from the NYPD and other city officials. This uneven and arbitrary enforcement has subsequently pushed unlicensed Latina vendors towards the outer boroughs where policing is much less concentrated; a dynamic which has over time, created a highly gendered distribution of vendors across the city. The resulting spatial separation of vendors by gender and ethnicity is hence symptomatic of the way in which, under flexible accumulation, recomposed labour has become increasingly informal, entrepreneurial and "feminised" in character.

To provide a more comprehensive overview of the occupational re-gendering of street vending, Section 1.7 examines Kathleen Dunn's research into the "flexible vending family" and the mutual interdependence of Latina vendors working around Sunset Park, who have been able to organise themselves under the group umbrella of Red Hook Food Vendors (RHFV) (Graaf & Ha *et al.* 2015; Dunn). In Dunn's study, she explains how the multi-generational Latina family is at once a co-ethnic work unit; a method of coping under neoliberal austerity; and a potential foundation on which to build vendor solidarity. Dunn's insights consequently have utility for SVP since, as she suggests, the extended Latina family is an untapped and understudied resource for building group cohesion.

In Chapter 2, the methodology chapter, I focus on Marx's 1880 proposal for a workers' inquiry: a practical mode of investigation into the sociological conditions of the working class, the original purpose of which was to produce an exact form of knowledge that would assist workers in their own self-organisation. During the mid-20th Century, this mode of inquiry was applied to US factory struggles by Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) who sought to evaluate the prospects of class formation at the point-of-production and in turn, better assess the revolutionary capacities of the US working class overall. The effectiveness of this method was, however, undermined by the group's substitution of their own voices for those of workers, which

ultimately limited JFT's ability to decisively determine class composition during this crucial period. JFT's methodological shortcomings were, however, in turn critiqued by their erstwhile collaborator Cornelius Castoriadis, a philosopher and social theorist whose observations on working-class autonomy were also informed by Marx's inquiry. For Castoriadis, the prioritisation of the workers' standpoint is thus paramount whenever conducting ethnographic research since the self-organisation of workers in struggle (*'autogestion'*) has profound pedagogic implications for sociology itself.

Similarly, Italian sociologist Raniero Panzieri (1964) would also advance the study of class composition through the development of "co-research," a practice which combines both the fine-grained methods of US workplace sociology and macroscopic Marxist analysis. This approach, which intentionally sides with workers in struggle (i.e. those who suffer the most under capitalism), consequently runs at odds with traditional industrial sociology, which by and large sought to harmonise social relations and paper over the fundamental contradictions of class society. By contrast, Panzieri's mode of 'hot inquiry' aims to sharpen class antagonism through the application of ready-to-hand orientations that allow the social scientist to play an active role in the development of militant subjectivities.

Nevertheless, as Panzieri and his fellow autonomists imply, working class self-activity cannot simply be relegated to the factory and instead, involves a wider set of practices that socialise the conditions of the working class within the space of social reproduction. Subsequently, Section 2.4 assesses the organisational efforts of the Sojourner Truth Organisation (STO), a Midwest New Left group who retheorised the historical production of racial consensus in the US, which thereafter allowed whiteness to function as an ideological bar to multiracial solidarity among workers (Du Bois 2013; Staudenmaier 2010). STO's approach thus aligns well with Michael Burawoy's (1979) extended case method (ECM), an ethnographic technique well-suited to the practical conduct of workers' inquiry, in turn, providing a ready

framework for the analysis of institutional power relations wherever race and culture shape consensual norms.

Despite the suitability of these methods, Section 2.6 confronts their workerist assumptions, which to date, have largely been unable to account for the global expansion of surplus populations and the associated growth of informal urban labour markets. As a result, many of these prior methods presuppose struggle only at the point of production and consequently, have tended to overlook the problem of *proletarian differentiation* (Denning 2010; Rübner Hansen 2015). In essence, this categorial disjunction is generated, on the one hand, by the exploitation of workers through the wage relation and on the other, the expropriation of the informal sub-proletariat through generalised dispossession. In the US, this fissure between waged and unwaged populations has been historically expressed as a racially patterned divide between workplace and community struggles (Katznelson 1981) and accordingly, in the chapter's penultimate section, I respond to this cleavage by examining how it affects the prospects of organising among poor people within a community setting (Piven & Cloward 1979).

The so-called problem of proletarian differentiation therefore troubles prior methods of workers' inquiry, since such methods were chiefly intended as interventions at the point of production and in turn, some modification is required to fit them to the changed conditions of New York street vendors, who are predominantly wageless proletarians, earning a subsistence living within the space of social reproduction. As a result, Section 2.7 examines whether workers' inquiry remains a useful methodology when conducting ethnographic research within degraded and informal labour contexts, and how issues such as vulnerability, care and confidentiality obliged me to remodel my approach.

Chapter 3 describes the institutional aims of SVP and how the organisation endeavours to improve the working conditions of New York street vendors. It therefore includes an overview of the project's basic services; the roles of its staff and membership; and a review of the

organisation's internal process. This is then followed by an account of the professional and ethnic composition of vendors (as reported in *Peddling Uphill*, SVP's original survey of vendors [Basinski & Sluzska 2006]), while in addition, I provide an estimation of the overall size of the industry and a statistical breakdown of vendors by licence (including a description of New York's outdated permit system which greatly determines the so-called 'vending hierarchy').

Perhaps the greatest difficulty faced by vendors in New York is the discretionary harassment they receive from the NYPD and other city agencies, often resulting in the confiscation and destruction of their carts; itself a by-product of artificial permit scarcity. Beneath this mode of everyday dispossession is, however, the discrete vulnerability of women vendors who are regularly described as "working in the shadows." Because of their occupational invisibility, the gender-specific concerns of unlicensed Latina pushcart vendors were, until recently, greatly underappreciated at SVP. Hence, in Section 3.6, I examine the ethnic- and gender-specific concerns of this important sub-section of the membership, as highlighted by the SVP women's survey: a report that usefully provides up-to-date statistics on women vendors, situated as they are on the lowest rungs of the vending ladder (SVP 2019).

To better assess the prospects of organising among this highly vulnerable constituency, I next provide a brief account of the now defunct Queens-based organisation VAMOS Unidos, who had relative success in organising Latina vendors working in the outer boroughs (Milkman *et al.*, 2014; Dunn). Alongside this, Section 3.8 documents the well-publicised 2019 arrest of churros vendor Elsa by the NYC Transit Police. While only a local incident, news of Elsa's arrest resonated widely among the public, since it touched upon a series of urgent social reproduction issues that profoundly affect a great many New Yorkers, in turn leading to a series of city-wide protests that forced the New York City Council (NYCC) to reconsider vending reform.

With these sectional concerns in mind, Chapter 4 goes on to describe how, after a recent reappraisal of its internal process, SVP was able to improve deliberative decision-making

at the project. This review not only bolstered existing strategies, but established new discursive sub-forums, thereby allowing the vendor members to refine their demands around lesser-heard sectional concerns (such as the common experience of gender-based violence among Latina vendors). The implementation of these changes can thus be considered a turning point at the project, since when I arrived in 2019, engagement levels at SVP were flagging and as a result, many vendor members kept their participation shallow. It was consequently apparent to both staff and members that the project's principal campaign, Lift the Caps, which was originally crafted as a universal appeal to all vendors, was no longer serving as the spur to participation that it once did and in light of this, Section 4.0 examines how recent enhancements to the process secured participation at SVP, while at the same time, allowing staff to become more responsive to the needs of vendor members.

Following this, Section 4.1 reports on the culmination of the campaign to Lift the Caps, whereby in April 2019 the project's members rallied en masse at New York City Hall in support of the street vending reform bill, Intro 1116. Here I explain the importance of the proposed reforms and how the hearing was a unique opportunity for the project's vendor members to perform non-citizen citizenship while giving testimony in front of lawmakers. Furthermore, I provide a detailed account of the rhetorical strategies deployed by SVP's vendor members during the hearing, when attempting to dispute their adversaries in real-time.

This public airing of work-related grievances can, however, be contrasted with the discrete issues brought forth by the newly formed SVP Women's Committee. Accordingly, in Section 4.3, I present a pair of in-depth interviews with the organisers of the committee, who explain how trust-building exercises, conducted within the committee's confidential setting, have been crucial to shoring up engagement at the project. While at first, the ethnic- and gender-specific concerns of Latina vendor members did not appear to be immediately work-related, through one-on-one discussion, the women were eventually able to interrogate the "sum of their

lives,” providing them with a series of important perspectives on the dual aspect of their socially reproductive work (both inside and outside the home). This pre-organising work around the concerns of Latina vendor members, subsequently, did much to build ties among the women and in turn, their intensive self-inquiry prepared the ground for later consciousness-raising sessions. Taking these potentials into consideration, this chapter subsequently concludes with a description of how the various strands of the project’s internal process (i.e. advocacy, mobilisation and organisation) came together, when at the start of 2021, Intro 1116 was eventually passed by the NYCC.

In conclusion, Chapter 5 revisits the question of whether multiethnic organising at SVP enhances participation levels among the membership, while also evaluating what collective power for the vendors might look like in terms of building long-term engagement (something which is entirely necessary if SVP is to enforce its recent legislative gains over the long-term). Section 5.2, the findings section, thus analyses how SVP has been able to broaden inclusion, while deepening engagement through a series of complimentary measures and herein, I explain how these combined measures prioritise organising at the project, while at the same time, supporting SVP’s major campaigning goals. Hence, central to the renewal of SVP’s process has been two key innovations: (i) the establishment of the Women’s Committee; and (ii) the setting up of new chapters in the outer boroughs; both measures which seek to address the unique vulnerabilities of unlicensed mobile Latina vendors.

Yet, contrary to immediate appearances, I also argue that the sectional organisation of this specific ethnic sub-group is in no way an abandonment of SVP’s prior commitment to multiethnic organising, but instead, represents the re-prioritisation of base-building among those who are most vulnerable. As such, the project’s renewed focus on Latina pushcart vendors is proving fruitful, since not only does it utilise the ready affordances of the Latina flexible family, but it also updates the general occupational profile of street vending to better fit with the sector’s

informal and feminised character under 'flexible accumulation.' Moreover, this renewed emphasis on the organisation of women vendors has wider potential in terms of inspiring other ethnic groups at SVP and hence, points the way forward in terms of building solidaristic multiethnic capacities.

Finally, by way of conclusion, Section 5.3 explains how the trust-building work of the Women's Committee has helped Latina vendors overcome self-stigmatisation; an important prelude to the work of organising among poor people (see Freire 2000; Piven & Cloward 1977). The intensive self-inquiry of the Women's Committee thus accords well with Jane McAlevey's "whole worker" approach, which is sometimes referred to as deep organising; a technique which attempts overcome the one-sidedness of professional personifications by organising from the "outside in" (i.e. by first engaging workers in the communities in which they live). As a result, McAlevey's holistic method allows would-be organisers to break down the artificial divide between work and its outside, thereby making the whole worker approach contextually appropriate for organising within informal labour contexts.

As is often remarked, however, US labour elites have been slow to respond to recent changes in class composition, in part due to the under-theorisation of class overall (see Section 2.6) and considering this, I next critique the duality of the formal/informal labour schema, positing that, by overstating the divide between waged and unwaged proletarians, our sociological understanding of class is weakened. Instead, by way of alternative, I emphasise the altogether fragmentary nature of informal labour markets (Benanav 2018; Breman 1976; Bromley 1979), while simultaneously, foregrounding the revolutionary potential to be found within the self-reliance of the sub-proletariat. Nevertheless, while adequate class analysis within US labour-contexts remains fraught, under-theorisation is not the principal obstacle to class formation and accordingly, the more urgent task is to observe how the working class constitutes itself through the process of struggle (see Rick Fantasia [1989] who here draws a distinction

between the “class-in-itself” and the “class-for-it-self”).

Considering such determinations, my study thus concludes by reflecting on the recent achievements of US service sector employees, who made full use of structural affordances during the pandemic to unionise and win class gains (Winant 2021). Much as we see within SVP’s efforts to overcome occupational hierarchies within the vending industry, these “struggles about class” (Przeworski 1977) are a serious attempt by sections of the US proletariat to recompose itself and hence, just as SVP has successfully engaged its members through an unflinching interrogation of their own socially reproductive roles, deep organising grants both formal and informal workers the capacity to go beyond domestic and professional personifications and thereafter, begin the collective work of self-recognition (i.e. the recognition of each other as class protagonists and the source of their own collective power).

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.0 A General Description of Worker Centres

Worker centres are part of a range of US labour organisations that have grown steadily over the past three decades (Fine 2006), an expansion which has coincided with the decline of the highly bureaucratised US labour movement, which has struggled to keep pace with changes to the economy. As such, the advent of worker centres marks the re-emergence of working-class activity outside of traditional unions, leading some to suggest that they “might revive a moribund labour movement.”⁴ While this is perhaps an overly optimistic assessment, in recent decades worker centres have achieved demonstrable gains for participatory democracy through the development of new institutions of struggle.

Worker centres have accordingly responded to an evolving labour market in which employers contract with temp agencies and use flexible employment “to hold down wages, evade regulatory responsibility, and minimise paid employment hours” (Doussard 2013, 29). By addressing the proliferation of informal labour contexts and the patchwork regulatory frameworks therein, worker centres have been able to develop “heterogeneous localised responses to degraded work” (41). Worker centres therefore serve as multipurpose spaces that vary in their core mission and as a result, there is no single example of a worker centre that could be described as prototypical. That said, the centres do emulate each other’s successful strategies wherever replicable; a phenomenon that Ruth Milkman calls *mimetic isomorphism* (Milkman 2010) whereby they adapt each other’s borrowed strategies to suit local communities

⁴ Uetricht, M., ‘Big Business Aims to Crush Worker Centres,’ *In These Times* (2013): <https://inthesetimes.com/article/big-business-aims-to-crush-worker-centers>

and conditions. The grammar of worker centre organisation is therefore mutable, since as Marc Doussard remarks, there is currently “no institutionalised vocabulary [...] to chart employer practices, regulatory inflection points and market fissures to which these practices can be employed” (Doussard 2013, 32). In practice, this means that the efforts of worker centres, although innovative, are often reactive and defensive.

While worker centres are formally heterogeneous, they do typically provide a standard range of services that enables them to develop solidarity between different sections of the low-wage workforce, often, but not exclusively serving immigrant communities. Consequently, worker centres have had much success in “organising the unorganised” (Milkman 2013, 2) in sectors where traditional unions have had trouble penetrating. In Janice Fine’s initial survey, ‘Worker Centres: Organising on the Edge of the Dream,’ she notes that by 2006 around 139 centres served an estimated 20% of day labourers in the US (Fine 2006). To update this figure, in 2013 there were estimated to be around 200 centres, pointing to a continued growth of the phenomenon (Milkman, et al. 2014, 3). Typically, these associative spaces are geographically bounded and often situated in metropolitan areas where, in the main, they serve specific ethnic enclave communities. Moreover, while some centres operate independently, others are linked through hub-organisations such as the National Day Labourer Organising Network (NDLON).

More recently, however, some centres have been able to develop close ties with major unions or are in process of becoming unions themselves; most notably in the case of the National Taxi Workers’ Alliance (NTWA), a 20,000 strong New York worker centre which in 2013 successfully organised around the issue of debt and the taxi driver’s medallion. Meanwhile, other worker centres choose to maintain an autonomous distance from traditional labour organisations and only form alliances on a strategic basis, as and when it suits them. In addition, the relative autonomy of worker centres is further guaranteed through fiscal sponsorship, which they draw down from a complex network of philanthropic funders. Yet

problematically, these foundations often act as invisible stakeholders in the centres, making their own demands in terms of how resources ought to be spent and as a result, some worker centres have re-introduced dues to remain responsive to the needs of their worker members.

Demonstrating the ethnic and racial diversity of their respective memberships, by 2005 around 122 of the 139 recorded worker centres specifically served immigrant workers (Fine 2006). Breaking this down further, 40% of these centres served workers originating in Mexico and Central America; 18% served workers from South America; 15% from East Asia and the Caribbean; 8% from Africa; 3% from Europe; while the remaining 1% served workers from the rest of Asia (Moody 2014, 288). Putting this in terms of geographic location: 41% of US worker centres were at the time concentrated in the Northeast; 36% on the West Coast; 34% in the South; 17% in the East North Central; with the rest spread over the Midwest.⁵ This distribution of worker centres subsequently reflects how, in the late-70s, immigrant workers felt they were poorly represented by mainstream unions during industrial disputes (289-90) and in response, formed their own worker-led organisations. Meanwhile, throughout the 80s-90s, a fresh influx of immigrants led to a second wave of worker centre formation, which was then followed a third, particularly in industries where informal work is common. For an updated account of recent worker centre developments, see Section 1.4.

This diversity is itself redolent of the global expansion of informality (Breman & Van der Linden 2014; Benanav 2018; Chen & Carré *et al* 2020) and therefore, much like the fragmentary nature of informal labour markets, there is no standard unit of comparison for worker centres. Most centres do however carry out broadly similar functions, which Janice Fine (2006) breaks down into three key areas: (i) services; (ii) advocacy; and (iii) organising. In terms of services,

⁵ Kim Moody claims that the relatively large concentration of worker centres in the Southern states is a result of the internal relocation of many Northern industries, particularly food processing and automobile-parts production (Moody 2014, 288-9).

worker centres typically offer their members financial redress for unpaid wage claims and workplace injustices. While other services often include the provision of access to free healthcare, English language lessons and assistance getting hired. Alongside this, most worker centres seek to expose both “bad employers” and industry-wide malpractice, while campaigning for legislative policy reform on behalf of their worker members. Hence, at a collective level, worker centres will often picket bad employers, cooperate with unionisation drives and overall encourage workers to take direct action.

Beyond the offer of legal services and policy reform, worker centres also operate as employment bureaus for informal workers and day labourers, providing a structure through which workplace abuses can be monitored, thereby generating a paper-trail for abuses, such as wage theft, unsafe working conditions and the abandonment of day labourers at worksites [Fine 2006, 9]). Worker centres therefore occupy a similar position to the “temporary labour agencies [that] have increasingly come to dominate the low end of the temporary staffing sector” (Chauvin 2009, 76). Although, unlike the temp agencies, worker centres are actively pro-worker and hostile to employers and therefore, it is no accident that the rise of worker centres has been symmetrical with the growth of the employer-friendly temp industry (Doussard 2013).

Like other immigrant service centres, worker centres seek to improve wages and formalise conditions for low-wage immigrant workers, while at the same time emphasising worker self-education and leadership development. Thus, the form and content of worker centres diverges from that of more traditional unions in several notable ways; the most obvious being that their organisational focus is not the worksite. Instead, worker centres are embedded in reproductive, social and cultural space (i.e. the space of reproduction of the social relations of production; or put it another way, the lifeworld and communities of low-wage workers, see Section 2.6). Hence, in line with the priorities of social reproduction and informality, worker centres have tended to target place-bound, local-serving and sweated-labour industries (Gordon

2005; Doussard 2013), once again differing from mainstream unions, which are generally focused on concentrations of core workers in large-scale workplaces further up in the production chain.

In practice, this means that worker centres are broadly directed towards civic transformation and the mobilisation of the informal workforce, while remaining sensitive to the cultural milieu of their sustaining enclave communities. This focus on community makes workers centres organisationally distinct from traditional unions, although the centres do sometimes seek loose vertical affiliations with organised labour, based around overlapping commitments. Yet, despite these occasional alliances, many worker centres treasure their autonomy, serving the needs of their members and communities first, thereby avoiding the political clientelism and hierarchical ties that have often compromised previous forms of association. As such, many worker centres actively attempt to preserve this distance and prevent their relationship with the unions devolving into a “vanguard coalition” (an organisational form typical of top-down organising [Milkman, *et al.* 2014, 22]). Worker centres are thus defined as much by their internal organisational structures (i.e. process) as they are by their external affiliations. This means it is difficult to classify worker centres by function alone, since they deploy a wide range of strategies and services, while drawing on a plurality of alliances.

To this extent, Fine explains that worker centres are “hybrids,” combining elements common to other existing organisations, as well as features from historic civic institutions (e.g. “settlement houses, fraternal organisations [and] local civil rights institutions” [Fine 2006, 3]). Although, it is primarily through member-led advocacy and organising, that worker centres differentiate themselves from prior forms of association. More notably still, the centres place a strong emphasis on the development of leadership from within, thereby equipping their members to actively participate in actions of their own choosing. These methods of leadership identification and training subsequently aim to retain organisational knowledge within the

working class itself; preventing such knowledge from being the sole reserve of a salaried union bureaucracy that unilaterally negotiates on the behalf of the rank-and-file (see Chapter 2 on the theoretical importance of developing and retaining working class knowledge).

So, while political education varies from centre to centre, all worker centres “share a commitment to providing means through which workers can take action” (4). This pedagogic function allows worker centres to raise consciousness around economic issues such as wages, as well as broader civic concerns, such as immigration (see Section 1.1 for more detail on pedagogic worker centre practices). Hence, this denotes a two-pronged strategy, whereby worker centres endeavour to engage members around economic action (in the form of strikes, unionisation, etc.) while simultaneously advocating for public policy reform.

In addition to this, Janice Fine (2006) identifies several other salient features common to worker centres; mostly notably, their tendency to be non-worksites based. Workers centres are therefore much more likely to be associated with a specific geographic locale, rather than any particular branch of industry, thereby eschewing majority representation on any given worksite, while preferring instead to organise around ethnicity, gender, racial discrimination and social justice. As already mentioned and in line with this approach, leadership development is central to most worker centre strategies, whereby they internally develop their own leadership in order to retain organisational expertise among the membership.⁶ As such, political education is considered “integral” to worker centre organising and is generally conducted through workshops which train worker members to participate in civic life (primarily in the areas of immigration, “work, education, neighbourhood interaction and [obtaining] healthcare” [5]). Membership engagement levels hence tend to be measured by involvement in workshops, courses and

⁶ To counteract bureaucratisation, worker centres encourage the deliberative decision-making of worker-members with the hope of producing an active citizenry and participatory working-class capable of delivering on its own demands.

organisational drives, meaning that most centres have a small, but highly involved core membership.⁷ This means that for most workers centres, “membership is a privilege that is not automatic but must be earned” through political participation and educational development (5).

As far as worker centre advocacy and organising goes, Fine identifies three general areas of interest: (i) raising wages and improving working conditions; (ii) responding to attacks on immigrant communities while fighting for immigration reform; and (iii) dealing with issues concerning civic integration, such as healthcare, housing and discrimination under the law. The targets of worker centres can therefore, either be individual employers on a shop-by-shop basis, or whole sectors of employment and even, state-level institutions. This allows for the pursuit of workers’ rights at multiple scales (i.e. “local, state and federal levels” [5]). In terms of economic action, immigrant worker centres usually attempt to coerce employers into better treatment of their employees yet combine this with the overall aim of industry wide-adoption of improved working-standards. As a result, the return of stolen back-pay for day labourers is one area in which worker centres have had considerable success, often employing what Fine refers to as “creative approaches” (6) (i.e. a combination of direct action against targeted employers which is then coupled with the threat of legal action).

In tandem with this, public policy formation is precisely where worker centres have had “the greatest impact” (8). In this regard, Fine identifies four key areas in which legal advocacy takes place: (i) the centres act in consort or opposition to government agencies to ensure the enforcement of existing laws; (ii) they ensure employer compliance within existing agreements; (iii) they design new legislation in relation to wages and conditions; and finally, (iv) they advocate for immigration reform and civil rights. To this end, worker centres regularly take action to guarantee the enforcement of The Fair Labor Standards Act (FSLA) 1938; a set of

⁷ SVP’s core vendor member group is known on the database as the “Power 100.”

laws which governs the use of child labour and guarantees the minimum wage while establishing the 40-hour week as a national norm. Similarly, worker centres have also been known to pursue lawsuits under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (which “prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, sex, national origin, religion or disability”), while also upholding the Age Discrimination Employment Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 (8).⁸

Worker centres are therefore able to simultaneously foreground both class- and immigration-based issues, making explicit the “intertwined” social relations between immigrants and the communities around them. This means that the centres tend to view gender, race and ethnicity as facets of class; or to put it another way, aspects of class position that until recently had been overlooked by traditional unions. As a result, social justice concerns are not simply a marginal aspect of worker centre activism, but instead, immigration reform and the ongoing struggle against “xenophobia, racism and discrimination” are seen as integral to raising up the living standards of all worker centre participants (10). In support of their social mission, worker centres thus aim to produce a politically active citizenry capable of robustly challenging the exclusions of immigrant workers, while successfully engaging “healthy numbers of people of very modest means on an ongoing basis” (15). For this reason, in Section 1.2 I will examine the distinct way in which worker centres endeavour to produce what Jennifer Gordon (2005) calls “non-citizen citizens.”

⁸ In Chapter 2, I examine how, rather than targeting employers, SVP targets the City of New York, the NYPD, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and the NYC Department of Consumer Affairs (formerly the DCA, now known as Department of Consumer and Worker Protection [DCWP]), as well as individual building owners in the city.

1.1 Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Popular Education Among Workers Centres

If there is a guiding ethos common to worker centres, it is the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Fine 2007) and the methods of liberatory education he pioneered in Brazil from the late-40s onwards (O'Cadiz & Torres 1994). It was these techniques that in subsequent decades would become highly influential on the development of not only the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) but also other Latin American liberation movements, pan-African anti-colonial struggles and the US Civil Rights movement.⁹ As part of this radical lineage, worker centres consequently view popular education as integral to their organising efforts, which they typically conduct through “[w]orkshops, courses and training sessions [which] are structured to emphasise the development of critical thinking skills” (Fine 2007, 13), since their members often have low-levels of educational attainment and hence, whenever thinking about worker centre participation, it is useful to consider how Freire's model of pedagogy is a participatory one.

Freire throughout his life strived to elucidate the relationship between the production of social knowledge and the lived practices of the urban and rural poor, innovating a constellation of pedagogic methods that Paul Apostolidis (2019) refers to as “critical-popular research” (38). Following his success in developing effective literacy programs among agrarian workers in Brazil, Freire would in 1969 publish his most influential work: *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a foundational text which draws from a diverse pool of philosophers, including Marx, Weber, Sartre and Hegel; political thinkers such as Gramsci and Lukács; as well the psychoanalytic work of Fromm and Fanon. Furthermore, Freire would in this, and later writings reflect upon the

⁹ See *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Change*, ed. Bell, B., Gaventa, J., and Peters, J. (1990) which documents the encounter between Myles Horton of the Highland Research and Education Centre, and Paulo Freire, whereby they compare the reception of critical pedagogy in both the US and the so-called developing world.

revolutionary thought of figures such as Che Guevara and his frequent correspondent Amílcar Cabral (see Lake & Kress *et al* 2013). In this regard, Freire's critical pedagogy bears favourable comparison to Castoriadis' late writing on the relationship between pedagogy, autonomy and class struggle (see Section 2.2), albeit generated under somewhat different conditions.

In keeping with Marx's critical maxim, "the educator must be educated," Freire emphasises that critical pedagogy "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed" (Freire 2000, 48) and thus, begins his "dialogic method" from the position of both "humanisation and dehumanisation," while stating that those who are oppressed have the ultimate vocation of becoming "fully human" (43). Yet, while the vocation of the oppressed is continually negated by the injustice, exploitation and violence of the oppressor, by continually striving for freedom the supernumerary poor have not only the opportunity to recover their own "lost humanity" (44), but also that of the oppressor. Freire's thesis thus accords well with Marx's affirmation that the working class are indeed the sole agents of universal history, since in Marx's words, class society "which is, in short, a total loss of humanity [...] can reform itself only by a total [redemption] of humanity."¹⁰

It is subsequently only through the praxis of struggle that the oppressed might overcome the structural conditions of their dehumanisation. Standing in the way of universal liberation, however, is the hegemonic and inauthentic image of the oppressor; an introject that the oppressed, by inclination and habit, adhere to in the absence of any positive counterhegemonic image to represent them. So, while the oppressed often adopt the attitudes of the oppressor, Freire sees latent potential and the possibility of a self-pedagogic process of liberation occurring through *participation* in struggle for the social transformation of the given.

¹⁰ See Marx, K., *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843)*. Accessed here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>

By reframing concepts from clinical psychology and adapting them to the conditions of the disempowered masses,¹¹ Freire theorises that before they are able to politically participate the oppressed must first “eject” (47) the image of the oppressor and replace it with a counter-image of *autonomy* and *responsibility*, which he asserts can only be acquired through class “conquest.” The assumption of hegemony (and a comparison can be drawn here with Gramsci’s counterhegemonic production of “good sense”) therefore requires the development of critical consciousness so that the oppressed in their ascendancy, do not simply re-enact the dehumanising domination of the oppressor.

Yet in situations of generalised low literacy the oppressed lack of any sufficient critical vantage point, which in turn presents an obstacle to be overcome if the poor are to collectively transcend the limits of their objective situation. So, while remaining alienated from any appreciation of their common vocation, the oppressed can only subsist in a state of inauthentic and fearful introspection; frozen in “subjectivist immobility” (50) as spectators in life and straightjacketed within the social roles that the oppressor has until now, prescribed for them. Consequently, without the capacity critically reflect on their own atomised condition, the colonised multitudes can only possess that which Hegel calls the “the consciousness of the Master,” or that which Fanon refers to as a “colonised mentality” (see Fanon 1963), and it is here, therefore, that Freire’s pedagogic task coincides with Lukács’ injunction to explain to the masses their own actions.

In this regard, Freire’s pedagogy is foremost a technique for the critical elucidation and transformation of reality, which crucially requires “dialoguing with the people” (53) so that the ‘educator’ and the masses might together co-investigate the objective situation. To a great degree, this is where Freire’s method lends itself to the pedagogic methods employed by worker

¹¹ For example, the concepts developed in Eric Fromm’s *Fear of Freedom* (2001) and its sequel *Escape from Freedom* (2013).

centres in their attempt to bring disparate groups of informal workers into dialogue with one another, while placing deliberative democracy and the development of critical thinking at the heart their activities and workshops. Yet, for critical pedagogy to remain authentic to the experience of its participants, such pedagogic work must at all costs avoid the bureaucratisation of struggle, since as Freire points out, each time “a new regime hardens into a dominating ‘bureaucracy’ the dimension of struggle is lost and it is no longer possible to speak of liberation” (57).¹²

Hence, if the fundamental task of the oppressed is to “eject” colonial mentality (63), then worker participants must first overcome their own self-distrust, while at the same time appreciating that they too “know things” beyond the conventional criteria of knowledge.¹³ In practice, this means that the oppressed must first build the confidence to overcome the “boss [...] ‘inside’” (64) thereby losing their emotional dependency on the oppressor. Freire states, that only then might the oppressed glimpse their full humanity and in turn, develop forms of critical praxis adequate their beleaguered situation.

On the question of praxis, therefore, Freire is keen to assert that liberation cannot simply be confined to the realm of action but must, as a process, also include critical reflection. Subsequently, it is only by coming into dialogue that the internalised “monologue” of the oppressed can be displaced; that is, until its participant interlocutors finally come see themselves “as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (66). It can thus be said that critical pedagogy is a process of subjective

¹² Moreover, if the work of critical pedagogy is conducted inauthentically “superficial conversions to the cause” that distrust the rationality of the oppressed, will instead “fail to initiate [...] dialogues, reflection and communication [while falling back on] slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions” (66).

¹³ See Franz Fanon (1963) for his comments on the effects of the Algerian War on the mentality of Algerians; remarks which are comparable with the observations of Albert Memmi.

liberation, which through the development of critical intersubjective powers, liberates the oppressed from the instrumental objecthood of their prior social roles. Considering this understanding, it is hence the task of educators, revolutionary leaders and activist-researchers to initiate a thoroughgoing dialogue (or creative *communion with the people*) with and among the oppressed, so they might themselves develop their own *conscientização* (i.e. critical consciousness).

For Freire, the development of critical consciousness must, however, always begin anew, since it cannot rely on the prior methods of colonial or general education, which in his words are the methods of the oppressor (and here we might consider the various De-Africanisation programs that constituted so-called education during the colonial era).¹⁴ Instead, would-be educators must, in accordance with critical pedagogy, practice a "*cointentional* education," elucidating the class-basis of reality, while at the same time, seeding awareness among the oppressed that they themselves have the potential to be the "permanent recreators" of any new reality.

To this end, Freire observes that current models of education rely on a "lifeless" narration the world, whereby the teacher attempts to "fill" the students with the rote contents of their teachings (71). This static narration, however, empties words of their concreteness and fails to provide the students with contextual meaning, thereby tending towards mechanical imitation and a fixed understanding of the given. Under this educational paradigm, whereby learning is upheld to be a mere "act of depositing" (70), the bare repetition of the passive student is celebrated. Accordingly, Freire refers to this as the "banking" model of education,

14 For a valuable account of the influence of Amílcar Cabral on popular pedagogy, see Malott, C., 'How Amilcar Cabral Shaped Paulo Freire's Pedagogy,' *MR Online*, 3 Sept 2021: <https://mronline.org/2021/09/03/how-amilcar-cabral-shaped-paulo-freires-pedagogy/>

which for him lacks the true creativity of active participation, a modality which he states is fundamentally experimental: “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention,” since it is only through “restless, impatient, continuing [and] hopeful inquiry [that] human beings [might instead] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (72). For true knowledge to emerge, therefore, it is the student who must educate the teacher, otherwise the student remains “alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic [accepting their own] ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence” (72).

This contradiction must hence be reconciled, since the more the students “store” the deposits of the banking model, the less able they are to develop any experimental or critical consciousness, imposing further passivity. As Freire puts it:

If men and women are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanisation, sooner or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them, and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation (75).

The revolutionary educator cannot, however, simply wait for spontaneous revelation to occur but must instead, profoundly trust the “creative power” of their students; an act of solidarity which requires “true communication” so that the teacher’s thinking is authenticated only by whatever the students’ prior experience has made real.

Expanding this injunction, Freire here draws an analogy with popular movements and their manifestations, wherein the pedagogy of would-be “leaders,” much like the teacher in the banking model, only serves to perpetuate the status quo of class domination. To be truly transformative, however, the leaders of popular movements must accordingly “abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (79).

If the banking model of education only “anesthetises and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education [instead] involves a constant unveiling of reality.” So rather than

submerging the consciousness of the oppressed, the critical pedagogic paradigm instead seeks to involve the dispossessed as dialogic “co-investigators” of the real situation, since ultimately, Freire’s method “strives for the emergence of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality” (81).

The dialogue initiated between the educator and the masses is therefore fundamentally a “human phenomenon” (87) with two distinct dimensions: reflection and action; unified by the radical praxiological becoming of the two. Hence, it is only through the co-development of praxis that participants in struggle can annunciate truths capable of transforming the world (much in the same way that workers centres attempt to raise the collective “voice” of their participant members, so that they can then mobilise and speak truth to power). Subsequently, while verbiage without authenticity—or that which Freire calls alienating “blah” —might best be described as *the sacrifice of action*, and while conversely any overemphasis on action might, by contrast, be described as the *sacrifice of reflection*, such deficits only serve to negate “true praxis” while making authentic dialogue “impossible” (88).

The genuine subject of struggle is consequently excluded from speaking on behalf of others and instead must enter into the encounter of dialogue in order to break silence. Active dialogue is thus by definition, “an encounter among men and women [who] name the world” (88) in a manner Freire describes as *communion* or the radical encounter of love freed from domination, wherein ‘love’ signifies social solidarity or the commitment of the masses to each other. This collective naming of commonly experienced oppressions, subsequently allows the oppressed to creatively generate acts of reciprocal liberation, while abolishing dichotomous thought and in its place, instantiating an “indivisible solidarity

between the world and the people” (92).¹⁵ Educators, revolutionaries and activists who to wish to assist the oppressed in their vocation must, as a result, be attuned to the world (i.e. its objective structural conditions) in which “the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed” (96) and wherein, the lived reality of the people mediates dialogue and as a result, shapes their shared “thematic universe” (or that which Freire also refers to as the complex of their “generative themes”).

Since the content of popular pedagogy must, if it is to be effective, stimulate the awareness of the oppressed, any generative theme developed out of dialogue, can neither be an arbitrary invention or the educator’s own working hypothesis. Instead, it should index the dialectical relation between “the determination of limits” and the freedom of the masses (99). Yet, to overcome such limitations (or “limit situations”) active participants must first identify the perceived limits of the situation (i.e. the historical dimensions of their shared reality) while remaining alert to apparent fetters on human liberation. Consequently, such inquiry strives to generate “limit acts” or actions designed to overcome prior oppressions which before now were passively accepted.

While prior this, such limitations may have cultivated apathy among the oppressed, perspectival awareness of the objective situation instead transforms the given, intrinsically linking it to the feasibility of embodied action. Hence, the collective annunciation of oppressions, allows for a further evaluation of potentials, thereby fostering a “climate of hope” in which the confidence of the oppressed can develop (i.e. conscientisation “makes

¹⁵ Here Freire imparts an important lesson regarding neoliberal incentive structures, stating: “[S]elf-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue” (Freire 2000, 90). This is certainly something to bear in mind when considering the micro-entrepreneurial coping strategies of the vendors.

the transformation of their state of apathy into the utopian state of denunciation and annunciation of a viable project” [Freire, 1985, p. 59]).

Yet, since the historical situation is dense, complex and somewhat occulted at the level of everyday experience, the resulting “coded” totality must consequently be “decoded” through praxiological investigative methods, thereby allowing critical-popular research to move from the realm of abstract reflection towards transformative concrete activity (i.e. a motion of flux and reflux, moving from particular to general analysis before returning to the parts once more). Pertinent to this study, however, Freire states that the group which does not attempt to decode the generative themes of their common reality instead suggests “a very dramatic theme: *the theme of silence*,” or that which he refers to as the “structure of mutism in the face of the overwhelming of limit-situations” (106).

As will be evident in later chapters, the broad outlines of the Freirean critical-pedagogic technique are present in the day-to-day work of SVP, and while such methods were not explicitly discussed at the project, this ethos and its practices were heavily embedded within SVP’s internal process. For example, when the vendors performed non-citizen citizenship at New York City Hall (see Section 4.2), collectively raising their enunciative voice to give testimony as rights bearing citizens in practice; or when collective decision-making at SVP was reconfigured to give the regular membership more say in the crafting of collective strategies (see Section 4.0). Yet perhaps most significant example of critical-pedagogic technique was when a profound communal dialogue that was initiated within the SVP Women’s Committee, thereafter, allowing Latina vendors to break silence and critically interrogate their own socially reproductive labour and the generative theme of domestic violence, which before now, had been a limit to participation at the project, allowing them to forge the deep, yet meaningful intersubjective bonds of affinity (see

Section 4.3).

1.2 Non-Citizen Citizenship and the Limits of Monoethnic Organisation

In the US, immigrants hold a “strategic position in some industries” (Moody 2014, 276) and are heavily concentrated in the service sector, construction, transportation and factory work, while “millions more work on the edges of recorded employment” beyond the reach of the unions (Moody 2014, 280). According to the Migration Policy Institute (MIP), the size of the immigrant population living in the US grew from 9.6 million in 1970 to more than 44.9 million immigrants in 2019 (making up 13.7% of the total US population).¹⁶ Yet, against expectations, competition for jobs between different immigrant groups is “blunted” (283), since they generally work within their own ethnic niches and therefore, do not come into direct competition with each other or native-born workers. These ethnically circumscribed boundaries are a direct result of the racially segmented “hiring queue” (Waldinger & Litcher 2003; Maldonado 2009), which ranks the workforce according to race, gender and ethnicity, and correspondingly, siloes immigrant workers in different sectors of the labour market.

Nonetheless, Kim Moody warns that it would be naive to believe that there is no direct competition between newly arrived immigrants and native-born workers, since jobs and space are “finite” (Moody, 2014, 282). As a result of the segmentation of the labour market along racial and ethnic lines, immigrants have consequently formed their own distinct enclaves in major US cities. Although, as Ruth Milkman observes, immigrant newcomers are the least likely to be

¹⁶ MIP migration statistics accessed here: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2020>

unionised, yet when they eventually “become citizens” they are just as likely to belong to a union as native-born workers (Milkman *et al.*, 2014). Within this opportunity space, worker centres have thus been able to intervene in the assimilation of immigrants; either by helping them acquire permanent residency or alternately, encouraging them to actively take part in public life *as if they were already citizens*.

Considering this, worker centres might be typified as pre-unions; or more accurately, they undertake the work of “pre-organising” among new arrivals and therefore, can legitimately be regarded “in the context of the broader labour movement” (Moody 2013, 296). While mainstream unions have often overlooked or had trouble reaching these most marginal of workers, worker centres have stepped into the breach, assisting immigrants in claiming their rights, which erroneously are often thought to only belong to native-born citizens (Gordon 2005). The organising work of worker centres is therefore so synonymous with the plight of low-wage immigrant workers, that Janice Fine simply introduces them as “immigrant worker centres” (Fine 2006, 7).

Hence, the expansion of the number of worker centres over the past-thirty years directly corresponds to a steady increase in immigration (Fine 2006, 9-11), accompanied as has been by a parallel growth in low-wage “informal employment arrangements” (Milkman *et al.* 2010, 5). For this reason, the advocacy-based approach that Jennifer Gordon calls “non-citizen citizenship” (Gordon 2005) is at the forefront of worker centre activity. So ubiquitous is this practice, that the performance of non-citizen citizenship is now an intrinsic formula for most worker centres. SVP like other worker centres, therefore, trains its vendor members to advocate for public policy reform, which before now, was something that only fully enfranchised citizens might typically do (see Section 3.1).

Jennifer Gordon coined the term “non-citizen citizenship” during the fair-wage day labourer campaign that she oversaw at WPP in Long Island (Gordon 2005): a campaign which

successfully resulted in the passing of New York's Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act of 1995.¹⁷

Gordon's account of this landmark campaign is thus widely cited in worker centre literature (Gordon 2005; Milkman *et al.* 2010 & 2014; Lesniewski 2013), yet while this account helps us understand how worker centres leverage immigrant identity to achieve legislative gains, it also highlights the apparent shortcomings of advocacy-based approaches.

In her account, Gordon describes how, beginning with a series of rights-based workshops, WPP members were able to develop a campaign to target the weak enforcement of the minimum wage in New York, and accordingly, the subsequent campaign was comprised of two prongs: fairer wages and stronger enforcements. Nonetheless, back in 1992, the principal problem facing the project was the uncomfortable fact that many of the lawmakers and senators that WPP's Latino members had to appeal to, were expressly anti-immigrant. When discussing the campaign's prospects, one of the project's worker members would therefore ask, "If you're not a citizen, how can you make demands? If I can't vote, I'm no one. I'm invisible. How can I protest?" (Gordon 2005, 246).

This presented WPP with a dilemma, namely: *how could a group of undocumented immigrants lead a campaign to change the law?* Citizenship status is therefore one of the chief obstacles facing immigrant workers when either attempting to settle individual workplace grievances or hoping to affect legislative reform. As it was, most of the senators that WPP's members needed to win over did not regard them as voting constituents and as a result, the lawmakers were at best disinterested in their appeal. Looking uphill therefore, WPP came up with a strategy to play "good" employers against "bad," whereby they decided to publicly shame any employers failing to pay the minimum-wage, thereafter, characterising them as

¹⁷ Jennifer Gordon's essay 'We Make the Road by Walking: Immigrant Workers, The Workplace Project, and the Struggle for Social Change' (1995) was suggested to me by project director Sean Basinski as a guide to SVP's strategic and organisational mission.

“freeloaders.” Alongside this, the project also appealed to traditional allies and supporters, such as: ACORN, the New York labour councils and prominent religious leaders, while also collecting signatures from the public in support of their campaign. Moreover, this was combined with an active media strategy to educate the public about how enforcement of the minimum wage would bring in extra revenue for the State of New York, thereby heaping further moral pressure on employers.

To the surprise of many and despite the prevailing political climate of xenophobia, the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act eventually passed, fully supported by both anti-immigrant Republican senators. Yet, this would raise further questions, however, since it was originally thought that the senators could only be moved by two considerations: votes and money (and as Gordon states “conventionally, immigrant workers wield neither” [262]). At the time, 98% of WPP members were either undocumented or temporary permit holders and as such, officially considered “non-citizens.” This subsequently led Gordon to ask: *how did the WPP members get Republican senators to back the campaign?* After interviewing them, however, she was surprised to discover that support for the bill came from an unexpected source: “the power of moral suasion that grew from [the senators’ own] identification with the immigrant stories that worker participants presented” (265). As it would turn out, the senators and their colleagues were second and third-generation immigrants and on this basis, Gordon identified an ideological peculiarity that had influenced them: “[T]hese Republican legislators seem to operate on a dual and contradictory mythology of immigration [and in] their eyes ‘good’ immigrants built this country.” Hence, an idealised notion of national inclusion was “represented in the senators’ personal mythologies by their forebears” (265).

By emphasising their own economic contributions, WPP’s worker members were therefore able to gain “a measure of political legitimacy,” winning recognition both as rights-

bearers and legitimate workers (267-8).¹⁸ Yet, despite the success of such appeals, one of the drawbacks of performing non-citizen citizenship is that it encourages workers to pander to elite ideology, while ignoring the wider structure under which they suffer and accordingly, when appealing lawmakers, WPP members were obliged to perform the role of hard working “good” immigrants, while at the same time, conceding to the dominant ideological framing of their situation.¹⁹ By custom, US citizenship is traditionally enacted through electoral voting, which subsequently serves as an indicator of political involvement (269) and it is through this framework, that immigrants imagine themselves to be barred from civic participation, since they do not see themselves as being “legitimate political actors” (Gordon 2005; Desipio 1996). According to Gordon however, the WPP fair wages campaign was the perfect of example immigrants “acting in ways not envisaged by the law” (Gordon 2005, 272).

Gordon is consequently able to claim that non-citizen citizenship is a re-enactment of America’s heritage, whereby the historically disenfranchised had to struggle to establish their rights, as was the case with the emancipation from slavery and women’s suffrage (Shklar 1989). In support of this view, constitutional scholar Hendrik Hartog contends that: “Government cannot know in advance who will be capable of exercising rights. And rights holders are those who do what rights holders do” (Hartog 1987, 274-275). Hence, in the case of the WPP campaign, the claim to citizenship was supported by the de facto economic participation of immigrant workers, which in turn, allowed them to challenge common notions of the law by presenting themselves as “contributors” and not simply “takers” (Gordon 2005, 276-7).

¹⁸ As Judith Shklar points out in *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (1989): “Both the dignity of work and the public obligation to work are most universally preached. A good citizen is an earner, because independence is the indelibly necessary quality of genuine, democratic citizenship. But few people blame either the poor or the system for poverty and unemployment. They are just facts of life, like the weather” (Shklar 1989, 434).

¹⁹ This is a criticism of monoethnic campaigns that both Steve Jenkins and Jacob Lesniewski share, see Section 1.3.

Considering this achievement, Gordon sees immigrant workers as capable of claiming rights in two directions: firstly, by avoiding any direct confrontation about rights for so-called “illegal” workers; and secondly, by exploiting a widely resonant national myth proclaiming the United States to be a nation built by first-generation immigrants. Nonetheless, while this was true for legislators in Long Island in 1992, Gordon is keen to state that the WPP approach is not a one-size-fits-all strategy but instead geographically and temporally context-specific. On this point Gordon is unequivocal, stating that the WPP fair wages campaign does not offer a general organising model, but instead reflects make-shift circumstances, thereby making replication difficult (283).

Going forward, worker centres therefore need to get creative in their approaches, exploiting emergent features of the US labour landscape, while continuing to use the racial and ethnic segmentation of the workforce as a point of leverage. Subsequently to date, ethnicity has functioned as “a powerful glue” (286) allowing worker centres to put down “deep roots” into their communities. However, given the prevalence of monoethnic organising, Gordon raises an important question in terms of “power and strategy,” asking: “How far can monoethnic identity go in a world of multiethnic workplaces?” (286-7). Under present conditions, the associational structure of monoethnic worker centres allows transient workers who change jobs frequently to remain affiliated, yet as Gordon rightly asks: “How can a membership so diffused among [many] industries exert the power it takes to raise wages and improve working conditions?” (287).

For further clarity, this question might be put another way, that is, how can immigrant workers organising from the ground up, wield the necessary social power to enforce legislative changes won through the practice non-citizen citizenship? The inference here is that without robust and sustained base-building, hard-won legislative reforms cannot easily be enforced and as a result, the goal of worker centres cannot simply be incremental policy reform, but instead, they must aspire to be “organising organisations” (see Milkman *et al.* 2014; McAlevey 176); or

more specifically, organising organisations that regard “collective action” and unionisation as the principal form of leverage.

Addressing the question of social power, Gordon therefore presents several experimental solutions to this problem, suggesting that worker centres might for instance, target a single “particularly locally rooted industry” or alternately, develop campaigns that target all employers in that industry (Gordon 2005, 288). The application of similar approaches has borne positive results in New York, notably for the Restaurant Opportunities Centres United (ROC) and the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), both of whom have organised across multiple ethnicities in single industries (Milkman *et al.* 2014; Moody 2014). Similarly, the Multiethnic Immigrants Workers Organising Network (MIWON), a coalition of Filipino, Korean, Latino, Chinese and Thai workers have been successful in organising across multiple ethnic boundaries among LA’s garment workers (Gordon 2005, Milkman *et al.* 2010). Hence, in his discussion of “next wave organising,” Victor Narro suggests that multiethnic networking allows for a deeper “critical reflection” on the problem of organising workers at the margins (Narro 2005, 465). Nonetheless, the forging of interethnic alliances is not always straightforward, since at present worker centres are “under-networked at every level” (Fine 2006). Yet, Gordon sees multiethnic organising and the development of cross-ethnic networks as a “crucial” if worker centres are to wield social power and grow the capacity to secure long-lasting collective gains (Gordon 2005, 288).

In summary, Gordon considers multiethnic organising to be broadly beneficial, although, since this inquiry is primarily concerned with how multiethnic organising at SVP might assist in building vendor power, it is her question about “power and strategy” (287) that needs further elaboration (see Section 1.3). We might therefore pause and reflect on the terms *monoethnic* and *multiethnic*, which so far have been deployed somewhat abstractly. Gabrielle Alberti reminds us that, while in theory, associative groups of low-wage immigrant workers do tend to

be seen as ethnically homogenous, “in practice they are not” (Alberti 2008, 4). I hence use the two terms somewhat guardedly, since even at SVP, an organisation which self-identifies as a multiethnic, ethnicity itself is co-constituted in multiple ways (i.e. by age, citizenship, language, class, gender, sexuality, skin colour and indigeneity), all of which intertwine to create further complex identities and dispositions.

To this extent, even vendors from the same home country, who we might assume to have direct commonalities, are instead subjectively complex (see Section 5.3) and from here on, whenever describing worker centres as *monoethnic*, I explicitly mean organisation around a single, linguistically circumscribed ethnicity. Conversely, the term *multiethnic* refers to collaborative efforts between one or more different immigrant groups, while also encompassing equally important alliances with native-born workers.

While SVP organises primarily on the basis of language, it is of course reductive to believe that this adequately encompasses the broad multiplicity of lived experience present within the vending community. For example, despite the fact that the vendor members who make up the SVP Women’s Committee (see Section 3.9) come from a variety of Latin American countries, and while their shared language was convenient when attempting to initiate a collective conversation among the women, the bonds of solidarity that were subsequently forged were done so through a profound interrogation of the women’s common themes. It can therefore be said, that while the Women’s Committee was predominantly a Latina committee, the self-inquiry and subsequent self-activity of these tenacious vendors was not based on any prior notion of cultural identity.

As Martha E. Gimenez (1989) points out, politically convenient demographic labels such as “Latin American” or “Hispanic” are somewhat “contrived” and moreover, risk repeating the nativist “politics of erasure” (McLaren & Jaramillo 2006) that has until now, negatively stereotyped Latinxs as a racialised and monolithic social bloc. Instead, it is far more productive

and in keeping with the politics of liberation to appreciate how, in our example, the Latinas of the SVP Women's Committee are instead "dialectically" defined by a series complex of social antagonisms that cannot easily be reduced.

As Suzanne Oboler (1995) points out, Latinxs in the US do not share common legal status and therefore, labels such as "Hispanic" only serve to officially homogenise and racialise this population through what is "undoubtedly an effective and time-honoured method of social control" (Oboler 2009, 10). Furthermore, within the sphere of US progressive politics, Latinxs have long been characterised as "subjects on the cusp of political power and influence," or to put it another way, a powerful "sleeping giant" (Béltran 2010, 3) on the verge of awakening. In light of this political potential, Cristina Béltran subsequently asks how we might better understand the seeming "passivity" of the Leviathan, given that the metaphor of the giant, which is extremely common within the discourse of electoral politics, apparently rests on the erroneous supposition of pre-existing and automatic civic cohesion among Latin American people and their descendants.

Moving beyond prior regulative designations, however, the social construct of "Latinidad" has since the 1980s somewhat superseded baggy demographic terms such as Hispanic, in an attempt to unify Latin American pan-ethnic identity under series of broad collective identifications and attributes (see Padilla 1985). Accordingly, Latinidad is seen by many liberal progressives as a "productive response" to negative stereotypes since, at minimum, it seeks to establish group coherence based around the shared geopolitical experience of Latin Americans in the US. In practice though, Latinx identity is far more "complex and contradictory" since it involves pluriform "issues of immigration, colonialism, conquest, race, colour, gender, sexuality, class and language" (5). Hence, given these entanglements, Béltran contends that Latinidad is perhaps best seen as an incomplete process, since in reality, the body of slumbering "giant" is composed of at least twenty different nationalities and a multiplicity

of subgroups therein.²⁰

So, although more positive in valence, Latinidad can subsequently only repeat some of the prior homogenising and erasing tendencies of “Hispanic” identity, since whenever used to describe Latinxs living in the United States, “it is far from immediately clear whether the subjects under discussion are farmworkers living below the poverty line or middle-class homeowners, urban hipsters or rural evangelicals, white or black, gay or straight, Catholic or Jewish, undocumented Spanish monolinguals or fourth-generation speakers of English-only” (6).

Reinforcing this view, Suzanne Oboler again notes, that despite internal and racial group differences, “people of Latin American descent in the United States have long been perceived homogenously as ‘foreign’ to the image of ‘being American’ [...] regardless of the time and the mode of their incorporation into the United States or their subsequent status as citizens” (Oboler 1995, 17-18). As a result, parallels can be drawn with the Asian American experience, whereby Asians have over time been seen variously as “perpetual immigrants,” model citizens or as was the experience of Japanese Americans during WWII, the “foreigner-within” (see Lowe 1996).

If “Hispanic” is consequently considered too integrationist by Oboler (1995) then, in the words of B eltran, the counter-identity of “Latinidad does nothing to resolve [...] dissimilarities in attitude, region and class” and thus, while claiming “a collective identity rather than having one imposed by federal and state bureaucracy is an improvement, [...] the problems of political community remain unresolved” (B eltran 2010, 109-110). Hence, B eltran subsequently asks: how does one “‘awaken’ a political figure whose very political existence is so uncertain?” (8).

²⁰ On this point Wendy Trevino also agrees, pointing out how many of the nationalities encompassed by Latinidad are similarly colonial constructs. For example, *mestizaje* (an identification commonly used by Mexicans in Texas) is a multicultural construct which Trevino states at best preserves colonialism’s prior racial order, while erasing blackness. See Chen, C. & Trevino, W. ‘Mexican is Not a Race’ *The New Inquiry*, 6 April 2017: <https://thenewinquiry.com/mexican-is-not-a-race/>

Yet rather than falling prey to such capriciousness, B eltran instead draws on the experiences of both Chicana feminists and post-modern feminist theory to suggest that Latinidad, much like the category of women in general, remains “permanently open, permanently contested [and] permanently contingent, in order not to foreclose in advance future claims for inclusion” (9). Or perhaps, to put it another way, Latinx identity is an “incomplete We” that harbours productive potential and therefore, in order to surpass the representational identifications of Latinidad, B eltran instead prefers to periodise the struggle of Latinxs within the US by documenting prior instances of “unity through action.” This history she describes as culminating in “A Day Without an Immigrant”; a mass nationwide action and mobilisation of US Latinxs, in what turned out to be a decisive collective response to the proposed Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Immigration Control Act of 2006, as drafted by Republican senators. It was this coordinated act of mass boycott, an effective “General Strike” in which hundreds of thousands Latinxs participated, that B eltran sees as having laid the necessary ideological groundwork and organisational infrastructure that eventually defeated the bill.

While liberals were keen to emphasise how A Day Without an Immigrant demonstrated that Mexican and Latinx values coincided with those of US citizenship, B eltran states that this view only serves to dilute the radical and “profoundly political” (131) character of the protests, since they took the form of a publicly visible self-legitimising act that initiated many of its participants in direct political action. It was these workers and their families who, through participation, carried with them the “needs of the Many” rather than any precomposed vision of unity that presumes Latinxs as a “pre-existent, continuous entity” (133). Consequently, through self-directed mass mobilisation, the boycott’s participants were able to challenge “the dichotomous logic of immigrants as either grateful subjects or dangerous lawbreakers” and furthermore, “allows us to consider the more radical possibilities inherent in action and other acts of unauthorised ‘taking’” (133).

Much in the same vein Wendy Trevino makes a similar historical point about Latinx unity-through-struggle, referring to the 1915 Plan of San Diego, which proposed an insurrectionary rebellion in the Southwest United States to overthrow the US government and form an independent republic composed of Mexicans, Tejanos and Black Americans:

The Plan of San Diego, acknowledged racial hierarchies, even as it allowed room for the genesis of another identity based on shared struggle, an identity not based on some myth of racial homogeneity but on solidarity in struggle.²¹

Hence, whenever considering Latinx unity, it is also worth analysing the conditions under which the reproduction of the US Latinx population occurs, since it is clearly related to the manner in which the US draws on Latin America's global reserve army of labour and consequently, how immigrant workers fit into "distinct spheres" of the US labour market.

For example, this is examined in Olivos & Sandoval's (2015) account of the "becoming Latino" of Guatemalan agrarian laborers in Iowa's meatpacking industry, whereby the authors state that they "became Latino as much for their labour, as for their characteristics" (205). It can thus be said that the "mode of incorporation" (i.e. the way in which Latinx workers are canalised into second-tier jobs) has a considerable impact on the manner in which identity and group formation occurs. US Latinxs are hence extremely diverse, while at the same time, internal differences tend to be homogenized around broadly recognisable cultural traits, as William I. Robinson goes on to argue:

[C]ultural and political determinants are relevant, but *subsidiary*, in that they only become 'operationalized' through structural determinants rooted in the US political

²¹ As Trevino states: "This tradition demands that we fight back to literally change who the 'we' is by changing the conditions under which the 'we' are reproduced." See again Chris Chen's interview with Wendy Trevino, "Mexican Is Not a Race": <https://thenewinquiry.com/mexican-is-not-a-race/>

economy and in an historic process of capital accumulation in which Latinos share a distinct mode of incorporation (Robinson 1993, 30).

By eschewing myths of racial and ethnic homogeneity, it is therefore important to recognise how the building of radical identities based on shared political struggle is crucial if solidarity is to be built anew. Consequently, when evaluating the potentials of the SVP Women's Committee in Section 4.3, it is worth considering how the cementing of solidarity occurred through the elucidation of the common experiential theme of domestic violence; a sub-issue that was not uniquely specific to any language group or country of origin yet represented an obstacle to be overcome if SVP's Latina vendor members were to have equal standing among their wider community. Moreover, it was gender-based violence that motivated many of the women to come to the US in first place and ultimately seek out vending work (i.e. domestic violence somewhat defined their "mode of incorporation" into the US economy).

As it stands, a variety of studies (see Reina, Maldonado & Lohman 2013) have over time documented a high incidence of intimate partner violence among Latinas in the US and as such, domestic violence represents an obstacle to assimilation and integration (1474). Furthermore, the issue of DV is compounded by the mixed immigration status of Latinx family members; a "high regard for family unity" (1480); and the gendered expectation that men alone should be "breadwinners." It is these factors combined that leaves many immigrant Latinas socially isolated, since "the presence of co-ethnics in a locality does not mean there will be solidarity between [members] from a particular ethnic group" (1485).

To overcome this isolation, the conversation started among Latinas in the SVP Women's Committee was thus an important first step in creating a context in which the women could identify ethnic- and gender-specific oppressions that disadvantaged them within their own communities. Likewise, it was equally important that this dialogue was unmediated by men or other family members, thereby allowing the women to open up to each other and "break silence"

over the issue of gender-based violence, which in their lives is often combined with the fear of immigration enforcement. Yet, through dialogue, the women were thereafter able to establish a context in which to interrogate patriarchy and family, while at the same time, building a common sense of shared identity around these defining experiences. Accordingly, in Section 3.9 we see how, in response to these dynamics, vendor leader Kele would encourage women vendor members to experience aspects of their social life through SVP in the hope it would free them from some of these isolating factors, that had until now restricted their broader social integration.

1.3 Power-Based Critiques of Worker Centres

In the previous section, I examined how monoethnic organisation has been an effective and somewhat necessary strategy for worker centres in terms of winning legislative reform. However, such efforts often fail to build sustainable gains for low-wage workers, and while worker centre literature typically stresses “the importance of organising and ‘building power’ for oppressed people” (Jenkins 2002, 56) many worker centres tend to confine their activities to advocacy efforts, relying on what Jennifer Gordon calls “lawyering” (Gordon 2005). As such, the legislative reforms that most worker centres aspire to are heavily dependent on the expertise of professional activists and social workers, a preponderance which at times can sideline their worker members, thereby leaving them insufficiently engaged to enforce the very gains designed to benefit them.

Steve Jenkins, previously an activist and organiser at Make the Road (MRNY) has been critical of such efforts in two important ways. Firstly, he asserts that social change cannot be achieved through advocacy alone, “because it does not alter power imbalances between oppressed people” (i.e. those on the behalf of whom worker centres claim to speak); and

secondly, he believes that professional advocates are not automatically representative or “accountable to” the people they would like to speak for (Jenkins 2002, 57). In this regard, Jenkins sees the worker centre advocacy campaign as fundamentally “compromised,” since by and large, such efforts fail to decisively change the balance of power in favour of oppressed groups, thereby remaining ineffective. Furthermore, if workers centres are indeed able to make legislative gains, then according to Jenkins they are not substantive or long-lasting.

Jenkins claims that this ineffectiveness is itself a by-product of worker centres placing too much emphasis on subjective consciousness-raising, while at the same time underestimating the imbalance of power produced by the institutional division of labour between professional staff and worker members (57-8). Moreover, because of the overreliance on advocacy-based strategies, “[m]ember power is increasingly relegated to the ideal realm of symbolism and rhetoric” (58). Consequently, in Jenkins’ view, the prioritisation of advocacy means that worker centres too often fail to develop any “capacity for poor and working-class people to achieve structural changes in the future” (58) and against this trend, he would prefer to see worker centres “make real change.”

Jenkins thus suggests that many worker centres idealise “member power,” yet regularly undermine members’ efforts by calling on them to petition “elite sources of power” (59); a weakness that Gordon had also identified in the WPP fair wages campaign. By placing too much weight on the subjective transformation of workers (i.e. consciousness-raising) and by ignoring the structural conditions of oppression that workers face, the changes to which many worker centres aspire might subsequently be regarded as superficial. As Jenkins states: “Power is not simply a product of individual will” (60) but is instead a collective endeavour.

Moreover, he sees advocacy work as concessionary, since the range of solutions that it offers, rest too often on the efforts of “lawyers and social workers [to] mobilise elite institutions such as government agencies, foundations, media, or courts” (61). Thus, in his opinion, by

adopting institutional language, advocacy panders to elites, which in turn allows societal norms to go unchallenged. He extends this further by saying that advocacy reduces the function of members to “objects” or “symbolic representations” (62), implying the passivity of worker members in their prescribed roles. As previously mentioned, these symbolic identities are already racially and ethnically determined by the labour market, and therefore, if we take Jenkins’ view into consideration, it can be said that the worker centre advocacy-campaign further restricts the scope of action that immigrant workers might undertake.

The problem of “doubling down” on ethnic identity is also evident in Gordon’s WPP case-study, whereby immigrant day labourers had to present themselves favourably in line with hostile Republican ideology. She accepts however, that the passing of legislative reform was, “[l]ow in financial and political cost [for the senators, yet] high in presumed appeal to Latino voters” (Gordon 2005, 264). Accordingly, this somewhat confirms Jenkins’ claim that worker centre advocacy campaigns serve to reinforce the dominant notion that power can only come “from above” and as a result, any consequent changes “are limited to those [...] palatable to elite decision makers” (Jenkins 2002, 61). Jenkins thus states that worker members can only transcend such limitations “when they have the power to force the institutions they are confronting to accept their demands” (62).

Jenkins hence defines the ability to coerce dominant institutions as “social power” itself and thus by definition, the power of low-wage workers to change the social situation is not, “based on the group’s ability to *persuade* [...] but must [instead] be based in some capacity *coerce* the decision maker” (62). So, rather than being any “immutable quality,” social power is consequently seen by Jenkins as a “process in development,” or to put it more succinctly,

collective power “only becomes realised through organising with others” (63).²²

Moreover, if the concentrated social power of traditional labour unions was based on their ability to penetrate and halt production, it is difficult to see how worker centres organised along monoethnic lines might wield decisive social power, especially given that their potential is already diffused among a variety of industries and distributed across geographic space (see Section 1.6). Yet on this point, Jenkins advises that any evaluation of worker centre power is not simply a quantitative problem (i.e. not the traditional question of organising as many workers as possible), but instead relies on qualitative and strategic dimensions to be determined on a case-by-case basis. Traditionally, labour unions have been good at building *power in numbers*, yet in recent years US unions have done little to qualitatively develop their respective memberships and therefore, as Jenkins puts it, “their potential power is largely unrealised” (84). From this he concludes, collective power can only truly be developed by workers themselves, stating that it is worker members alone who ought to “determine the demands [and] direction of campaigns” (77) since only workers can have direct experiential knowledge of their own objective conditions, which in turn grants them the “capacity to develop social power” (83).

By contrast, advocacy-based campaigns often select groups with “little capacity” for the development of social power, as is clearly case with smaller monoethnic worker centres, whose participants are frequently scattered across different sectors of employment. The implication is thus quite clear: it is only by seeking alliances across racial and ethnic boundaries that worker centres can increase their capacity for social power, since interethnic solidarity would allow worker centres to target multiethnic sectors of employment and make broader appeals across the working class as a whole.

²² I would add that “organising with others” naturally suggests interethnic and multiracial organisation.

In this regard, it is reasonable to characterise Jenkins' polemic as an attempt to resolve the tension between Jennifer Gordon and Janice Fine (or more precisely, how they each attempt to measure the social power of workers centres).²³ Hence, in terms of their respective positions, Fine criticises worker centres for focusing on "the quality, as opposed to the quantity of members" (Fine 2009) since as a rule, large-scale enrolment is not the highest priority of most worker centres. To this end, she thinks that the scale of worker centres is constrained by their over-reliance on philanthropic funding and thus, recommends recruiting large numbers of fee-paying members. Conversely, in Gordon's WPP account, we see the intensive engagement of a small core group of highly motivated worker members along with the development of their qualitative voice (i.e. "the capacity to speak out and be heard" [Gordon 2005, 144]).²⁴ Yet, as Jenkins' frames it:

The development of social power must be understood both qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative level refers to the development of the membership in their individual capacities and in their ability to function democratically and assert their interests. The quantitative aspect is the size and power of the membership against the forces they are confronting (Jenkins 2002, 87).

To settle the quantitative/qualitative debate however, Jenkins recommends that each worker centre conduct their own power analysis to guide them "in choosing which campaigns to initiate based on [each] group's capacity to develop social power" (Lesniewski 2013, 29) since, if the group represented are too small or too marginal within their specific industry, then this limits

²³ I am grateful to Jacob Lesniewski for this insight (see Lesniewski 2013).

²⁴ Lesniewski characterises the debate between Gordon and Fine as differing opinions over "strategic choices and trade-offs" (Lesniewski 2013, 27).

their capacity for building intimidating coercive and collective power.²⁵

Confirming this view, Salvador Lledo of LA's Pilipino Worker Centre (PWC) states: "Even [if we were] to organise the whole Filipino [community] we could not solve the problem [...] Together with Latino and other ethnicities, we can solve the problem" (Milkman *et al.* 2010, 94). The inference here is that smaller ethnic groups can only have limited effectiveness in multiethnic sectors, which is one of the main reasons why the LA sweatshop organisation MIWON was originally formed. Multiethnic organising therefore has the capacity to increase the social power of less-well represented groups of workers by allowing them to "piggy-back" on larger ethnic groups and in so doing, grapple with economies of scale.

While Jenkins' power analysis informs this study, it should however be noted that he is not unchallenged in his assessment of what constitutes "social power" and as prominent organiser Jane McAlevey (also previously of MRNY) points out, Jenkins overdramatises the need for worker centre members to wholly take the lead. McAlevey thus does not accept that MRNY is simply an advocacy-based organisation, asserting that the Queens-based worker centre is instead an "organising organisation" within which worker members have collective and deliberative power (i.e. the members crucially decide on the hiring and firing of staff, budget approval and the identification of organisational priorities). As a result, she confidently states that MRNY participants do "understand [that] collective action is their *primary* source of leverage" (Milkman *et al.* 2014, 176; McAlevey).

An "organising organisation" is thus not merely defined by its capacity to "win specific legislation or material benefits" but instead defined by its ability to affect "long-term changes to

²⁵ Supporting this view, Lesniewski states, that without "the generation of social power, the advocacy power brought about by worker centres relies on staff-generated campaigns and risks the eventual stagnation of the worker centre movement" (Lesniewski 2013, 29).

the power structure of [...] wider society [by] shifting the balance of power towards to the organisation's base [and] away from the forces that oppress them" (176). So, while McAlevey agrees that there is merit to Jenkins' analysis, she disputes the view that traditional unions were "superior organisational forms," instead stating that his argument ignores the parlous state of the existing US unions, who in practice behave much like advocacy groups. Notably at present, union participation is for the most part passive, whereby members almost never take part in "militant, collective action" (176-7). Moreover, many of the industries that unions were formed around no longer exist and as such, McAlevey states there can be no direct return to historic forms of organisation.

So rather than dichotomising advocacy and organising, McAlevey instead stresses that MRNY engages in a "high-touch" model whereby "top-down strategic savvy and bottom-up mobilising" are combined. Hence, this "synergistic" approach across a "multi-issue spread [can yield results] that often exceed the sum of their parts" (176). McAlevey therefore concludes that, leverage is not simply a function of the type of organisation that workers form, "but rather [relates to] the skills of leaders and the extent of the active participation of the members" (185).

In turn, McAlevey suggests that if worker centres can prioritise their aims effectively; engage in consensual decision-making; hire dynamic staff; and retain a highly active participatory base, then they might avoid falling into the trap of sidelining worker members. This appears to be borne out in practice, since MRNY's high participation rate separates it from both the "do-nothing unions" and "risk-averse" advocacy groups, both of which "lack faith in the intelligence of ordinary people" (185). By contrast, McAlevey goes on to claim that "a large and highly participatory-base, strategic savvy [and] multi-issue spread," are what gives MRNY the edge. Furthermore, she adds that these developments could even see MRNY move into electoral politics in the future, something that would come pass in 2018 when the worker centre stepped into the electoral arena, endorsing actress-turned-politician Cynthia Nixon's campaign

to challenge Governor Andrew Cuomo.²⁶

While overall, McAlevey accepts Jenkins' criticism that early worker centres did not sufficiently assay and target structural oppressions, a new wave of worker centres is already addressing this deficit and consequently, Jenkins has retreated from some of his stronger claims. Rather than siding with either Gordon or Fine, however, McAlevey instead requests that worker centres blend qualitative and quantitative approaches to advocacy and organisation. Multiethnic organising should therefore not be seen as a strategy in isolation, but part of the broad spectrum of approaches available to worker centres (i.e. that which Piven and Cloward define as "repertoires of power" [Piven & Cloward 2000]).

Hence, multiethnic organising cannot simply be viewed as the solution to the riddle of "organising the unorganisable." If incorporated into a well-considered strategy however, multiethnic organising techniques might improve the internal process of worker centres in three crucial ways: (a) by expanding the participatory base, so that larger ethnic groups can assist smaller ones; (b) enhancing existing strategic knowledge while drawing on the experiences of a deliberative membership; and (c) unearthing differences among the membership, thereby widening the range of sub-issues that workers centres address. Significantly, it is this final measure, that would go the furthest in matching the heterogeneity of dispositions found within casualised labour contexts (see Section 5.3 for a further expansion on this topic).

As it currently stands, the monoethnic character of early worker centres is an organisational limit that emanates from the contradictory plight of immigrant workers, who are both "excluded from formal citizenship rights [while] fully participating in the national labour market" (Alberti 2008, 3). Thus, as Milkman states, multiethnic organising is crucial, not least

²⁶ Gay, M., 'Cynthia Nixon Gets Cuomo to Play to Type,' *New York Times*, 18 April 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/18/opinion/cynthia-nixon-cuomo-primary.html>

because immigrants who “are more interdependent for basic survival” (6) have a lot to teach individualistic native-born workers. However, if ethnic and racial differences can be overcome, then this seeming contradiction could “paradoxically [lead] to solidaristic developments,” since according to Milkman, group cohesion between worker centre members tends to be built around a shared “feeling of stigmatisation” (3).

1.4 Recent Organisational Developments Among Worker Centres

While many elements of these prior critiques remain relevant, the worker centre movement has somewhat outgrown earlier debates over the tension between advocacy and organisation, and while the ordering of priorities is an abiding concern, the strategies and tactics that worker centres employ will always be context-dependent and locally bound. This section therefore examines how, through experimentation; by adopting each other’s strategies; building the right networks; and seeking out alternate sources of funding, worker centres have in recent years been able to strengthen their efforts as effective organisers with memberships that are politically confrontational, and activism focused.

Nik Theodore (2019) states that the combination of both hiring hall services and organising is an effective pathway for many day labourer worker centres, who in recent years have been able to expand the “repertoire of worker collective action” and in effect, become “regulatory mechanisms uniquely suited to the problem of decentralisation, disorganisation and degradation that plague informalising segments of the construction industry” (158). This is evident in his case example of Casa Latina, which has long been successful in organising Seattle’s day labour market, where it has been able to “exert a regulatory ‘push’ towards higher standards” while restricting the supply of labour to abusive contractors. Likewise, Paul Apostolidis (2019) has documented the “exemplary success” of both Casa Latina and Voz in

their attempt to organise the shape-up corners where day labourers assemble, thereby bringing the centre to the corner; an organising strategy that SVP would also adopt in 2019 when they established new chapters in the outer boroughs in key strategic locations such as Corona Plaza, Queens (See Section 4.4).

More recently still, Theodore (2023) also describes how day labourer worker centres have, in wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and various ecological emergencies, been able to function as “disaster recovery hubs” (1). He states that such interventionist mutual aid efforts help day laborers “in navigating the hazards of disaster recovery,” and consequently have further potential in terms of developing more inclusive forms of workforce development and community education. Such relief activities are thus comparable with SVP’s mutual-aid and food pantry efforts, initiated during the pandemic, as well as the coalition they would thereafter build around essential worker protections and compensation.

As Takasaki, Kammer-Kerwick, Yundt-Pacheco and Torres (2022) also point out, in recent years many worker centres have begun refocussing on organisation and activism, since worker centres must always remain cautious when navigating advocacy practices that would “legally categorise them as labour organisations” under the National Labour Relations Act (NRLA). Meanwhile, Frantz and Fernandes (2018) have found that such activism-focused worker centres are much more likely to be politically confrontational, especially if they are worker-member led, engage in active deliberation and seek out alternate funding structures beyond any reliance on philanthropic foundations.

Yet, Frantz and Fernandes also warn that some in the worker centre movement have been too keen to embrace “neoliberal rationalities” in terms of employer alliances and entrepreneurial ventures, which itself is a by-product of the incentive structures that their philanthropic funders insist on. Here the authors cite examples of prominent worker centres that have “forgone both the practices and the discourse of confrontation” (646) while comparing

them to the Laundry Workers Centre United (LWC), the newly reorganized Domestic Workers United (DWU) and New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), all of whom have retained their combative organisational character by adopting the measures previously mentioned.

Some worker centres have accordingly deviated towards “conservatism, bureaucracy and hierarchy” due to the influence of the foundations, who as a condition of their sponsorship require worker centre organisers to expend considerable “time, resources and expertise” on deliverables, in turn, extending “neoliberal logic and practices” and shifting “priorities away from contentious politics and direct-action campaigns” (651). Yet, by contrast, organisations such as the DWU which started out with more “Marxian” frameworks of political education, appreciate that the fight must simultaneously be taken to both the “state and corporations,” thereby eschewing strategic conservatism and its “market-based ventures” (651-2). It is hence only by pursuing alternative sources of funding, while centring member-led priorities and allowing the rank-and-file to deliberate over strategic and tactical choices (653) that workers centres such as LWC, NYTWA and DWU have been able to maintain their combative functions.

Furthermore, Jessica Garrick (2021) suggests that there is certainly room within the movement for workers centres that strike a balance between the emphasis on advocacy and organization; somewhat confirming McAlevey’s view that worker centres are “hybrid” organisations, that flexibly combine multiple strategic orientations. Since, when compared to traditional unions, most centres are not so much ideologically driven, but instead respond to the deep structural changes that currently face low-income workers within their specific locales. Along these lines, Garrick subsequently identifies a divergence between (i) multi-sector worker centres, concentrating on advocacy and policy reform, and (ii) those that focus on sector-specific industries where significant agreements can be won (see also Codero-Guzmán 2015). The difference between the two categories, she explains, is often geographic and as a result, remains contingent on each centre’s distinct local challenges. It should thus be noted that the

strategic orientations chosen by individual worker centres consequently depend on the level of development that each worker centre has achieved to date.

In this regard, Tom Juravich (2018) states that both unions and worker centres “operate in distinct arenas of power against fundamentally different adversaries,” (105) and while Garrick (2021) accepts there is a degree of convergence between industry-focused worker centres and the mainstream unions, Juravich opines that the “larger movement for worker justice needs to have activity at all these levels” (105). Juravich hence updates the debate between McAlevey and Jenkins by documenting instances in which worker centres have used “multiple forms of power,” (104) subsequently stating that even “small justice” offers low-wage workers meaningful relief. To this extent, he believes that the unions in turn, have done well to adopt worker centre strategies; for example, when during the campaign to Fight for \$15, the SEIU and Teamsters were able to reach out to SeaTac employees and by blending “traditional union organising with deep community relations that reached across, faith culture and language boundaries,” thereby creating a series of strategies and organising drives not unlike those familiar to worker centres (Rosenblum 2017, 173).

In the final analysis, this means that “[r]ather than returning to the glory days of the economic power of industrial unions,” which before now McAlevey had dismissed as a possibility, “a revival of the labour movement should just instead begin with a new outward social justice orientation and use multiple sources of power” (Juravich 2018, 113). This determination therefore aligns well with the efforts of successful worker centres, who for several decades have been flexibly working along the twin axes of both advocacy and organising. As a result, Juravich does not see the worker centre model as either an alternative or rival to mainstream unions, but instead complimentary in struggles occurring at multiple scales against different types of adversaries. With this in mind, he suggests that the mainstream labour movement has much to learn from worker centre orientations and consequently, should treasure

the autonomy of workers centres and their diversity of tactics, rather than attempting to co-opt them directly.

In this regard, Lee, Lopez and Gonzalez-Vasquez (2022) have also championed the diversity of worker centre activity and their variegated strategies, highlighting how the ability of worker centres to organise across “multiple systems,” and “a range of systemic injustices impacting low-income BIPOC communities” (including housing, immigration and employment) has, as a result, created multiple “pathways to fuller social, economic and political participation” (3). Furthermore, the authors identify California as having the best-established worker centres, which have successfully built “working-class coalitions across race/ethnicity and immigration status” (4) to combat multi-valent oppressions. As they go on to explain, that this has only been possible in California because worker centres there have not only improved low-wage industry standards, but “also address other systems, such as immigration and criminal justice, that perpetuate inequality” (10).

To this degree, worker centres have been largely successful in advancing systemic change by forming strategic coalitions with each other and at times the unions, a dynamic which is often mutually beneficial since while unions still have much to offer in terms of material resources, they often lack the deep community reach that worker centres have so far achieved. It is hence by “partnering up” that the Los Angeles Black Worker Centre, the LA Coalition Against Wage Theft, California Coalition for Worker Power, the California Domestic Workers Coalition, ICE Out of California and the National Day Labourer Network have all made significant local, state and federal gains.

Such coalitions in recent years have consequently built meaningful solidarity among diverse groups of low-income workers by reaching out to individuals facing “intersectional disadvantages,” for example: “a Pilipina immigrant who identifies as transgender” yet who is disadvantaged when compared to their “white, male, native born counterparts” (10). Hence, by

crafting substantive appeals to workers previously considered on the margins, worker centre coalitions have, as a result, been able to leverage “the key strengths of participating organisations to achieve win-win results for everyone” (11).²⁷

As Héctor R. Cordero-Guzmán (2015) states, the emerging infrastructure of sector-based worker centre networks has been able to take on “the largest segments of the low wage labour market” (32) and in turn, actively contest the exclusions of these most excluded of workers. If during the early-2000s worker centre networks were “few and far between,” (41) by coming together and collaborating over geographic conditions and around specific campaigns (see Cordero-Guzmán, Izvanariu & Narro 2013) worker centres have been able to pool resources and information while combining their strategies. Thus, by coordinating labour market intermediation in a range of key sectors, including “construction, landscaping, demolition, and labourer sectors; the restaurant industry; domestic workers; the home health care sector; and a range of other sectors,” [Cordero-Guzmán 2015, 42] worker centre coalitions have been able to overcome the aforesaid limitations of scale and organise across the ethnic and racial boundaries that divide low-income workers.

Additionally, it should perhaps be further mentioned that in recent years there has been a substantial growth of Black worker centres, that have emerged in response to the multi-scalar black employment and incarceration crisis. For example, Equity and Transformation (EAT) is a Chicago-based worker centre that focuses on informality and the high rates of unemployment found among the city’s Black working class (Theodore *et al* 2021). Consequently, in an attempt to organise informality in Chicago, the centre has focused on “bootleg economies” and in this regard, bears some comparison to Street Vendor Project since EAT mainly organises among

²⁷ An approach innovated during an earlier period of struggle when Sojourner Truth Organisation sought encourage white workers to fight for the advancement of workers of colour, even if there were no direct benefits to themselves beyond enhancing worker solidarity overall (See Section 2.4).

people who work “multiple hustles” to survive and has, in response to the multitude of problems facing by these most informal of workers, crafted a multi-system approach, which also includes efforts to bridge the African American and immigrant day labour situation in the city, since informality in general sits at a “nexus of system failures” (28-9).

Steven Pitts (Fine & Narro *et al* 2018; Pitts) has noted however, when commenting on the question of power-building among Black worker centres, that there are often issues of sustainability, since they tend affiliate with each other, yet at present, are under-resourced. Accordingly, Pitts states that while coalition-building is largely beneficial, by overextending themselves, worker centres risk becoming too “multiservice” (i.e. the “Jack of All trades [and] masters of none” [135]). Furthermore, he states that there are currently enormous pressures for Black worker centres to enter into larger progressive coalitions, yet he believes that they can only do so with the “integrity and power” (136) which they derive from their grassroots and local-serving character. However, Pitts sees a way forward and believes that by sharing information, tactics and experience, a wider “community of learning” about the impact and specificity of racial contexts might be established.

Nonetheless, building solidarity within the context of neoliberalism’s multiple systems of failure is never straight forward, since informal labour markets tend to produce widely heterogenous subjects that are consequently difficult to categorise (see Section 5.3) and thus, in the next section, I will examine how “flexible accumulation,” an experimental mode of neoliberal value extraction, innovated in New York, has ultimately entrenched ethnic boundaries while radically reconfiguring city’s vending regulations and the spatial relations therein.

1.5 Flexible Accumulation in the Entrepreneurial City

Following the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, the neoliberalisation of New York brought about a radical restructuring of the city, which included the managed decline of the city's previously generous welfare system. This reordering of political priorities was therefore an attempt by New York's administrators to restore investor confidence, an effort that was facilitated by the city's public sector unions who agreed to irreversible layoffs and the use of public pensions to pay down the city's debt (see Moody 2007). This cross-class capitulation brought union officials into line with the aspirations of the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC), who at the time sought to revive the city's bond value by urging fiscal restraint, while at the same time abandoning the city's working-class population to austerity.²⁸

This unprecedented transformation ushered in what Kim Phillips-Fein has described as a "bewildering shift in priorities" (Phillips-Fein 2017, 8) for New York and its inhabitants, who in the final instance, neither the local state nor the Federal government were willing to bail out. Yet, as is often misconstrued, this paradigmatic shift was not simply the product of neglect, since on one hand, it was the consequence of a capital strike by New York's financial elite, while on the other, it was the deliberate result of political choices made by successive mayors who throughout the 70s had struggled to balance the books. As Phillips-Fein states, this transformation was not demanded by "free market zealots or right-wing political leaders," but instead imposed "[by] liberals who believed [...] that New York had to make deep budget cuts,

²⁸ Michelle Esther O'Brien's review of *Fear City*, 'Organised by Crisis' interrogates the structural causes of the fiscal emergency, reading Robert Brenner's account of global overcapacity in manufacturing against David Harvey's over-generalisation of neoliberal austerity measures: <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/book-review/organised-crisis>

drive a hard bargain with its unions, streamline services, improve efficiency, and reinvent its government” (9).

This signalled profound shift in the social-democratic liberal agenda, moving from post-War embedded liberalism towards a neoliberal regime of open-ended urban governance, which in turn, had radical implications for the use of public space. Hence, New York’s fiscal crisis and attendant experiments in austerity brought about novel forms of competition that further divided the low-income inhabitants of the city. Meanwhile, white flight threatened the urban centre with devaluation and subsequently, central city neighbourhoods were allowed to decay for the benefit speculators. Moreover, the loss of the city’s middle-class tax base undermined New York’s ability to provide welfare support for the remaining urban poor, leaving the residual unemployed and sub-proletariat to fend for themselves.

By the mid-Seventies global deflation had “put pressure on the employment base of many urban regions,” (Harvey 1989, 254) in turn leading to a historically low demand for labour. Moreover, this was accompanied by a programme of spatial de-concentration²⁹ that relocated black and other minority populations away from urban centres (Moody 2007; Wacquant 2007). Caught in the midst of these emergent conditions, New York’s immigrant population therefore looked to the margins of the economy to find novel employment, which among other things, included street vending; an occupation with a long tradition in New York, yet in recent decades has become erroneously associated with the informal economies of the developing world.

New York’s relatively generous welfare system upon which the urban poor had

²⁹ Spatial de-concentration was the term given to a federal government programme initiated by the Department of Urban Housing (HUD) to socially cleanse black and other minorities from the inner cities. This ‘hidden agenda’ was discovered by housing activists in 1979 and as such, the programme was enacted through the creation of laws which benefited landlords under the guise of ‘fair housing’ and ‘housing mobility’: <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/spatial-deconcentration-dc>

previously depended was instead swapped out for expanding informality, thereby matching “the rise of the entrepreneurial city,” a development that was itself a consequence of increased competition between US cities and other global metropolises as they vied for position in the international division of labour (Harvey 1989, 255). Accompanying this inter-urban rivalry, however, was an emergent mode of accumulation that David Harvey calls *flexible accumulation*, which also brought to the city flexible currents of capital and labour mobility. In the case of New York, this required the generation of a business-friendly low-tax environment, quite antithetical to the gritty blue-collar image that the city had previously enjoyed throughout the last century. Furthermore, by making the city more appealing to businesses seeking to relocate, it was hoped that the tax base might eventually be repaired. As such, public-private partnership now functioned as a “subsidy for affluent consumers,” while simultaneously incentivising “powerful command functions to start in town at the expense of local collective consumption for the working class and poor” (256).

Because of this drive to attract new businesses, cities like New York were forced into innovation and investment, developing experiential attractions for tourists and shoppers, such as malls, stadia and theme parks. Following Lefebvre, Harvey remarks that for the transformation of urban governance to be successful, the use of public space must be radically reconfigured, since “[any] project to transform society must [...] grasp the complex nettle of the transformation of spatial practice” (256). In New York this included the practice of gentrification; or to put it another way: “class war [...] at the level of the built environment” (Davis 1992, 228). In turn, this generated a demand from businesspeople for the securitisation of public space in high value districts, such as Lower Manhattan, Midtown and more recently Hudson Yards; all spaces which are effectively now treated as private.

Urban researcher, Ryan Thomas Devlin points out that this enclosure of public space drew class battle lines across New York in what became a struggle over “symbolic versus lived

space” (Devlin 2010, 52). This was no more apparent than with the “cleaning up” of Times Square, a central district in which many vendors still work. In such high-value districts, the painting symbolic prestige has been “critical to the extraction of value from urban space” (52) and therefore, in the view of building owners and businessmen, the presence of immigrants on the street is at odds with the city’s revitalised image. To this extent, neoliberalisation might be characterised as a struggle over “spatial representation,” which in the case of New York distorted the scale and scope of the vending laws, since appearances suddenly became paramount if the city’s image was to be renovated.

This recodification of public space was principally driven by the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): local chambers of commerce representing different quarters of the city, through which wealthy stakeholders allocated the funds for regeneration. Yet, to make good on their investment, districts such as Lower Manhattan and Midtown had to be socially cleansed with help of the NYPD, who were supported in this role by local private security firms acting directly on behalf of the BIDs (for example, the Downtown Alliance operating around WTC, Wall Street and Battery Park). It was this drive towards ‘public safety’ which subsequently allowed wealthier middle-class residents in these districts to practice social insulation, both from the homeless and street vendors, who are arguably are the most visible appearance of immigrants and people of colour on the streets of New York.

In response to flexible accumulation the city’s poor were in turn, forced to “practice both new and well-tried survival strategies” (Harvey 1990, 260) if they were to avoid becoming an underclass. For the urban sub-proletariat, who have neither the property nor finances to command space, surviving within this restructured economic environment required “frequent interpersonal interactions” (240) just to generate a basic income, due in part to the overall scarcity of exchange values and formal labour opportunities. In Harvey’s account, therefore, the matrix of social relations through which these interactions occur is one of “mutual aid and

predation [combined with] tight yet conflictual interpersonal social bonding in both public and private spaces” (260).

This results in an “often-intense attachment to place and ‘turf’ [...] because it is only through active appropriation that control over space is assured” (260-1). Here Harvey highlights the “hustling economy” or to it put another way, the spatial contestation between the city and its poorer inhabitants who have come to be seen as unwanted elements (cf. Neil Smith 1996). Yet, as is the case with street vendors, it is precisely these elements who require the appropriation of small packets of public space for their continued subsistence and as a result, increased social contestation often calls into play ethnic, religious, racial and class discriminations, as different sections of the city became re-ghettoised.

This has hence been a growing trend since the mid-60s, after which the US experienced a large increase in its surplus urban poor; a growth further supplemented by the influx of immigrants from rural regions of developing countries. As Harvey notes, parallel to this expansion, labour markets have become increasingly informal, skewing in highly gendered manner³⁰ and as a result, “vulnerable groups, such as female-headed households, have been plunged deeper into the mire of poverty, thus creating zones where phenomena like the feminisation of poverty became dominant” (262).

Under flexible accumulation, women therefore play an important role in the organisation of informal sectors of work, whereby their labour is typically entrepreneurial in character, due to a “strong pressure [...] to find a living of almost any sort” (261). As such, women have tended to take up professions that allow them to combine childcare and work, thereby uniting productive and reproductive functions (see Graaf & Ho *et al.* 2015; Dunn). Under these conditions, vendors

³⁰ The increase in informal and feminised labour typically includes practices on the margins of legality, with domestic work and sex work being oft cited examples.

and their families might thus be viewed as resourceful street workers, seeking to accommodate the demands of reproductive labour, while at the same time escaping the situation of degraded work under neoliberalism (Doussard 2016). This double labour, much of which goes unpaid, therefore represents the hyper-exploitation of women, something that Kathleen Dunn (see Section 1.7) has highlighted in her study of Latina vending families and their modes of self-organisation (Graaf and Nao Ha *et al.* 2015; Dunn).

To make things more challenging, flexible accumulation has also reinforced political conservatism, albeit in the case of New York, implemented by self-described liberals (Phillips-Fein 2017). Meanwhile, immigrant worker centres and other participatory civic organisations have only been able to reactively defend against such transformations. This subsequently accords with Harvey's account; whereby flexible accumulation erodes the potential for mutual aid since entrepreneurialism "disintegrates" the organisational capacity of the working poor. It is this increase in entrepreneurial activity that consequently presents a substantial obstacle to would-be organisers, since it heightens competition among the sub-proletariat along the lines of kinship and ethnicity (for an expansion on these themes, see Section 5.3).

Harvey remains optimistic however, since flexible accumulation rests upon a "highly fragile patterning of urban investment" (Harvey 1990, 268) due to its tendency to oversaturate urban space with short-lived spectacles, thereby inclining it to be both crisis-prone and highly susceptible to periodic slumps induced by over-accumulation. Nevertheless, this also provides hope for organising, since, despite organised labour's relative weakness, the tendency towards periodic crises produces a series of political potentials that worker centres can well exploit.

Harvey therefore sees flexible accumulation as occasioning a new style of organisation that arises, "through the social consolidation of 'informal sector' activities as cooperative and worker-controlled endeavours" (269). Hence, if viable new forms of worker self-representation are to emerge "as a feasible alternative to capitalism," they can only do so if grassroots worker

organisations are able to grapple with the “realities of place and community” (269-71).

1.6 Informal Urbanism on the Ground

While the transformation of public space that emerged under flexible accumulation has created a spatial regime of command and control at the level of the local state, counterintuitively this mode of governance ultimately rests on legal ambiguity and uncertainty. The disruptive and deregulatory paradigm that is flexible accumulation has therefore established novel technologies of spatial governance to adjudicate precisely how the urban environment ought to be used. To this extent, it modulates and manages its urban subjects through exclusion and dispossession on a racialised basis.

Ryan Devlin who previously worked as a researcher at SVP states, however, that the administration of public space in New York is not simply “guided by formal laws,” but is instead supervised by “store managers, building managers, police officers and even vendors themselves” (Devlin 2010, 1). Accordingly, Devlin asserts that it is the very ambiguity and complexity of current vending laws, applied and administered in an uneven fashion, that leaves New York street vendors exposed to daily harassment from the NYPD. As such, administrative informality is enforced in an arbitrary and discretionary manner and subsequently, can be characterised as the racialising operation intrinsic to contemporary neoliberal urban space and its production of use values.³¹ The current regulatory administration of New York’s vending industry is thus best described as a flexible mode of management well suited to profit

³¹ For a broader explanation of the function of “discretionary” police powers under capitalism, see Neocleous, M., *A Critical Theory of Police Power: The Fabrication of the Social Order*, Verso (2000).

maximisation under flexible accumulation.

Under this informal regime, vendors tend to frequently change location based on where they get the least harassment, often moving to the lower-resourced outer boroughs where enforcement is somewhat weaker and there is less chance of being fined. This subsequently produces a spatial distribution that Devlin asserts is not shaped by “actual laws,” but instead reflects the power of property rights over the dispossessed, thereby opening up both challenges and potentials for contestation, principally through the demystification of the vending regulations. Thus, under the aegis of calling for “better” laws, Devlin sees the social power of vendors as crucially linked to their collective capacity to advocate for the clarification of the rules, since vendors are daily harassed through the flexible and selective interpretation of the law. By consequence, if the vending codes were to be simplified and made more transparent, then in Devlin’s view, the vendors as a class would reap collective benefits.

During the shift towards flexible governance, however, rather than pursuing any particular package of central state reform, the NYCC instead sought out private market-based solutions, and thus fittingly Devlin concentrates on the patchwork manner in which vending regulations are enforced (i.e. through, “negotiations, threats, harassment and intimidation” [iv]). While observably dysfunctional, from the perspective of the BIDs and city administrators, the informal regulation this complicated sector can be seen to be as both cheap and resource lite and as a result, responsibility for enforcement is typically uncoordinated, haphazardly falling to a variety of city departments and often delegated to private security interests (or even, as Devlin points out, handed over to members of the public who are encouraged to report “quality of life” infractions to the NYC 311 hotline).³²

³² NYC 311 is a non-emergency phone number that allows New Yorkers to report so-called ‘quality of life’ complaints. Consequently, it is often used in gentrifying areas to complain about vendors and summon the police. See Stolpher,

Devlin hence uses the term *legal informality* to describe the situation of both the vendors and those who enforce the vending rules. The resulting state of legal uncertainty might therefore be viewed as “a flexible, *decentralised* mechanism of control” (17) and subsequently, Devlin goes on to demonstrate how informality has become New York’s dominant administrative logic; one that is principally enacted through the coordinates of “law, space and power.” Consequently, the ensuing farrago around vending regulations does not, “indicate a failure of control, but rather, a different sort of control: one that is dispersed, flexible, variegated and well suited to the imperatives of neoliberal urban governance” (v).

Beginning in the 1970s, legislative informality in New York was developed in concert with the expansion of informal labour markets. As such, the sociological use of the term ‘informality,’ which originally described casual employment in developing urban Africa and India (see Hart 1973; Breman 1976; Bromley 1979) came to full-prominence in the 1980s, when urbanists studying the cities of the Global North began to recognise a parallel, yet proportionally smaller informal economy emerging within the US (Blomley 1978; Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia 1989; Castells & Portes *et al.* 1989; Sassen-Koob 1989). These early studies of informal urban labour practices in turn upended previous teleological assumptions which, prior to this, conjectured that immigrant workers would, as a matter of progress, be drawn into the modern industrial workforce, thereby shedding the many of the customary informal practices of their home countries, including street vending.

Janice Perlman (1976) was the first to call into question the marginality of the urban immigrant poor, challenging the prevailing notion that formal employment and informality were mutually exclusive. Furthermore, Perlman also demonstrated that casual labour markets

H., ‘New Neighbours and the Over-Policing of Communities of Colour,’ Community Service Society, 6 January 2019: <https://www.cssny.org/news/entry/New-Neighbors>

emerging in the Global North were unconnected to levels of development but were instead the product of polarising inequality under nascent neoliberalism. Hence, detailed ethnographic research into New York's informal labour markets would thereafter proliferate (Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia 1989; Stepick 1989; Sassen-Koob 1984, 1989); a body of work which solidified the view that informality was an emergent characteristic of the late-capitalist city, which, due to transformations in the economic base, promoted different sectors of employment unevenly.

This discovery allowed urbanists to question whether informality in the post-industrial core had reduced poverty at all. To this end, Saskia Sassen examined in detail the disjunctive growth of casual labour markets within developed economies, in turn, concluding that the study of "immigration, ethnicity and race" needed to be incorporated into global city-type approaches to better comprehend contemporary urban labour markets (Sassen 2001, 247). As such, her polemic overturned the widespread assumption that informal labour practices were being imported from the periphery to the cities of the Global North and as a result, Sassen would come to see informality, "[...] not as a 'developmental lag' or as 'exogenous to the advanced sectors of the economy,' but precisely a consequence of the loss of the ability for labour unions to formalise work" (247).

Sassen hence sees trending informality as "an emergent or developing 'opportunity' structure that avoids or compensates for various types of constraints" (289). In New York this would surface as garment sweatshop activity in neighbourhoods undergoing "partial residential and commercial gentrification" (289). The city's neoliberal turn was, therefore, accompanied by a notable proliferation of small-scale light industrial manufacturing shops in the outer boroughs, attended by a "type of neighbourhood sub-economy" (289) in which goods and services came to

be predominantly exchanged by immigrants within their own enclave communities.³³

The emergence of these local informal subeconomies subsequently had the effect cheapening manufacturing costs while at the same increasing “flexibility in the organisation of production” (Sassen 2010, 318). Furthermore, the expansion of casualised labour markets also served to lower the cost of social reproduction for low-income workers, making New York ever more attractive to immigrants. Food vending thus plays an important role in cheapening production costs overall since, as a result of reduced overheads, street vendors are able to affordably feed low-wage immigrant workers, labouring in local sweated industries.

If informality is hence the result of the spatial reordering of priorities under flexible accumulation, it is consequently also important to provide a thorough account of how “informality manifests in space” (Devlin 2010, 16). In this regard, Devlin goes on to describe how the geographic view of informality confers three main benefits. Firstly, it allows us to see informality not as an object of regulation, but instead as an emergent process produced by the state which in turn, facilitates the project of governance (Roy 2005, 149). Secondly, he asserts that the relationship between law and space should not be seen as fixed or absolute, but instead regarded as a social relationship that actively produces and structures space dependent on the flexible interpretation of the law. While thirdly, he argues that the geographic view better explains flexible accumulation itself, emerging as it has done through the concrete spatial reorganisation of the city; a transformation which cannot simply be viewed as the natural consequence of the neglect and failure of the state.

Thus, by inference, informality is not merely a “spatial disorder,” but rather “a sort of

³³ In essence, street vending can be categorised as exactly this type of informal service-sector activity. As described in section 3.6, many Latina pushcart vendors make a living serving hot food to immigrant workers in local auto-repair shops.

spatial precedent setting that informs an alternate and contextual politics” (Devlin 2010, 17) and accordingly, worker centres can be seen as an expression of this precedent, first appearing in New York at the tail-end of the 1970s and thereby, representing the re-emergence of an active immigrant working class, ready to contest their exclusions by formally reorganising themselves under the changed conditions of neoliberalism. It can hence be said that these initial local responses to the novel spatial tactics of neoliberal control under globalisation, emerged out of “the non-political, everyday activity of the poor” as they struggled to meet their daily needs (17). While in addition, Devlin further suggests that this conception of neoliberalism as “spatial precedent setting” helps us focus on “the ways in which individual and collective action by certain groups can congeal into a real challenge to the normative spatial order set by the city and development interests” (17).³⁴

As a global city, New York has inarguably been a paradigmatic site for informal urban theory, although for some, it is also city in which the divide between rich and poor is sometimes considered to be “relatively settled” (19). Yet, along these lines, Devlin disagrees with urbanists who would characterise the neoliberal-turn as “revanchist” (i.e. he does not perceive neoliberalisation to be an act of class revenge, wreaked by the rich against the city’s poor and the welfare provision on which they previously depended [cf. Smith 1996]). Such a reading only further deactivates space as a contestable dynamic and instead, Devlin would rather observe how the law is malleably interpreted on the ground to create “a shifting landscape of exclusion and permissiveness” (19). The direct observation of these variegated conditions therefore helps us develop better theories of spatial governance and ways to resist it.

³⁴ While highlighting exemplary instances where vendors have asserted the right to public space, Devlin finds an equivalence between Gordon’s practice of non-citizen citizenship and that which James Holston calls “insurgent citizenship” (Holston 1999): i.e. the practice of contestation which looks to extend political democracy into other spheres of social life.

While researching at SVP, the unpredictable character of enforcement is something that I regularly heard about from the vendors, whereby they would often complain about the cat-and-mouse game played with vending enforcement. For example, one Chinese vendor would describe to me precisely how inconsistent enforcement can be:

I was caught trying to sell a clear plastic bag to another vendor, which is forbidden since it's considered to be wholesaling. But the Peddler Taskforce was waiting nearby, undercover in the park, waiting for infractions. The Lower Manhattan vendors call these plainclothes police the 'Alphas' because they used to drive a [disguised] removal truck with a livery that read 'Alpha Moving' on the side.

Although anecdotal, this well reflects New York's haphazard regulatory spatial regime. Yet rather than representing the neglectful absence of proper governance, this discretionary and at times, predatory enforcement is typical of flexible control. So, while at first glance, the inconsistent application of the law appears as an anomaly derived from bureaucratic inefficiency or governmental intransigence, it quickly became apparent while working at SVP that legal informality constitutes a supple form of domination; one which operates continuously to displace the vendors from their spots.

Hence, in conclusion, Devlin brings into question the static certainty of the divide between New York's rich and poor, while in its place, introducing a framework for the spatial contestation of rights as developed by Henri Lefebvre and extended by David Harvey.³⁵ Within Harvey's interpretative framework, however, any discussion of rights must be set within its proper political and economic context, since under neoliberalism, "the inalienable rights of individuals to private property and the profit rate trump any other conception of inalienable rights

³⁵ See Harvey, D., 'Right to the City,' *New Left Review* 2008 (53): 23–40. Accessed here: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii53/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>

you can think of” (Harvey 2003). As such, Harvey views positive dispensations, such as freedom of speech and expression to be little more than “derivative rights.”

By contrast, Devlin considers this to be a somewhat pessimistic framing of rights-talk and instead, posits that civic entitlements within a community setting are not always defined by what is legal and juridical. He reminds us, therefore, that the state is not monolithic and as a consequence, not all rights-talk is necessarily concessionary. As he usefully points out, the US state is in fact multidimensional and composed of manifold scalar branches (i.e. the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government). It is hence with reasonable regularity that these various branches come into conflict, in turn producing legal and rights-based opportunities, or “fissures” within the regulatory economy. In practice, this means that SVP must pay close attention to political rivalries within the state, particularly given that the local state in New York is split between two competing administrations (i.e. that of the State Legislature in Albany and the NYCC which sits in Lower Manhattan).

A similar split between branches of government was also exploited by street vendors in Los Angeles in 2017, whereby they made appeals to the federal judiciary, in turn creating a political opportunity that allowed the vendors to push local politicians towards complete decriminalisation.³⁶ In an attempt to emulate this success, in October 2019 New York Senator for Queens, Jessica Ramos (D) sponsored State Senate Bill S6817: “An act to amend the general city law, in relation to the regulation of street vendors.” The state-level bill therefore proposes the legalisation of all sidewalk-vending in New York State, putting immediate pressure on the NYCC to pass their own vending reform bill: Intro 1116, which had languished in front of city council members for several years and accordingly, the prospect of state legislation provided SVP with increased leverage over the NYCC, since when compared to the far-

³⁶ Reyes, E. A., ‘After years of debate, LA legalises sidewalk vending: “This means freedom.”’ *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Nov 2018: <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-vending-legalize-20181128-story.html>

reaching implications of the state-level proposal, Intro 1116 suddenly seemed a lot more palatable.

1.7 Women Vendors and the Co-ethnic Flexible Family

If, as Harvey contends, informality is concomitant with the feminisation of labour under neoliberalism, then Kathleen Dunn begins her description of the Latina 'flexible family' (Graaf & Ha *et al.* 2015) by acknowledging that the urban informal sector continues to grow in both the Global North and South. Moreover, this workforce is mainly composed of low-income women who commonly work in highly precarious urban space. Over a series of studies therefore, Dunn examines how both gender and ethnicity have conditioned the organisational resources of three different street vendor organisations in New York: Street Vendor Project (SVP), VAMOS Unidos (now defunct) and Red Hook Food Vendors (RHFV). However, it is her exemplary case-study of RHFV, a group of ten Latina vending families from North-western Brooklyn, that advances important insights into how women vendors might organise under the conditions of flexible accumulation.

From the outset, Dunn asserts that neoliberalism and the attendant expansion of informality has "increased the social cost for poor and working-class families through degraded labour earnings and benefits" (20). As such, she sees the flexible family as working to absorb the cost of austerity, which has now become a permanent economic feature. Under such modified conditions, the Latina family might therefore be considered both a basic form of solidarity and potential haven from administrative sanctions, deployed by the city against the urban poor and immigrant working class. Yet, this assertion is not unproblematic, given that the family work unit has long been a mainstay of gender ideology under capitalist relations.

To qualify this, Dunn however cites Haraway, explaining how the family under capitalism

nevertheless, “operates in a dialectical relationship with modes of production” (Haraway 1991). Hence, if the contemporary mode of urban value formation is flexible accumulation, correspondingly, Dunn contends that the flexible family serves to bridge the divide between formal and informal labour; thereby responding to the “dynamics of dispossession [...] as a collective survival and mobility strategy [to] combat state-led attempts at eviction from the spaces they need for those strategies” (Graaf & Ho 2015; Dunn 20).

The strengthening of familial bonds among those on the lowest rungs of the economy has as a result, enabled immigrant families to “morally object” to the logic of market growth. By pooling time and resources, including their collective labour, the flexible family is consequently better able to organise “against dispossession” (20). Customarily, these strong familial ties are forged between kin-members connected through “blood and law,” yet these connections also extend to co-ethnic group members (see Hill-Collins 1993), enabling the extended family to dampen market competition between them and their kinship networks. Accordingly, Dunn sees the flexible family as dialectically constituted by both the fragmentation of formal labour markets and the subsequent disintegration of community:

Given that the family as an ideological construct is positioned in *opposition* to the vicissitudes of capitalist relations, it should not be particularly surprising that its bonds and forms may in fact be diversified and strengthened by the splintering effects that neoliberalism creates, in both its economic and spatial practices (Graaf & Ha *et al.* 2015; Dunn 20).

Dunn therefore contends that women’s work within the family, and specifically within vending families, is both “overproductive and under-recognised” (20) and consequently, it is women’s overtime, naturalised under capitalist gender relations, that grants the flexible family the capacity to absorb the costs of neoliberalism, due to the pivotal role that women play in sustaining the familial relations through their double labour (see Hochschild 1989).

Notably, 70% of all vendors working in New York's outer boroughs are women, with half of these being single mothers (for further details, see SVP women's survey *Vulnerable in Itself* [2019]) and consequently, working close to home allows unlicensed women vendors to care for their children within their local neighbourhoods (Milkman *et al.* 2014; Dunn). As previously mentioned, both legislative informality and artificial permit scarcity have created a highly gendered distribution of vendors across the city. As a result, legislators and administrators have long assumed the typical vendor to be a heteronormative, male breadwinner operating openly in public space; an assumption which at the scale of the family, reinforces gender norms in terms of market access. To this extent, it is in the outer boroughs that gender ideology intersects with race and class around the question of the permit scarcity and the right to market access, each combining to "produce quite differently coded bodies" in the eyes of the law (Graaf & Ha *et al.* 2015; Dunn 25).

As it currently stands, the bodies of women vendors are policed quite differently to their male counterparts (see Section 3.8) and within this context, Dunn considers the gender ideology of both work and space to be co-constitutive, while producing unequal outcomes. To this end, she states that: "In documenting the workplace politics of public space, gender emerges alongside race, class and nativity as a key structuring force of occupational segmentation and stratification" (2). It is this understanding which thereafter guides Dunn's inquiry into the self-organisation of women-led vending families, working in and around the sports fields of Red Hook and with whom she researched, in order to gain a better understanding of how Latina vendors work to supplement and sustain family livelihoods.

Geographically this has been possible around Sunset Park, where vending has been made attractive, precisely because of the absence of police and municipal oversight. Yet, this lack enforcement also means that robbery is not uncommon and as a result, these vulnerable Latina vendors have had to pull together in order to work safely. Accordingly, in Dunn's

description, RHFV is “an extended pan-Latin family,” working to together to face the challenges of street crime brought about by “large-scale disinvestment in the waterfront neighbourhood” (21).

This is clearly an example of how co-ethnicity around geographic origins and language can constitute a wider notion of “family.” By building and sustaining this co-ethnic network, the women were gradually able to expand their businesses into family enterprises, which sometimes included their husbands, but typically relied upon the work of nieces and daughters-in-law; in part because Latina women have important knowledge about culinary traditions. Moreover, Dunn observed that among these families, vending as an occupation tended to be passed between women in a form of “intergenerational transmission,” and while men sometimes do staff the vending carts, they are also much more likely to have formal work (see Section 5.3 about how exit from the formal labour markets is typically involuntary for women, thereby making informality a necessity).

The extended Latina family has consequently played a major role in RHFV’s approach to organising, and while the co-ethnic flexible family is principally a resource for making up the wage-deficit under flexible accumulation, its constitution has profoundly affected RHFV’s strategic choices, whenever asserting their rights. Thus, while pursuing the practices of non-citizen citizenship, RHFV were able to capitalise on their identity as immigrant women from working families, in order to make their case (typically deploying a “mom-and-pop”-type moral objection to market exclusions to blunt city’s well-worn broken windows rhetoric).³⁷ Despite the

³⁷ Here the use of “mom-and-pop” refers to the type of rhetoric commonly mobilised in support of brick-and-mortar stores and restaurants, which historically tended to be family-run small businesses. Responding to this “common sense,” SVP promotes the idea that vendors are small-scale businesses worthy of equal consideration. However, this determination sometimes comes into conflict with the perception of vendors as street workers. Subsequently, this creates tension from an organisational standpoint, since most vendors cannot operate as the same scale as larger and better capitalised businesses.

success of RHFV, Dunn states that, to date, very little academic commentary has been made about the women-led flexible family, further suggesting that scholars and organisers should pay much closer attention to its affordances.

Undoubtedly, the flexible Latina family is both a coping-mechanism and organisational resource that SVP would naturally want to draw on, especially since a numerically significant portion of project's members are Latinas. Similarly, during my time at SVP, the notion of vendors as a 'family' was regularly invoked, notably by visiting LA vendor Faustino Martinez, a shaved ice seller from South Central, who ended his address to SVP vendors by saying: "I can truly say that street vendors are my family." Yet, according to Crystal Stella Becerril, the lead organiser of SVP's Women's Committee, this identification with 'family' as a potential base of solidarity is somewhat problematic, since vending families are by necessity competitively territorial and hence in Section 4.3, she queries how far the notion of the Latina kinship network as a pre-existing basis for organising might be stretched.

1.8 Implications for Multiethnic Organising

Both Devlin's analysis of flexible enforcement and Dunn's complimentary research into the affordances of the flexible family have implications for the study of multiethnic organising at SVP. The intensification of competition under flexible accumulation clearly has ramifications for organising, given that neoliberalism's recent paradigmatic shifts in space, power, law and employment have further divided working people along racial and ethnic lines. As Devlin points out, this fragmentation has had profound consequences for New York's vendors, who are "a tremendously diverse group in terms of race, ethnicity, and language," yet deleteriously, this heterogeneity has the further effect of "inhibiting collective action" (Devlin 2010, 111). As Dunn explains however, the neoliberal turn has also reinforced the ethnically constituted vending

family, working within a sector that is increasingly feminised. Hence, if SVP is to truly grapple with the vending hierarchy, then it must also give due consideration to the feminisation of the industry and accordingly, modified strategies for both base-building and organisation must be pursued in order to tap into the emergent potentials found among Latina vendors.

Traditionally, worker centres and other grassroots organisations have responded to these shifting priorities by attempting to organise monoethnically at the margins. By contrast, SVP faces a different set of concerns, since the project is obliged to simultaneously organise across multiple ethnic boundaries and distinctions to obtain as much political leverage as possible. Yet, as the SVP women's survey (2019) was able to confirm, the elucidation of ethnic- and gender-specific concerns among Latina vendors would open new potentials for solidarity (see Section 3.6). However, these issues which were mainly socially reproductive in character, were not initially considered to be universally generalisable across the entire SVP membership and for the time being, Lift the Caps would remain the project's legitimate organisational focus since it carried with it the aspiration of all vendors.

The campaign to reform street vending is thus somewhat emblematic of multiethnicity at the project and as such, the pivot towards the sectional organisation of Latina pushcart vendors was a cautious one, given that in the past the winning of partial rights for one vendor group over another has only served to further entrench racial and ethnic differences already present within the vending hierarchy. As Ryan Devlin (2010) recalls, veteran vendors won the right to sell in the Midtown-box during the mid-90s,³⁸ whereby they successfully secured the right to sell in this lucrative, yet competitive district of Manhattan. Ultimately however, this notable success only served to increase the veteran's sense of seniority in relation to other vendor groups and

³⁸ Martin, D., 'Veterans Fighting for Right to Peddle in Midtown Once Again' *New York Times*, June 6, 1995: <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/06/nyregion/veterans-fighting-for-right-to-peddle-in-midtown-once-again.html>

subsequently, their victory forces us to reconsider the limits of rights-based contestation, especially when conducted on behalf of a particular subgroup (43).

As Devlin recounts, in their fight for recognition the veterans were able to utilise pre-existing rights: namely an obscure Civil War-era law which granted them spatial and economic inclusion. Consequently, through the creative interpretation of this law, the veteran vendors were able to effectively challenge the NYCC, who prior to this had only been concerned with the rights of building owners. Yet remarkably, this victory had a pronounced downside, in that it further limited market access for immigrant vendors, since the campaign only served to protect the licences of veteran vendors over all other types of licence.³⁹

Devlin thus presents the so-called “Battle of Fifth Avenue” as a cautionary tale, allowing him to surmise that “once rights are won, they have the potential to de-politicise, and can even be a regressive force” (43). Accordingly, the veterans’ victory was limited to a defence of their own specialised rights and as a result, this serves as a warning about rights-based struggles in general, particularly whenever citizenship is involved. Devlin subsequently concludes that the winning of partial rights for a specific vendor subgroup can be counterproductive if such rights do not accrue to all classes of vendor. Moreover, not all veterans welcomed this increase in privileges, and as veteran vendor and coin seller Anand would later comment: “Even though I served my country and have a military veteran’s licence, I wanted to get involved in SVP because I thought this situation of veterans having greater rights was very *unfair* on everybody else.”

As the previous director of SVP Sean Basinski remarked, veterans are a comparatively difficult group to organise. SVP did at one time have a successful veteran’s committee, yet its

³⁹ Whenever I conducted outreach around Fifth Avenue, the veterans would often express nativist and patriotic sentiments, along with the belief that they had greater rights than immigrant vendors.

cohesion was dependent on the participation of committed veteran leaders (i.e. charismatic figures who enjoyed a good standing among the veteran vendor community). Once these lynchpin members were no longer able to participate, however, the veteran's committee faltered. While furthermore, as is evident in the hearing for Intro 1116 (see Section 4.2), there has also been notable occasions when veteran vendors have sided with the BIDs, something which appears to be partly a consequence of their nativity and the relative privilege that the veteran vendor's licence affords; whereby they enjoy the widespread public perception of being 'good vendors' who have won the specialised right to sell by sacrificing for their country.

Conversely, the downside of the good vendor stereotype is that it encourages negative perceptions about immigrants as 'takers' and as a result, Devlin believes the winning of differential rights has "closed the door to a more radical and inclusionary reimagining of space" (53). In summary, if we wish to consider vendors as spatial protagonists, then SVP's campaigns must ultimately be oriented towards the collective benefit of all vendors, lest the winning of rights for some entrenches the vending hierarchy further. Yet admittedly, there are also organisational drawbacks that emanate from the strategic priority of organising vendors around one universal advocacy effort (i.e. Lift the Caps), since despite the legitimacy of SVP's principal campaign, legislative reform has not always guaranteed the active participation of members. In turn, this insight lends credence to Jenkins' critique that the advocacy campaign around which most worker centres attempt to mobilise, does not confer automatic benefits in terms of organising.

Yet, as Dunn's intervention demonstrates, the Latina flexible family has proven to be a reliable organisational resource for RHFV; an approach that was thought to be replicable at SVP. Along the same lines, and equally inspiring was the visit of the Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign, whose organisers explained to SVP's staff and members that they won collective benefits for vendors in LA by first addressing gender-specific issues important to Latina

vendors. This campaign took just over 10 years, winning rights for an estimated 50,000 street vendors, many of whom were elderly and as such, their social security was not sufficient to live on. Much like SVP's vendor members, the majority of LA vendors are undocumented and while some were formerly incarcerated, many more were women vendors (and therefore, typically single mothers and sole breadwinners).

From outset, the LA organisers faced the difficult prospect of base-building among a highly variegated workforce distributed over a huge area. For example, Latina vendors are mostly concentrated around MacArthur Park and East LA, while many of the vendors found in South Central were African American. At first, these black vendors were reluctant to join in with what they saw as an "immigrant campaign," and therefore to overcome this hesitancy, the Leadership for Urban Renewal (LURN) and the East LA Community Corporation (ELACC) had to train different sets of vendors from each neighbourhood. In total, they were able to set up eleven local neighbourhood groups, each comprised of a core membership of around 20-50 vendors. Through these local chapters, they then arranged quarterly meetings, which according to the organisers "was the structure of how we kept people together." However, of particular interest to SVP, the LURN/ELACC coalition were extremely successful in organising one specific group: Latina vendors, for whom the experience of domestic violence was near ubiquitous.

It was the elucidation of gender-based violence that subsequently gave organisers a route in and thereafter, they were able to build strong emotional bonds between the women, providing a firm foundation on which solidaristic base-building could begin. As one of the LA vendor members described, up until then women vendors had suffered in silence:

I started vending after my husband lost his job. For me, it was a flexible job that allowed for childcare whilst earning. [The LAPD] would regularly scare us and give us tickets for being on the sidewalk. This was really frightening, since at the time the fines were

marked as a 'criminal ticket.' I felt it was unjust to be criminalised for trying to support my family. Yet [...] participating in the organisation allowed us to learn about the law, and that's when we realised, we could unite to make a difference, since there were so many of us women working in the shadows.

Following on from this testimony, LURN's executive director Rudy Espinoza and the Director of Community Organising at ELACC, Carla DePaz explained the importance of first organising Latina vendors, before being able to expand their efforts to include other constituencies and ethnicities.

By first building trust and then conducting political education around the issue of domestic violence, the LA organisers were thereafter able to develop a highly motivated and participatory core group, that was later to become the backbone of a much broader campaign. In this manner, the LA campaign was subsequently able build on the collective experiences of the women by drawing a straightforward analogy between gendered violence in the home and the harassment that the women experienced on the streets at the hands of the LAPD.

In addition, LA council member Curren Price (District 9 South Central) also spoke during the visit to SVP, explaining how as a politician, he was first attracted to the campaign to decriminalise vending as a poverty alleviation measure, which would provide immediate relief for his mainly African American constituents, who at the time were suffering from high unemployment.⁴⁰ Yet, while there was an extant black vending community in South Central, mostly selling general merchandise such as t-shirts, this vendor group was not initially interested in joining the campaign, since it was widely considered to be an immigrant-only

⁴⁰ “[District 9] has the highest poverty rate and the lowest median income of any council district; unemployment is high and business activity is low; and it has the city’s highest percentage of high school dropouts, with comparatively few non-profits on hand to provide services.” Ed., ‘Curren Price in City Council District 9,’ *Los Angeles Times*, 5 May 2013: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/endorsements/la-ed-end-council-district-9-20130505-story.html>

cause.

Despite such setbacks however, Latina members concentrated around MacArthur Park were able to win series of small gains in East LA and San Pedro, before expanding their organising activities citywide. It was the vigour and exemplary teamwork of this core group of tenacious women vendors that eventually convinced other ethnic groups to lend their support. Yet this was only possible after organising the Latinas around gender-specific issues (namely domestic violence) and hence in Sections 3.9 & 4.3, I describe how the intensive emotional work of the newly established SVP Women's Committee has foregrounded the discrete concerns of Latina vendors, while also explaining how the project's pivot towards this very vulnerable subgroup remains consistent with the overall aim of winning collective gains for all members.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.0 Introduction to Marx's Workers' Inquiry as Methodology

The methods presented in this chapter take inspiration from Karl Marx's workers' inquiry, a questionnaire first published in *La Revue Socialiste* in April 1880 with the intention of surveying the French working class. This inquiry took the form of a 100-question survey into the general conditions of workers, aspects of their trade and the overall composition of the workforce. In the latter portion however, Marx's inquiry shifts towards a series of questions that more directly interrogate potentials for solidarity and resistance among workers. His intention, therefore, was to elucidate radical capacities found among the working class, while learning from workers themselves.

In his preface, Marx asserts that to date “[n]ot a single government, whether monarchy or bourgeois republic, has yet ventured to undertake serious inquiry into the position of the French working class” (Marx 1880), although he does draw a comparison with the “official investigation” organised by the English government, which eventually led to a gradual program of factory reform from the 1820s onwards, thereby ultimately establishing legal norms for the working day. Although this legislation was reluctantly enacted by the English bourgeoisie, Marx states that the resulting 1833 Factory Act was in truth, “the product of a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled between the capitalist class and the working-class” (Marx 1990, 412-3). France, meanwhile, had limped “slowly behind England” and consequently, by initiating his own inquiry Marx hoped to induce the Republic to follow the “example of the monarchical government of England” (Marx 1880). His declared hope for this “first act” was that it might accordingly forge a path to socialism and as such, he suggested that the respondents' replies

be as detailed and comprehensive as possible, so as to elicit “an *exact* and *positive* knowledge” of the conditions of French workers.

By requesting such empirical detail, Marx seems to have implicitly understood that the working class are best situated to understand their own exploitation and for this reason, the survey was to be produced precisely from the standpoint of the worker. Considering this proposition, Marx’s questionnaire invited workers to include their names and addresses, so that correspondence might be initiated. This provides us with a clue to the inquiry’s ulterior purpose: to connect workers based on their shared grievances, and although it was originally thought that Marx’s questionnaire had not received any responses, Clark McAllister (2022) demonstrates that the results of various international working men’s inquiries were “seized and suppressed” (3) by the police; with exceptions remaining undiscovered until recently. However, this did not prevent later Marxist sociologists from adopting and adapting Marx’s formula to further proletarian knowledge.

While in my methods, I only loosely follow the form of Marx’s original questionnaire, I do attempt to embody the spirit of his inquiry and in particular, its emphasis on the pedagogic standpoint of the worker. As outlined hereafter, each of the practical and theoretical extensions to Marx’s method of inquiry looks adapt it to the changed circumstances of the proletariat and subsequently, I suggest a similar alteration to my own approach in order to adequate it to the informal situation of street vendors and more specifically, the ‘richness’ of their lived particularities.

As demonstrated in my conclusion, many of the workers’ inquiry-type approaches I subsequently evaluate, model their investigations around the common experience of 20th Century factory workers organising at the point of production and hence, some modification was required to fit these methods to the lived conditions of New York street vendors, in order to better examine the prospects of “poor people’s organising” among wageless proletarians (see

Piven & Cloward 1979).

2.1 Johnson-Forest Tendency and the Development of the Workers' Inquiry

During the Second World War and the immediate post-War period, Trotskyist splinter-group Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) investigated the contemporary working conditions of US factories, modelling their approach on Marx's workers' inquiry. JFT was founded by core-members CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, yet all three were to take the respective pen-names J. R. Johnson, Freddie Forest and Rita Stone for the purposes of writing anonymously during this anti-Communist period.

JFT began as a tendency within the Socialist Workers Party US (SWP), a communist group that had in 1934 played a significant and successful role in organising auto-workers in Minneapolis and Toledo. The Stalin-Hitler pact of 1939, however, triggered a crisis within the SWP, causing disarray among Trotskyist organisers, due to the party's unconditional defence of the USSR during WWII and in turn, this led James and Dunayevskaya to split from the SWP and join the Shachtmanite Worker's Party (WP). Their contention with the SWP was that Stalin's USSR was no longer proletarian in character and was instead ruled by a bureaucratic class that acted as the owners of nationalised monopolies. On this basis, they determined that the Soviet Union had lost its revolutionary character, which in turn attracted JFT to the WP who continued to organise strikes throughout WWII in opposition the AFL-CIO's and CPUSA's "no strike pledge," which prohibited their members from striking until the war's end.

Despite this proscription on wartime strike action, however, between 1945-46 a rash of wildcat strikes broke out across the US, followed by another massive post-war strike wave. This autonomous action subsequently encouraged JFT "to look for a deeper conceptualisation of

working-class self-activity” (Goldner 2004), particularly since widespread wildcatting had taken place without the permission of the dominant unions. Inspired by this rank-and-file disruption, and while working through Lenin’s philosophical writings, Hegel’s *Logic* and Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, JFT’s research would as a result, lead them to re-interrogate Marxist orthodoxies as part of a broader theoretical emphasis on the proletarian standpoint.

Nonetheless, disagreements with Shachtman’s WP led James, Dunayevskaya and Lee to temporarily rejoin the SWP in 1950, thereafter taking part in debates around the so-called the “Negro Question”: an early attempt think about race in relation to class composition. It was within these debates that JFT took the considered position that the autonomous struggle of Black proletarians “had the potential to ignite the entire US political situation” (Goldner 2004). Thus, in response to changing class composition, JFT produced a newspaper called *Correspondence* (1951) that was intended to be written, edited and distributed by workers themselves, thereby allowing the workers to share their own experiences and concerns. After laying out their editorial approach, JFT then collectively penned an essay titled “Gripes and Grievances” (1955), written as restatement of the group’s commitment to the revolutionary agency of workers:

When millions of workers are expressing the same gripe about their job, foreman, the union, and the company, it is no longer a gripe, it becomes a social problem. That gripe or grievance no longer affects just this or that individual, it affects all of society.⁴¹

While before now the grievances of workers were nursed as individual grudges, the intention of the newspaper was to allow workers to see their own frustrations reflected as social questions to be answered collectively and decisively.

In the subsequent period between 1955-1973, large-scale wildcat strikes continued

⁴¹ “Gripes and Grievances,” *Correspondence*, vol. 2, no. 2 (January 22, 1955).

across the US; a sequence of working-class revolt that similarly affected France and Italy during the same period. Yet problematically, JFT's engagement with worker-led revolt faltered in 1955 when CLR James was forced to leave the US. However, it was also during this period of exile that the group first came into contact with French-Greek philosopher and social critic Cornelius Castoriadis and as a result, this encounter would later culminate in a joint working-group known as Facing Reality, set up to review the international self-organisation of workers; an endeavour which eventually led to a publication of the same name, through which the group intended to "recognise and record" the advance of a "new society" within the old (Goldner 2004).

Facing Reality (1958) thus begins with an analysis of ferment on the factory floor during the 1956 Hungarian revolution, whereby worker power was organised through heterogenous and self-managing councils which, in the view of the authors had "established basic coherence in society and from this coherence they derived automatically their right to govern" (Castoriadis, James & Boggs 1958, 7). As a result, Hungarian workers were able to call a general strike that was "not decreed by any centre" (7) thereby wresting control from the ruling communist Hungarian People's Party (MDP).

This in-depth analysis subsequently allowed Facing Reality to draw comparisons with the victories won by US auto-plant workers during the strikes of 1955-6, whereby employers faced weekly wildcat stoppages. Yet, as the group would go on to comment, this worker-led phenomenon was poorly understood by current workplace sociology, stating that "[s]ince the war over a hundred thousand studies by industrial psychologists have appeared," each seeking control and discipline over the workforce by proposing new pension plans, wage increases and sick pay; all with the hope that errant workers might "submit to the schedules of production." However, such attempts to harmonise industrial relations only confirmed the view among workers that their supposedly representative unions were ranged "definitely with management and supervisors as one of the enemies of the working class" and subsequently, the unions

came to be seen by workers as simply the “bodyguard of capital” (21).

In response to this cross-class collaboration, *Facing Reality* asserted that only workers themselves could control the manner and speed of their own work, creating “rest [and] relaxation” as required, while seeking the “freedom to organise their work” as they pleased. This signalled the overall “the determination of workers to run the plants to suit themselves and not the management” (21-22). Such self-activity was therefore only possible due to the bonds of cooperation already formed on the shop floor and hence, for the editors of *Facing Reality*, the dispensation of workers to cooperate, both at work and while striking was not “based not upon authority,” but instead instantiated by the practical overcoming of the “[the] problem of human relations” (22).

As a result, *Facing Reality* viewed this spontaneous mode of self-governance as the potential germ of a new society to be composed of a wholly new people who “glory in struggle” through the establishment of “truly human relations” (73-4). Moreover, the authors placed a particular emphasis on women workers, who having entered the workforce during the war, were now engaging in precisely the same sort of workplace cooperation previously closed-off to them.⁴² *Facing Reality* thus determined that, through shop floor unity, the working class had the potential “to create and realise values which [...] originate directly from their organic opposition to official society [while] shaped by its experiences in cooperative labour” (75).

This oppositional creativity was therefore seen to operate outside of managerial discipline and was henceforth, deemed to be the seedbed from which a new society might

⁴² “The modern economy draws into cooperative labour or related activities all sections of the population, including women. Official society itself can no longer defend the shams and vulgarity and cruelty of bourgeois morality. The result is that women everywhere are beginning to recognise that the hitherto notorious sex war in American life is in reality one of the advanced positions of the new society seeking to make official abstractions into human reality” (Castoriadis, James & Boggs 1958, 74).

“flourish.” As James and Boggs were to suggest, the task at hand was to recognise that a “socialist society exists” and “record the facts of its existence” through workers’ inquiry (161). Obviously, this was sociological task and subsequently, through workplace investigation, the editors of *Facing Reality* determined that workers would soon come to recognise that the preconditions of socialism were already here, submerged within their own social relations and solidarities. In effect, it was hoped that through workers’ inquiry, socialists would be able to learn from the working class itself, giving primacy to the proletarian standpoint, through which workers could then “educate the educator” (see Section 2.2).

For JFT, however, mounting such an inquiry was not always straight forward, as one of their best-known pamphlets *American Worker* (1946) demonstrates; an effort which aimed to chronicle shop floor frustrations with “bureaucratic production and management methods” (Hudis 2003, 277). To this end, *American Worker* concerned itself with the life of the working class in production and accordingly, it was to be produced by JFT contributors Phil Singer and Grace Lee Boggs, who each wrote a pair of complimentary essays under the respective pseudonyms Paul Romano and Rita Stone. In the first portion of the essay, Romano presents a first-hand account of an auto-plant worker, while in the second section, Stone writes an accompanying intellectual reflection describing macroeconomic conditions beyond the point of production. Fittingly, the views of each author were to be printed on parallel on facing pages.

At the time, Romano was working in the factory he described, thereby drawing on his own first-hand experiences while capturing different perspectives found among his fellow workers and as a result, he would document the varying aspects of worktime; recounting the camaraderie that his colleagues felt, even when their conditions were objectively miserable, while also reporting on the constant creativity of workers, which he claimed they would exercise whenever the opportunity arose (for instance, taking time out to visit other sections of the plant and chatting with other operators).

In this manner, Romano emphasised shop floor contradictions as experienced in terms of productivity, noting how workers and management often came into conflict over how worktime ought to be organised. Moreover, he also recorded pay-grade differences between different sections of the workforce and correspondingly, the regressive attitudes of conservative white workers towards their black colleagues, as well as sexist attitudes towards women in the plant. Yet, equally significant in Romano's view, was the open distrust between workers and their own union, which many believed had been infiltrated by management.

Accompanying these observations were Rita Stone's theoretical reflections, which would provide further analysis of structural economic effects on overall worker consciousness (particularly in relation to machine work and the automation of previously manual processes). Evidently, this mode of comparison, between first-hand reportage and intellectual reflection, was clearly innovative. Yet for all its incisiveness, it was obvious in the final instance, that JFT were unable to fully integrate Romano's commentary on workers' perspectives with Stone's intellectual reflections and consequently, the division of labour within this approach persisted.

Castoriadis would therefore, at a later date, voice scepticism about JFT's method, since the group tended to ventriloquise the working class by substituting their own voices for those of workers. In part, this was a consequence of McCarthyism, whereby JFT's author-activists were obliged to disguise their own identities and produce fictionalised accounts of factory life. As a result, these narratives tended to reconstruct the views of workers, while collapsing a multitude of datapoints under a single authorial opinion. In addition, rather than interviewing the workers directly, JFT's researchers often embellished the final result with their own experiences. In addition, some accounts, such as Romano's *Indignant Heart*, were "explicitly autobiographical" (Haider & Mohandesi 2013) and as such, deviated from the original intention of the workers'

inquiry.⁴³

It can therefore be said, that JFT's incomplete method overprivileged the individual and subjective perceptions of the social scientist, leading Romano to produce an overly general, disembodied and dislocated analysis. In this regard, Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi (2013) claim that JFT's homogenising mode of exposition only serves to decontextualise the worker's individual experiences and as a result, detaches "their narrative from [any] specific locality" (10). Hence, this act of decontextualisation ignores the "distinct conditions of production, power relations, and demographics," (10-11) resulting in an amanuensis that substituted itself for proletarian experience. Moreover, this act of substitution, had the effect of sidelining minoritarian opinions while deprioritising the voices of individual workers, thereby making any accurate analysis of class composition more challenging.

As Castoriadis would subsequently point out, JFT was now deviating from their previously espoused model of council communism, guided as it was by the practical self-activity of workers (see Section 2.2). Likewise, Haider and Mohandesi describe JFT's retreat as "a significant step back from Correspondence, which had identified at least four distinct segments of the working class: industrial workers, blacks, women, and youth" (20). JFT's act of authorial substitution consequently reduced the figure of the worker to a generic essence that, "prevents us from grasping the many forms by which labour-power assumes, the plurality of ways it is put to work, and diverse processes through which it is exploited" (18).

So, while early-on JFT was able to identify the emergence of novel pluriform proletarian subjectivities, the group's later homogenisation of distinct sectional viewpoints only served to obscure the basis on which intersectional struggles around race, class and gender might be

⁴³ For further commentary, see Haider A. & Mohandesi S., 'Workers' inquiry: A Genealogy,' *Viewpoint Magazine*, 27 September 2013. Accessed here: <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/workers-inquiry-a-genealogy/>

recognised and elevated. Moreover, this elision would eventually lead JFT to be entirely overoptimistic about the spontaneous revolutionary potentials of the US working class, while at the same time ignoring significant obstacles to effective class formation.

2.2 Castoriadis: The Case for Autonomy or Educating the Educator

For French-Greek philosopher and social theorist Cornelius Castoriadis, the original purpose of Marx's 1880 workers' inquiry was to "educate the educator," or to it put another way, produce an up-to-date survey of proletarian knowledge acquired by workers in struggle. Castoriadis' deep engagement with the concepts of Marx consequently allowed him to critique Johnson-Forest Tendency's shortcomings, limited as they were by the climate of anti-communism in the US at the time. As Castoriadis saw it, by failing to adequately grasp the plurality of proletarian experience, JFT had been unsuccessful in their attempt to answer why certain sections of the class were both inchoate and contradictory, leading the group to draw overly optimistic conclusions about the humanist path to socialism.

Castoriadis' use of the phrase "the educator himself must be educated," was itself derived from the third of Marx's *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach*, wherein Marx had attempted to define a properly materialist praxis. Yet, whereas Feuerbach had subscribed to the idea that "men are products of changed circumstances and upbringing," Marx instead points out that the Feuerbachian formula forgets that "it is men who change circumstances" and as result, "the educator himself must be educated." In turn, this revision allowed Marx to assert that "[t]he coincidence of changing circumstances and of human activity or self-change [*Selbstveränderung*] can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary*

practice.”⁴⁴ Hence, for both Castoriadis and Marx, within class society, the process of radical transformation is a pedagogic one; or alternately, a self-directed operation designed to make explicit the submerged revolutionary intelligence of the working class.

In accordance with this theoretical development and at the behest of the French socialist periodical *La Revue Socialiste*, Marx in turn developed his own workers’ questionnaire designed to acquire “an exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class—the class to which the future belongs—works and moves.”⁴⁵ The objective here was to reverse the direction of social intelligence, since as Marx points out, while the French government had already gathered data on agriculture, finance, industry and commerce, it was yet to conduct any “serious inquiry” into the French working class.”⁴⁶

Thus, guided by Marx’s model, Castoriadis developed his own attempts at proletarian analysis in the pages of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (SouB 1948-67) which he co-edited with French sociologist Claude Lefort. Together they sought to interrogate the present social context from the standpoint of the worker, thereby highlighting affordances and constraints within the landscape of then contemporary struggle. Yet, contrary to prevailing Stalinist certainties, Castoriadis maintained that the current situation could only be understood in a fragmentary and context-dependent manner and as a result, he began to distance himself from any totalising systemic analysis and more specifically, dialectical materialism, which for him was synonymous with “decontextualised knowledge.”

Against doctrinal readings of Marx, Castoriadis instead saw the world around him as “educible and not deducible” (Adams 2014, xii) meaning that knowledge, rather being static,

⁴⁴ Marx, K., ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (1845): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm>

⁴⁵ Marx, K., ‘A Workers’ Inquiry’ (1880): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/04/20.htm>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

was in a continual process of production and subsequently, never complete. As he went on to explain, through investigation and interrogation we can “open a horizon of problematisation, elucidation and debate” (xii). The elucidation of autonomy is consequently Castoriadis’ central project, which aims to radically transform society while vanquishing the “rational mastery of bureaucratic capitalism.” Hence, this was a critique to be levelled equally at capitalism and Soviet state communism.

In place of bureaucratic mastery, Castoriadis instead decided to foreground its antithesis: “autonomy,” a term derived from the Greek *auto-nomos*, meaning “self-governing or laws given by the self, for itself.”⁴⁷ For Castoriadis then, the model of autonomy he accordingly sought, was to be found in the self-directed organisation of workers’ communal councils (or *autogestion* as the process is referred to in French). Yet by contrast, Castoriadis would posit that not all societies are capable of self-directed activity since they are unable to reflect on the source of their own legitimacy. The origin of their laws, social meanings and customs, therefore, will always remain obscure; instead attributed to “extra-social sources” (i.e. the myth of a lawmaker, founding fathers, the constitution, etc.) and in light of this, Castoriadis from here on would call societies closed off to the conditions their own foundation: *heteronomous*.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, the self-elucidating and truly *autonomous* society requires three specific characteristics: firstly, it must acknowledge itself as “the source of its own form, meanings and laws”; secondly, it must recognise “that socially given laws and meanings are not given once and for all,” but instead should be “interrogated and altered”; and thirdly, since there are “no

⁴⁷ Following the example of ancient Athens, Castoriadis defines an autonomous society as one capable of instituting itself through the collective participation of all, i.e. a project, which would “reabsorb the explicit power *the political (le politique)* into politics (*la politique*)” (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 174).

⁴⁸ This term is derived from Kant’s concept of heteronomy, meaning the political subjection of community to prejudicial external rule, which in turn leads to the corruption of practical reason.

pregiven limits to the human realm,” only the social collective can set its own limits (2). To adequately engage in deliberative self-activity, however, the collective must be sufficiently trained and accordingly, Castoriadis attempts secure the abovementioned axioms through the concept of *paideia*: the political education necessary for citizens to fully participate in society. It is precisely this education he claims, that lies at centre of the project of autonomy, leading him to ask the subsequent question: *what constitutes a properly democratic education?* (see Castoriadis 1989).

To answer this more fully, Castoriadis would yet have to interrogate the ancient Athenian understanding of the concept of *paideia*: a deliberative mode of citizenship founded on the pedagogic training of the *demos*.⁴⁹ As such, *paideia* obtains its root from the Greek word for child and its derivations (*paideou*: ‘I am raising a child’; *paidieusis*: ‘child-rearing’).⁵⁰ Yet, within the Athenian political register the concept acquires a higher meaning, instead becoming associated with the self-improvement of those who seek high office⁵¹ and therefore, Castoriadis considers *paideia* to be the concern of the whole collective.

This concept was so central for Castoriadis, that he examined the content of *paideia* over three separate essays.⁵² That said, he employs the term in a somewhat less rigorous sense than the classical Athenians, instead reconfiguring it mean the process of socialisation

⁴⁹ Castoriadis often alludes to this concept in his later essays, yet according to Ingerid S. Straume it remains underdeveloped since it is uncertain how, if socio-historic circumstances are context-dependent, the *paideia* of the slave-owning Athenian State relates to workers’ autonomy.

⁵⁰ This implies that a transformation of the *psyche* is involved in the socialisation process (i.e. the development of the monadic pre-socialised infant into an active political and social individual).

⁵¹ This broader notion of *paideia* can refer to the contents, goals or processes of education, while more generally signifying a unification of (or consensus on) wider Greek culture, civilisation, traditions, arts and education.

⁵² ‘The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,’ ‘Power, Politics, Autonomy,’ and ‘Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime’, all written between 1979-1996.

and education in general, while using the term “true *paideia*” to differentiate it from its original meaning. By way of commentary, Ingerid S. Straume claims that every society has a *paideia* on which social reproduction depends and therefore, it can be characterised as the process “whereby individuals become ‘embodiments’ of [society’s] principles of organisation, power structures, practices and norms.” Yet, while these embodiments are part of the any social imaginary, their subsequent significations come to “configure what counts and what does not count as part that society’s reality” (Straume 2012).

Ultimately, for Castoriadis, there can be no social reproduction without an adequate form of *paideia*, although such efforts tend to be constrained within capitalist society, since by convention, social training takes the form of state-provided general education. Castoriadis deems this to be insufficient, however, since in order to assume its full role, *paideia* must be embedded within the project of autonomy, thereby providing a heuristic which allows society to determine whether democracy is effective or merely regimental. It is therefore the application of direct rather than representative democracy that distinguishes a true communal *paideia* from formal state education.

Any autonomous society looking to master its own social reproduction, must as a result, develop social individuals capable of understanding themselves to be the origin and creators of their own laws (Castoriadis 1997, 10), thus preventing the psychic closure that typifies heteronomous societies.⁵³ Hence, the underpinning of any truly autonomous community is its capacity to educate its members as a politically active citizenry, thereby moulding each citizen in the image of the community’s own aspirations.

⁵³ Here closure denotes a totality whose institutions are premised on unchallenged or inexplicit significations; that which Marx calls “social hieroglyphs,” i.e. written in a language we do not know yet is distinctly linked to the fetishism of appearances.

Castoriadis points out however that contemporary bureaucracies, such as corporations, trade unions and political parties, maintain a stranglehold on information, knowledge and expertise. Yet, for any revolutionary project that wishes to permanently transform society there can be no “prior exhaustive knowledge” and for this reason, revolution is not a relation of means to ends, but instead a process of self-modification within which neither subject nor object is conclusively defined (see Section 5.3 for the distinction between the class-in-itself and the class-for-itself). Hence, transformational knowledge cannot be convincingly pre-given, but instead emerges immanently through struggle (i.e. from a reciprocal conditioning of clarification and transformation, wherein action precedes clarification, and whereby the goal becomes the “transformation of the given”). By this definition, true *paideia* might consequently be characterised as a celebration of the creativity of workers in struggle, for-whom “the very object of *praxis* is the [production of the] new” (Castoriadis 1998, 77).

To this extent, Castoriadis and Lefort’s theorisation of autonomy was not simply their conceptual innovation alone, but instead the product of SouB’s sustained engagement with the international working class, as exemplified by their partnership with worker-writer Daniel Mothé who was employed at the Renault factory at Billancourt. SouB as a result, placed considerable emphasis on the direct experience of workers and their organisational processes, marking a break with the intellectual theorists of the Parti Communist Français (PCF), while at the same time developing an active international dialogue between SouB, JFT and the proponents of Italian Operaismo.

Accordingly, each of these groups shared a critique of bureaucratic rationality, embodied as it was by the Soviet Union, extant socialist parties and trade union bureaucracies under capitalism. In line with this, SouB and their collaborators would subsequently develop a revised theory of contemporary class antagonism; polemicising settled terms such as *proletarian* and *bourgeois*, while recasting class conflict as an opposition between *directors* and *executants* (i.e.

those who manage and those who are managed). This was hence a dual critique of the heteronomous hierarchical social relations of both capitalism and really existing socialism, within which information and expertise only travelled in one direction: from the top down.

At odds with this, was Castoriadis' view that a genuinely socialist society could only emerge through the true *paideia* of self-activity (i.e. from the democratic relations of an autonomous rank-and-file). This conclusion subsequently departed from Leninist orthodoxy, which until then had maintained that it was merely sufficient for a communist avant-garde to seize control of the ownership of the means of production and manage it on behalf of the working class.⁵⁴ Yet, as Castoriadis would frequently opine, both labour institutions and communist parties had already fully adopted a "bourgeois model of organisation," instructing workers to simply reproduce the institutional function of their representative bodies, while all militant self-organisation and any possibility of revolution remained closed. It was consequently this impasse that allowed Castoriadis to conclude: "[We] have arrived at a complete negation of what was the essence of a socialist."⁵⁵

2.3 Panzieri and the Development of Co-research

Just as the Johnson-Forest Tendency and Socialisme ou Barbarie had broken with Stalinist orthodoxy, from the 1940s onward Raniero Panzieri and the proponents of Italian Operaismo developed an alternate line of independent Marxist thought at odds with the Italian

⁵⁴ As a result of this insight, by the mid-70s Castoriadis had begun to disavow Marxism as a revolutionary theory, claiming that the misinterpretation of Marx had distorted the socialist imaginary.

⁵⁵ Castoriadis, C., *Political and Social Writings Vol. 2*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (1988), p. 201. Accessed here: https://libcom.org/files/cc_psw_v2.pdf

Socialist Party (PSI). As a sociologist and political theorist, Panzieri challenged the canonical equation within the party governing the relationship between “truth, party and class” (Wright 2002, 14). Writing in 1957 in the wake of the Hungarian Uprising, Panzieri stated that the fundamental task was “to restore Marxism to its natural terrain, which is that of permanent critique” (14-5). In this regard, he recommended a re-examination of the “political and organisational movement of the working classes,” a phenomenon which he claimed was no longer accessible to party intellectuals.

Working alongside Lucio Libertini, Panzieri formed a group of dissident communists and socialists, coalescing around the publication *Mondo Operaia*, a cultural-political journal which asserted that only the working class itself could decide the goals of struggle. Moreover, Panzieri would insist that these goals should be achieved “*from below* and through forms of *total democracy*” (Panzieri 1973, 102).⁵⁶ This concerted attempt to break from both reformism and dogmatic socialism, however, required the development of new analysis and thus, referring to the PSI, Panzieri stated: “Of the party one can affirm with Marx: it is an educator which must be educated” (202).⁵⁷ In this regard, the dual departure from both party vanguardism and constitutional socialism would depend on the reestablishment of a dialectical relation between intellectuals and the working class itself. As a result, Panzieri would call for greater proletarian involvement in the development of policy, thereby placing himself within orbit of left socialists such as Luciano Della, Mario Tronti and Vittorio Reiser, as well as sociologists such as Romano Alquati, who studied labour practices and class composition at FIAT and Olivetti.

Indexing the inertia of both the PSI and associated trade unions, Panzieri would in turn

⁵⁶ Panzieri, R., *La crisi del movimento operaio: Scritti interventi lettere (1956–60)*, p. 102.

⁵⁷ ‘Panzieri and the Limits of Left Renovation,’ quotation accessed here: <https://libcom.org/library/panzieri-limits-left-renovation>

call for an analysis that, “becomes complete only through participation in struggles” (254) and with the help of his new collaborators, Panzieri subsequently established the experimental journal *Quaderni Rossi* explicitly for this purpose. As such, the journal would be based on the group’s critique of technology in production, which itself was derived from a rereading of *Capital* yet supplemented with methodological approaches imported from US social science. Armed with these insights, *Quaderni Rossi* therefore served as “a meeting point between Marxism and sociology” (Wright 2002, 20); a convergence that re-established the link between intellectuals and workers, allowing them to jointly produce social knowledge.

This approach would eventually come to be known as “co-research” (*conricerca*) a term derived from the work of the Catholic social reformer Danilo Dolce and his subsequent students, such as the anarchist Danilo Montaldi, who further developed this tendency and who in turn, greatly influenced the approaches of *Quaderni Rossi*.⁵⁸ Inspired by this tradition, therefore, Marx’s workers’ inquiry subsequently came to be seen as the model capable of conditioning all other sociological methods, thereby foregoing “the descent into pure empiricism” (23). Yet, *Quaderni Rossi*’s mode of investigation was not simply Marxist, since it was equally inspired by the sociological writings of Adorno and in this regard, Panzieri felt that methods imported from the broader sociological tradition might also be critically deployed. Accordingly, Panzieri and the other members of the *Quaderni Rossi* circle adopted fine-grained microsociological methods from both Weber and Durkheim (i.e. sociologies of social differentiation and stratification), while simultaneously rediscovering in Marx a parallel sociology; one that was capable of establishing a macroscopic theory of capitalism.

Furthermore, useful to Panzieri in his reconstruction of Marx’s method was his study of

⁵⁸ Important in this development was *Autobiografie della leggera* (Montaldi 1961), a sociological inquiry that collected the life stories of the poor and marginalised (i.e. dissidents, partisans, small-time criminals, prostitutes, etc.) and which records their stories in the vernacular.

the work Della Volpe, a communist post-war philosopher who had also queried bourgeois social science's inability to adequately apprehend class relations (23). Yet, while Volpe remained unable to realise the full radicality of his insights, the co-founder of *Quaderni Rossi* Mario Tronti would more forcefully argue:

If the *logic of 'Capital'* is again substantiated today, it is because for working-class thought, the objective necessity of an analysis of capitalism has returned to the fore [and thus the] *instruments* of analysis are revised when the object of this analysis is rediscovered. If the object is capitalist society in the concrete—the modern world moment of capitalism—then the instrument can only be Marx's method that has provided the first and only scientific description of this object (Wright 2002, 26).⁵⁹

Hence, Tronti's reaffirmation of proletarian thought would be instrumental in the development of Panzieri's interest in co-research, responding as it did to the intensification of exploitation wrought by new technologies and changing class composition within the Italian factory system.

According to Tronti, changes to the organic composition of capital had begun to subsume all social relations within what he now described as the "social factory" (i.e. a process of "internal colonisation" within which "the whole of society becomes an *articulation* of production"). Moreover, this burgeoning articulation beyond the factory gates, could "no longer tolerate a political terrain that is even formally independent of the network of social relations" (Tronti 1971).

With this in mind, the critical work of *Quaderni Rossi* would culminate in 1964, when Panzieri presented his lecture on the socialist uses of the workers' inquiry, emphasising the need for co-research between workers and intellectuals as a way to index both novel

⁵⁹ Original quotation, *Asor Rosa* 1975, 1640.

transformations in the composition of labour, as well as shifts in the overall mode of production. This intervention might thus be characterised as an attempt re-politicise sociological inquiry, the tools of which Panzieri claimed Marxists were far too “wary” to use.

In his lecture ‘On the Organisation of Workers’ Inquiry’ (1964), Panzieri directly addresses sociology’s elision by certain strands of academic Marxism, instead suggesting that alternate sociological research methods might usefully serve as the “potential scientific foundation for revolutionary action” (Panzieri 1964). He therefore predicates this claim on the assertion that Marx intended *Capital* itself to be a sociological study, the purpose of which was to critique the one-sidedness of bourgeois political economy, reliant as it was on the reduction of the worker to a mere input of production.⁶⁰

Building on this insight, Panzieri hence claims that the dominant Italian interpretations of Marx at the time had significantly diverged from the original intention of Marx’s overall project. Yet, whereas Marx’s method was one derived from the direct “survey and observation of capitalist society” (Panzieri 1964), the orthodox intellectual currents of dialectical materialism had instead “erected a fence around sociology” (Panzieri 1964). In order to correct this, Panzieri suggests that microsociology’s investigative methods might better account for changes in class composition and correspondingly, the level of class consciousness found among workers. For this reason, he recommends sociology as a political science fundamental to Marxism, stating that, “if we were to provide a generic definition of Marxism it [would] be that of a sociology conceived as political science [and subsequently] as a science of revolution” (Panzieri 1964).

Moreover, if communists want to claim objectivity and a “science” for sociology, then

⁶⁰ Panzieri claims that the roots of contemporary Marxism (and more specifically the predominant Marxism of 60’s Italy) originates in Engels’ attempt to universalise the dialectic and extend it beyond the specific situation of capitalism, recreating a metaphysics that flattens the distinction between the natural and social sciences, under which “no science of social facts is possible.”

they must first strive to foreground the fundamental dichotomy of capitalist society (i.e. the division of labour into manual and intellectual components), thereby avoiding one-sided representation, while at the same time, prioritising the realities of class conflict from the standpoint of the worker. Hence, this appears to be an urgent task, since any microsociological study beginning from the erroneous assumption that labour is simply an input of production, will eventually end up distorting the whole system of political economy it thereafter constructs. For this reason alone, one-sided bourgeois sociology is unable to “grasp reality as a whole” (Panzieri 1964) since it elides the observable fact that processes of production, including knowledge production itself, are ultimately defined by two contending classes.

As an alternative, Panzieri instead suggests that any accurate investigation into the conditions of the working class should have an independent, autonomous sociological framework; ergo, one that is actively antagonistic to capital. Although to be certain, Panzieri is not simply declaring all sociology to be a “bourgeois science” as Stalinist dialectical materialism had previously done (see Lukács 1971) and instead, he remains insistent that microsociology’s claims, rather than being false, are merely partial and as a result, must be extended beyond current limitations. So, while seeing merit in contemporary sociological methods, claiming that they retain that which “Marx defined as the character of a science [and] an autonomy based on consistent and logical rigour,” more specifically, Panzieri disparages sociologies which opt for a “framework of conflict resolution, whilst ruling out in principle the connections that might exist between the social relations it investigates and the antagonistic perspective of their subversion of the system” (Panzieri 1964). He warns therefore, that the outcomes of sociological inquiry are too often implemented for the purposes of social harmonisation and as such, tend to paper over the fundamental fissure between the two opposing classes. To combat such tendencies, however, Panzieri suggests that any prospective Marxist sociologist requires precise methodological tools capable of determining the “conflictual and functional” parts of the system.

Accordingly, when conducted as co-research between workers and intellectuals, workers' inquiry functions as a heuristic that allows the social researcher to expose submerged class tensions and sharpen them into active antagonisms; meaning that inquiry should by default, be conducted in such a way, so as to encourage the dysfunction of existing capitalism by destabilising its fundamental dichotomy, commonly expressed as class domination. For Panzieri, this means that "hot inquiry" as he calls it should be carried out at the heart of struggle in a manner that participates in moments of transformation and upheaval, while remaining alert to the perceptions of its worker participants. Hence, if deployed judiciously, workers' inquiry might in due course, unearth potentials for solidarity between different groups of workers, or more acutely, contribute to instances where solidarity hardens into refusal. This leads Panzieri to ask: "To what extent do workers understand that solidarity can cause social forms of antagonism to occur?" (Panzieri 1964), in turn occasioning a further question: to what extent, might the techniques of co-research assist proletarians in understanding how their demand for equality at work is also a demand for the whole of society.⁶¹

Panzieri's renewed focus on class struggle therefore serves to reinforce Tronti's notion that the managerialism of the factory has now been writ large throughout society as a form of political consensus (albeit one that precludes worker self-organisation altogether). Yet, to overcome the seeming impasse, Panzieri contends that sociological inquiry must consequently ground itself empirically by generating critiques at the level of the proletariat, while at the same time, restoring the connection between theory and practice in order to re-potentiate working-class self-organisation. Hence, this rearticulation of a truly Marxist sociology subsequently

⁶¹ This aligns with the views of fellow autonomist Romano Alquati, who like Castoriadis, re-theorised the fundamental antagonism as one between order-givers and order-takers, thereby implying that unions and nominally socialist workers' parties, both play a role in limiting the demands of the working class and in so doing, limit the scope of revolutionary activity (Wright 2002, 47).

reopens the terrain of class struggle and as if to underline this, Panzieri concludes his 1964 lecture by stating that it is “politically fertile to establish contacts with singular and grouped workers,” in order that there be, “no discrepancy, gap or contradiction between inquiry and the labour of building political relations” (Panzieri 1964).

2.4 Sojourner Truth Organisation: Racism and Class Consciousness

Throughout the 1970s, The Sojourner Truth Organisation (STO), a Marxist group situated in the Midwest, developed theoretical insights that went further than most New Left groups in attempting to understand the role that race plays in US class formation. This attempt to better define the racial character of US capitalism was just one of the many questions that STO’s members posed when the much-anticipated revolution of the late-60s failed to materialise. This was therefore a defining period of revolutionary tumult, which for many “separated the wheat from the chaff” in terms of militancy (Staudenmaier 2012, 11).

Headed by Noel Ignatiev (née Ignatin) this small communist group from Chicago attempted to reconcile the relationship between revolutionary intellectuals and the working class. As such, STO had arisen out of splits within the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) yet drew fresh inspiration from the wildcat strikes of 1968, the revolutionary Black Panther Party (BPP) and a multiplicity of anti-colonial liberation struggles worldwide, all of which had provoked STO to reframe working class struggle as the fight against racism.

Early on, STO would develop a series of crucial insights into how the category of whiteness operated within the US labour movement (in essence, acting as the “bulwark of white supremacy” [Staudenmaier 2012, 5]). Building on this analysis, the group aspired to become a mediatory organisation capable of uniting Black, White and Puerto Rican struggles, thereby hoping to raise the revolutionary consciousness of workers overall. This analysis had originally

developed during the strikes of 1968, when radicals within the SDS had begun to notice a trend whereby rank-and-file workers were taking independent action, while rejecting all “sweetheart deals” between the mainstream unions and employers (11). It was thus apparent within this conspicuous pattern that American workers were observably engaging in illegality, while directing strikes from the shop floor.

Within this radical context, the founding members of STO began to ask how class consciousness might be elevated to revolutionary potential, while also differentiating themselves from other workerist groups by paying close attention to the Black radical movement, which at the time had begun to militate for the development of revolutionary power from within the US itself. Prior to the formation of STO, groups such as the Black Panther Party had established links with white socialist organisations such as the SDS. Yet, as the result of counter-insurgency programs, such as COINTELPRO, radical groups such as the Panthers, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the militant underground Black Liberation Army (BLA) were soon imprisoned, demobilised and discredited. As a consequence, revolutionary Black Power was almost totally eclipsed during the following decade. Meanwhile, more promising in the opinion of STO was the development of Black-led worker unions such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) based in Detroit, who were organising in the auto-industry, yet guided by both the principles of Black liberation and Marxist-Leninism.

Previously, the BPP and their sister organisation the Puerto Rican Young Lords had by way of innovation, attempted to organise the so-called *lumpen*- sections of the proletariat within their own communities (see Fernández 2021). While such efforts involved the political education of the unemployed, drug addicts and former-gang members, conversely, LRBW concentrated on organising the Black proletariat at the point-of-production and consequently, the group would pay close attention to shop floor politics as the principal site of class antagonism. Thus, following LRBW's lead, Ignatiev and STO decided that workplace investigation had been the

missing component of radical organising during the 60s, which for the most part had focused on community-based antipoverty campaigns.

STO would hence give serious consideration to race and its role in workplace organising, since it was now obvious that the wildcat rebellions they were currently witnessing, typically involved workers of colour confronting employers in defiance of their own, white-led unions. In response to this emergent pattern, the predominantly white STO therefore sought to intervene in workplace struggles to educate reticent white workers about how the ideology of whiteness contributes to wage repression, while at the same time impeding cross-racial expressions of solidarity.

Since STO was broadly an intellectual formation, it distinguished itself from other New Left groups through three theoretical innovations. The first of these defining orientations was an adherence to the Gramscian understanding of “dual consciousness”; an insight which describes how proletarians typically accept the status quo of class society, while at the same time, displaying “an embryonic awareness of [their] revolutionary potential as a class” (Staudenmaier 2012, 4). One of STO’s earliest pamphlets therefore emphasised how proletarian consciousness can be both a source of potential power as well as a weakness, allowing the group to make the subsequent claim that the standpoint of the proletariat can simultaneously be both bourgeois and proletarian.

Considering this, STO believed it was the principal task of revolutionaries to challenge bourgeois ideology, while increasing worker consciousness through participation in struggle. In practice, this meant intervening in rank-and-file workplace disputes, while disseminating counter-hegemonic views through the production of newspapers, pamphlets and journals, the most notable of which were titled *The Insurgent Worker* and *Urgent Tasks*. This literature posed a series of unique questions for workers, challenging their unions, while asserting the need for workplace democracy. Moreover, alongside this effort, STO also sought to enlarge the frame of

proletarian consciousness by publishing a series of reflections on anti-imperialist struggle, so that workers might better situate themselves within a broader context of global revolution.

The second of STO's unique theoretical innovations was the elucidation of "white skin privilege" and subsequently, the group's position on race would be clarified in their 1975 pamphlet: *The United Front Against Imperialism?*⁶² This pamphlet urged white workers to "actively and militantly reject their partial, selfish and counterfeit interests as part of a group which is favoured" (5). Hence, this renunciation was an important part of STO's strategic effort to overcome the intransigent docility of white workers, while at the same time convincing them that racism held back the class as a whole. Ignatiev had originally developed this theory while still in the SDS, working alongside communist historian Ted Allen. Together they developed a keen interest in the ground-breaking work of historian and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, with a particular focus on his labour history: *Black Reconstruction in America* (2013), a pioneering inquiry into how Jim Crow had brought about the reversal of burgeoning proletarian self-governance, post-Emancipation.

In addition to these two insights, it was STO's further observation that workers required autonomy from governing bureaucracies as a prerequisite for class struggle. Autonomy in view of STO allowed the group to align with the expanding social demands of a variety of nominally marginal groups, including Black workers, the women's movement, queer liberation, anti-war youth and colonised nations; all of whom at the time, were taking part in active struggles that STO hoped to connect with. Much like other practitioners of autonomism, STO rejected the notion that only a vanguard party could serve as the guarantor of objective knowledge, instead substituting flexible modes of organisation capable of developing new truths. In STO's view,

⁶² Originally published in STO, *The United Front Against Imperialism?* (1972), accessible here: www.sojournertruth.net/unitedfront.html

such latitude was altogether necessary, since until now, reformist political elements within the US had failed to acknowledge racialised labour practices and more broadly, had never studied the history of independent Black liberation struggles.

In summary, each of these theoretical innovations thus represents a different aspect of STO's inquiry into why, during the late-60, working-class ascendancy had stalled and, in an attempt to further answer this question, STO member Don Hamerquist would re-examine Antonio Gramsci's work on political and cultural hegemony. In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci contends that revolution is neither passively nor teleologically inevitable, but instead requires an active political education, so that full revolutionary consciousness might develop among the working class. Under capitalism however, the defining features of the status quo (such as wages, labour and exploitation) have come to be seen as both natural and permanent and subsequently, only serve to reinforce existing dominant bourgeois constructs, which in turn become internalised as the cultural consensus of the working class itself (see also Marx *The German Ideology* 1845).

At the level of everyday experience, this unanimity of opinion is upheld to be self-evident ("It's just how things are"). However, proletarians in their everyday practices can be observed to act in the interests of their own class, albeit in an atomised fashion. Gramsci's contribution thus allows us to better appreciate how, as a result of *dual consciousness*, workers are able to consent to the continuance of capitalism, while at the same time harbouring the ideological resources for its potential overthrow. It is hence this understanding that ultimately allows Gramsci to conclude that a generalisable revolutionary consciousness is essential if workers are to successfully challenge bourgeois hegemony.

Hamerquist would go on to further interpret this to mean that the working class has two simultaneous yet contrary dispositions: "[o]ne essentially capitalist," that accepts the naturalness of private property, acquisitiveness and competitiveness, thereby maintaining and reproducing

“the dominance of the capitalist class” (Staudenmaier 2012, 46). While the second is a submerged consciousness, whereby workers through struggle come to understand that they also have the potential “to become the ruling class.” As a result, the “ideas and actions” of the proletariat can “become mass phenomena during periods of sharp struggle” (47) and therefore, taking this into consideration, Hamerquist was to ascertain that no matter how dominant capitalist ideology is, it will always remain tempered by a germinal appreciation among workers that they too can govern.⁶³

Hamerquist would thus refashion Gramsci’s concept of dual consciousness to better fit the context of US labour, since, due to prior historical determinations, intra-proletarian competition in the form of racism was a largely accepted feature of the status quo. So, while Hamerquist would go on to argue that white supremacy was duly reflected in the consciousness of the majority of white workers, his innovation was to claim that at a structural level, the defence of white privilege was de facto trade union consciousness itself. In order to index this peculiarity, however, he would combine Gramsci’s notion of dual consciousness with Lenin’s famous observation that the trade unions of most nations had at minimum, developed the conviction “necessary to combine in unions, fight [...] employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation” (Lenin 1902). Yet, as was also readily apparent to Lenin, the general level of consciousness of most trade unions remained insufficiently revolutionary when it came to overturning the prevailing status quo.⁶⁴

Lenin therefore considers trade union consciousness to be a fetter on revolutionary praxis and subsequently in his estimation, while workers have historically demonstrated the

⁶³ Original text Hamerquist, D., ‘Reflections on Organising’ (1970), accessible here: <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/sojournertruth/reflections.html>

⁶⁴ Lenin, V. I., *What is to be Done? Burning Questions of our Movement* (1902), accessible at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>

capacity to form meaningful labour institutions, without the development of a definitive revolutionary consciousness, the official representatives of the working class would more than likely to reject their own potential for class dominion. In light of such reticence, Lenin would endeavour to periodise proletarian struggle, contrasting the truly hegemonic stage with a preceding “‘guild’ or ‘corporatist’ phase within proletarian politics” (Anderson 1978, 17) and accordingly, if as Hamerquist claims, US trade union consciousness is de facto white privilege, then the embrace of whiteness and its questionable advantages are subsequently tantamount to the refusal of proletarian hegemony. It can hence be said that, in order to preserve whiteness as social rank, white workers in the US and their representative unions have simply acquiesced to the notion that working class interests are best served through cross-class collaboration.

From this, STO surmised that US workers would remain divided without radical intervention from intellectuals, organisers and revolutionaries, and thus recognising such obstacles, Hamerquist further asserted that revolutionary consciousness could not simply be handed down to the working class by a self-appointed Leninist vanguard and duly, this stance was reflected in STO’s 1971 pamphlet *Towards a Revolutionary Party*, wherein the group would argue:

The connection between mass struggle and socialism must be organic and political, not mechanical or literary gimmick [and unless] socialist agitation and propaganda can be linked to learning the context for mass struggle, it will amount [...] to lecturing the workers on issues which their experiences have not yet made real, and [subsequently] it will not take root (Staudenmaier 2012, 48).

So, while other New Left groups worked to perfect their rhetoric, STO would deploy the method of workers’ inquiry as a form of intervention, thereby treating workplace struggle as a situation in which theory might not only be applied but tested. The group thus rejected collaboration with mainstream labour unions altogether, instead positioning themselves proximate to people of

colour in struggle and alongside workplaces engaged in rank-and-file dispute.

This practical combination of Gramsci's theory of political hegemony and white skin privilege thereafter allowed STO to elevate anti-racist consciousness-raising to the level of organisational priority. This determination would subsequently draw on the earlier findings of W. E. B. Du Bois whose pioneering historical investigation *Black Reconstruction* (2013) had significantly advanced the overall understanding of racial class formation in the US. Yet, equally significant in terms of STO's inquiry, was Du Bois' analytical attempt to "identify the character of mass praxis, class consciousness, ideology and contradiction as they had occurred in the dialectics of American social historical development" (Robinson 1983, 196).

The principal purpose of Du Bois' mammoth essay was, therefore, to take aim at historical revisionists and contemporary socialists (both of whom at the time subscribed to the ideal of American exceptionalism) and Du Bois would hence characterise exceptionalism as the well-spring of ideological reaction around which white supremacy was structured. It was thus the preponderance of this narrative among white workers that made cross-class collaboration between poor whites and the US bourgeoisie palatable in the first place. The presuppositions of whiteness would, however, present a significant historical barrier to active class formation and as a result, in the pages of *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois would critically challenge the accepted shibboleths of US history: including persistent myths about the Civil War, Emancipation and Reconstruction (about which he would remark, "No serious and unbiased student can be deceived by the fairy tale of a beautiful Southern slave civilisation" (Du Bois 2013, 1520).

Contrary to the received fable, Du Bois would instead highlight the singular importance of the self-activity of both slaves and freed persons during the Civil War, pointing out that, when considered as a whole, the agency of both enslaved people and former slaves greatly determined the war's outcome by deliberately undermining the economic basis of the Confederacy through their acts of mass refusal. As such, this collective effort was reinterpreted

by Du Bois as a “General Strike” while furthermore, he contended that Black self-activity continued post-bellum, during the period of Reconstruction: a radically democratic epoch during which the proletariat, Black and white were ascendent. Accordingly, in his description of Reconstruction, Du Bois would hence foreground the experiences of black proletarians during what was a tumultuous transitional period, thereby placing them at the centre of US history, during both the Civil War and its aftermath.

Du Bois was hence able to claim that during Reconstruction the emancipatory efforts of the Black demos, who built political power in states such as South Carolina, constituted a de facto “dictatorship of the Black proletariat.”⁶⁵ Yet against these gains, in the final chapter of his essay, he goes on to document the effective reversal of Emancipation through the enactment of Jim Crow, whereby newly won rights were systematically revoked and a violent spatial separation was reinstated after the withdrawal of the army of the North.

Du Bois’ polemical history of the abrogation of Reconstruction, therefore, ran contrary to then socialist assumptions about solidarity, since in his view, US socialists and their labour institutions had failed to adequately grasp why white labourers would side with the planter-class during a period in which incomes were synchronously rising for both black and white workers. Du Bois was hence not only able to refute the myth of exceptionalism from a historical standpoint, but his findings also overturned prevailing socialist orthodoxies, which at the time preached the solidarity of all workers while resting upon the assumption that, despite internal

⁶⁵ To quote Chapter X, ‘The Black Proletariat of South Carolina’: “The record of the Negro worker during Reconstruction presents an opportunity to study inductively the Marxian theory of the state. I first called this chapter ‘The Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat in South Carolina,’ but it has been brought to my attention that this would not be correct since universal suffrage does not lead to a real dictatorship until workers use their votes consciously to rid themselves of the dominion of private capital. There were signs of such an object among South Carolina Negroes, but it was always coupled with the idea of that day, that the only real escape for a labourer was himself to own capital” (Du Bois2013, 925).

jealousies, labourers would always unite in common opposition to exploitation under capitalism.

In the former-Confederacy, Jim Crow laws subsequently contributed to a deep enmity between black and white workers and as such, prevailing socialist theories of class formation failed to account for the political success of this retrograde phenomenon. Thus, contrary to any automatic flowering of cross-racial harmony, Du Bois would instead claim that Jim Crow “drove such a wedge” between black and white labourers, that there is unlikely two groups of workers in the world “with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply” and as a result, see nothing “of common interest” (Du Bois 2013, 1488). However, despite this unbroachable chasm, it was demonstrable that white labourers during this period did not benefit from higher wages and as a result, Du Bois would confidently assert that white proletarians were instead, “compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage” (1488).

So, while Jim Crow produced a sharp social differentiation on the basis of skin colour, reinforced as it was by spatial segregation, racial caricature and brutal repression; this antipathy did not necessarily confer financial benefits on poor whites and as a result, they suffered “roughly equivalent economic circumstances” to black workers (Staudenmaier 2012, 84). In practice, this meant that poor white labourers acquiesced to bourgeois ideology, while simultaneously accepting their exploitation and as a consequence, Du Bois was able to identify whiteness as a “psychological wage,” to be exchanged for symbolic status and the privilege of being able to look down on black people (cf. Roediger 1991).

The “wages of whiteness” have thus long prevented the formation of any coherent US labour movement and as a result, “[w]hite labour saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives.” Meanwhile, in response to this unwarranted hostility, “[n]egroes were afraid to build decent homes [...] dress well, or own carriages, bicycles, or automobiles, because of possible retaliation on the part of the whites” (Du Bois 2013, 1489). In addition, not only was there a consensus built among whites around their perceived racial superiority, the

markers of 'blackness' were also developed as a both a defence and resource against white aggression and subsequently, the resulting deadlock would ultimately drain Reconstruction of its democratic and revolutionary character.

Du Bois' definition of whiteness as a psychological stipend therefore further served to furnish STO with a fuller critique of both bourgeois hegemony and US trade union consciousness. However, STO's appreciation of the coordinates of white supremacy were somewhat developed out of earlier insights, previously laid down by Ignatiev and Allen while still in the SDS, and it was during this time that the pair began to theorise that the colour bar was not simply defined by slavery and refined by Jim Crow, but instead originated from earlier material conditions in the colonial plantations of rural Virginia, when formal slavery was instituted in the wake of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 (a multiracial uprising by settler labourers against the colonial elite during which the Jamestown colony was burned to the ground).⁶⁶

In order to prevent further uprisings, thereafter two pools of segregated labour were created: a pool of white servants, indentured for a limited period, alongside a pool of hereditary black chattel slaves who were in turn policed by their counterparts, the white settlers. Hence, Allen claims this to be the birth of "white skin privilege," a unique feature of the colonial division of labour, that would somewhat precede the formal institution of slavery. Until now, the prevailing historical materialist view had been that the Southern slave system was a semi-feudal planter aristocracy; yet antithetical to this, Allen's research instead established that slavery was

⁶⁶ However, historian Gerald Horne warns in his essay 'The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism' (2018) that the cross-racial nature of the revolt is often overstated on the US left, since one of the central demands of the uprising was "a more aggressive colonial offensive to plunder the indigenous and parcel out their land to poorer settlers." Accordingly, Horne would prefer to view the episode as "a lost chance for alliance politics between African and indigenous peoples." Accessed here: <https://monthlyreview.org/2018/04/01/the-apocalypse-of-settler-colonialism/>

part of a prior historical labour process which had not always been racial in character⁶⁷ and as such, he saw white supremacy as the outcome of a series of conscious political decisions made by “slave-holding capitalists” (Staudenmaier 2012, 84). Allen’s insight therefore grants us a grounded explanation of how, rather than being a holdover from any earlier productive stage, these various processes of racialised labour were instead developed within the emergence of US capitalism itself.

During the late-60s, Ignatiev and Allen had originally combined some of these theoretical approaches to produce a pamphlet called ‘The White Blindspot’ (1967), wherein they described “white skin privilege” in relation to the contemporary labour process; observing how white workers enjoyed the relative advantage of being first hired and last fired. Meanwhile, beyond the workplace, the markers of whiteness also guaranteed their preferential treatment at the hands of police and petty administrators (i.e. the very same public courtesies described under Jim Crow in *Black Reconstruction*) and although advantageous, these privileges were relative rather than absolute. For instance, while preferential hiring meant that whites could more easily find employment, it did not ensure that jobs were always available whenever white workers needed them (Staudenmaier 2012, 87-89).

At an aggregate level, the racial imperative that flows from white skin privilege consequently does much to limit the organisational capacity of the US working class, since it grants whites automatic seniority at work with a direct cost to workers of colour (thereby ensuring competition and enmity between the two). This formulation is hence analytically useful, since it persuasively describes how from a historical perspective, US workers have not been able to form strong interracial or multiethnic bonds (see Davis 1986). In this regard, ‘The White

⁶⁷ Allen goes as far as identifying Herman Schlüter author of *Karl Marx and the Civil War* (1919) as the founder of “the ‘Marxist’ white-apologist school of American labour historiography.”

Blindspot' conjectured that political and cultural whiteness can be considered a materially grounded category; one that is capable of institutionally ensconcing itself as hegemonically dominant in direct proportion to its ability to destabilise other racial identities, the status of which remain contingent and contestable (cf. Lowe 1996).

This categorial uncertainty, generated by the poles of blackness and whiteness, therefore achieves a certain degree of fluidity vis-a-vis the status of other immigrant identities (i.e. those who were initially considered non-white, yet had "eventual access 'whiteness' and its privileges," even if these entitlements were in some cases revokable [Staudenmaier 2012, 88]).⁶⁸ Yet within this prevailing paradigm, however, Ignatiev and Allen saw a potential line of attack against white supremacy, stating that in order to combat whiteness' hegemonic function, white skin privilege itself might be elucidated and repudiated in struggle, thereby creating "the possibility of a reunified proletariat capable of overthrowing capitalism" (88).

By establishing these fundamental insights, STO was then able provide a handbook of first principles for militant organisers, declaring the fight against racism to be "the first, immediate and most urgent task of the entire working class" (Ignatin & Allen 1967). STO hence sought to depose white chauvinism through a combination of consciousness-raising efforts and cultural interventions (often in the form of pamphlets, newsletters and agitational newspapers). One such newspaper was 'Bread and Roses: A Paper by and for Working Women' (1970) which appropriately exhorted white women workers to support black care workers as a way of elevating racialised social reproduction struggles. In this manner, 'Bread and Roses' served to draw out the antagonism that labour unions were not responsive enough to the needs of both women and workers of colour. As the pamphlet stated: "The unions do nothing for women workers [yet they] are content to let us work for slave wages. They do not care if we are

⁶⁸ For a further account see Lowe, L., *Immigrant Acts: Asian American Cultural Politics*, Duke University (1996).

excluded from better jobs. They do not even fight for our job security” (Staudenmaier 2012, 53).⁶⁹ Accordingly, this intervention was thus designed to be a shot across the bows of the unions who would typically employ a rising-tide type rhetoric, based on the bread-and-butter needs of the so-called “average” worker (i.e. a white male breadwinner).

Against this trend however, STO would instead prioritise the rights of marginal workers and as a result, involved themselves with the most oppressed sections of the workforce, who toiled within a system where pay grades were primarily determined by race, gender and ethnicity. This was therefore part of an overall strategy to encourage white workers to get active around demands for which they would see no immediate gain and thus, “win or lose” the campaign would attenuate whites to the potentials of cross-racial solidarity, raising the stakes for the class as a whole (57).

Yet, for all the group’s theoretical sophistication, STO was underdeveloped in terms of praxis and in this regard, Michael Staudenmaier calls the organisation a “tragic tale” (307), since not only did the revolution that they agitated for never materialise, by the early-80s its possibility had been completely reversed, leading the group’s rhetoric to take on a somewhat millenarian character. Many of the group’s former members attribute this decline to shifting objective conditions, which included deindustrialisation and the hollowing out of formerly vibrant working-class neighbourhoods; a fragmentation that made attempts to shift the overall culture impossible. Simultaneously, as the racial demography of the US changed, newly arrived immigrants from Mexico were to surpass Black Americans and Puerto Ricans to become the largest working minority in the US.

Despite such setbacks, STO’s highly innovative contributions to revolutionary theory around white skin privilege, dual consciousness and autonomy, allowed them to make a

⁶⁹ ‘What We Want’, an essay published in ‘Bread and Roses: A Paper by and for Working Women’ (1970).

sustained intervention in the discourse of the New Left. For example, the notion of white privilege is now an accepted and widely deployed concept, adequate as it is to the continuing durability of white supremacy in the US. Another success, according to Staudenmaier, was STO's dogged adherence to class as a category of analysis, while also accepting, that too often, the group's intellectual and organisational contributions were constrained by a residual Leninism and continual efforts to maintain a "shared lineage traceable to the Russian experience [and] later deviations, be they Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist or Eurocommunist" (315).

STO's commitment to workplace investigation notwithstanding, the group's attempts to spread their influence across Midwest had only limited appeal, likely because they were a predominantly white and male-dominated organisation. As such, the group's decision to reject tokenism made it doubly difficult to translate STO's theoretical commitments into real world pragmatism and subsequently, the group would take part in too many wide-ranging struggles for which they lacked the any real capacity. As a result, STO's organisational drives tended to be fitful, yet wholly dependent on new outbreaks of defiant working-class self-activity, which they saw as essential for advancing proletarian consciousness.

In practice, this meant that STO was perpetually on the lookout for the next uprising, be it from workers or new social movements and hence, lacking any overarching strategy, levels of activity within the group would subsequently lull whenever mass struggle receded. Moreover, this continual vigilance led to burnout among STO organisers, which in turn led to disillusionment among members of the group. To counteract this tendency however, Staudenmaier suggests that radicals must instead "balance these [...] aspects, to avoid burnout without missing the boat when mass movements emerge" (317). Thus, in conclusion, he commends STO for the development of ready-to-hand frameworks in anticipation of struggle and thus, it can be said that STO innovated what is sometimes called "movementism": a tendency that sees social movements as self-directed yet requiring the critical intervention of

revolutionaries in order to help raise up proletarian consciousness.

STO hence clearly understood that the opportunity to elevate working-class consciousness to the level of revolutionary praxis comes into play whenever the masses decide to take illegal and self-directed action. Yet, Staudenmaier sees a contemporary obstacle to such activity, explaining how the “non-profit industrial complex” serves to limit the scope of working-class struggle and as a result, the consciousness of workers themselves.⁷⁰ This form of political recuperation from above thus currently circumscribes the potential for working-class resistance in the US (something to note in the case of worker centres). Nevertheless, Staudenmaier proposes the introduction of an “intermediary level” of organisation that might allow both worker’s movements and autonomist revolutionary factions to learn from each other, just as STO had attempted in the past.

2.5 Burawoy’s Extended Case Method as Ethnographic Co-research

Inasmuch as this is an ethnographic study, it remains to describe how the principles of the workers’ inquiry might fit with participant-observation in a setting where I am intervening as an activist, organiser and researcher. Because workers’ inquiry emphasises the proletarian standpoint and since the exercise of autonomy cannot simply be the application of prior techniques, co-research under these conditions must instead involve qualitative methods that not only record, but also enhance the self-activity of the those being studied. In addition, if the ambition of workers’ inquiry is to unearth the preconditions of socialism (i.e. previously undisclosed potentials for transformational solidarity, as Facing Reality proposed) then this

⁷⁰ See INCITE! Women of Colour Against Violence, eds., *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Duke University (2007).

intention should be combined with an ethnographic method capable of capturing everyday power relations both at the level of microsocial interaction and more broadly, within the wider economic structure.

In terms of methodological approaches, there are already many prior examples of immigrant and racial urban ethnographies that focus on work and its exclusions (Portes & Wilson 1980; Waldinger & Lichter 2003; Wacquant 2007). Likewise, approaches such as embeddedness (Polanyi 1958; Granovetter 1985) have allowed researchers to better appreciate how economic actors are fixed within social roles, in turn, influencing quotidian rational decision-making and the sociality of commonplace activities such as the search for employment and housing (Bonacich 1972; Rubenowitz & Rosenbaum 2000; Royster 2003). However, as rich and valid as these approaches are, inasmuch as they recognise capital and the wage system as determinant of social relations, they tend to elide the immediate condition of the working class, while ignoring the contribution that workers make to capital's own reproduction. In short, such methods trend towards the politics of desegregation through policy, rather than militant class struggle.

Alternately, David Burawoy's Extended Case Method (ECM) represents an intervention in the field of ethnomethodology that "destabilises the world we seek to comprehend" (Burawoy 1998, 1). As a Marxist sociologist, Burawoy therefore advocates for a public sociology beyond the professional confines of academia, thereby presenting a path forward for co-research that specifically thematises the participation of the social scientist on behalf of those they study. Hence, the development of ECM can be seen as complimentary to the industrial sociology of C. Wright Mills and Harry Braverman yet distinguishes itself by critically and decisively intervening on the side of the working class. It should also be stressed, however, that Burawoy does not limit himself to the study of shop floor politics but gives equal attention to working-class voluntary associations and processes of collective decision-making outside of the workplace.

In 1978, Burawoy published *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labour Process*, a

study which looked at the decline of industrial sociology. In Burawoy's view, workplace sociology had until now been characterised by a tendency to isolate the factory from its external social relations and as a consequence, minimise the "rationality of the worker" (Burawoy 1979, 4). In response to these limitations, Burawoy thus attempts to "rescue the rational kernel of plant sociology" (4) by placing it within a Marxist framework and in so doing, his aim was to elucidate how "conflict and consent are organised on the shop floor," (4) thereby demonstrating how workers are completely rational in their responses to management.

To achieve this, Burawoy seeks to build on the dominant sociologies of institutional bureaucracy and organisational theory, yet he finds these methodologies lacking, since too often, they produce studies that rest upon one of two "divergent premises, namely *the assumption of underlying harmony and necessity of social control*" (Burawoy 1979, 7); a dichotomy that Burawoy claims to be derived from the competing sociological traditions of Weber on one hand and Durkheim on the other. Problematically, however, each tradition holds a position that is somewhat antithetical, since social harmony tends to be assumed rather than explained, whereas social conflict is looked upon as aberrant and "pathological" (8).

Burawoy subsequently portrays this as a conflict between the two dominant yet contradictory tendencies to be found within mainstream sociology, and while in the first instance, Weberian methods do indeed work to reveal underlying social tensions, they are typically unable to locate its origin. Likewise, the so-called the harmony theories of the Durkheimian tradition have trouble speaking to the existence of empirically observable "coercive controls." To break this deadlock, Burawoy instead suggests that sociology must recognise the historical specificity of the capitalist labour process, while simultaneously eschewing transhistorical generalities and presuppositions. In so doing, he attempts to put sociology on its proper footing in order to better appreciate how coercive domination determines the expenditure of effort in a class-based society. Moreover, once sociology accepts the facticity of society's division of labour, conflictual

responses from workers can, thereafter, be considered completely rational. Accordingly, a parallel can thus be drawn between ECM and JFT's application of the workers' inquiry, in that Burawoy also seeks to examine why the labour process involves "combinations of force and consent that elicit cooperation in pursuit of profit" (30).

The elasticity of ECM is hence reflected in Burawoy's best known case studies, conducted within wide range of settings, including Chicago, Zambia, Hungary and post-Soviet Russia and as a result, his research traverses both capitalist enterprises and state-capitalist bureaucracies. ECM is consequently well suited to multiple institutional milieus, thereby allowing for data gathering from participants situated within locally rooted labour processes, while at the same time referencing wider social contexts. Yet, Burawoy's ethnographic method is perhaps best known for transforming the limits to participation into an advantage for the researcher, in turn facilitating a subsequent break with the one-sidedness of institutional sociology.

In this regard, Burawoy draws on the "exemplar" of post-colonial psychoanalysis, Frantz Fanon whose clinical interview technique "not only instantiates the principles of reflexive science, but thematises its limitations" (Burawoy 1998, 27). Moreover, in Burawoy's view, the adoption of this analytical model also allows the social scientist to embrace their own unavoidable interference with the object of research. Burawoy would henceforth nominate this inevitable intrusion into the lifeworld of worker participants as the "ethnographic condition" itself; or that which he labels *intersubjectivity*, thereby extolling the intercession of the sociologist as a "virtue" to be exploited rather than suppressed.⁷¹

⁷¹ For example, in Jamie Woodcock's 'A Workers' inquiry in a UK Call Centre: The Labour Process, Management and Resistance' (2015), he explains how the Kolinko Collective used the workers' inquiry to not only examine the self-activity of workers, but also as a method that identified struggles in which to intervene. The collective is interviewed about their methods here: <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/interview-kolinko-collective>

While before now, traditional reflexive sociology⁷² had opposed the positive and empirical notion that the social scientist should “insulate the subject and object” (14) of study, ECM instead attempts to synthesise positive and reflexive sociological methods to shore up the perceived deficiencies in both. Hence, much as Michael Polanyi would “thematise participation,”⁷³ Burawoy eschews any rigid positivist claim to transcendental objectivity, instead favouring a commitment to the “rationality of theory” and its capacity to reflexively produce cognitive maps through which to “apprehend the world” (5). The purpose of such mapping is therefore to extrapolate from what is uniquely local about the field site and move to a more general and global reckoning. In so doing, ECM allows for the fuller contextualisation of relations beyond the labour process, thereby enabling the social researcher to reference external contexts, such as “racism, labour markets and urban political regimes,” (6) all of which Burawoy considers equally determinant when considering the decision-making rationality of workers.

Here a comparison to Marx’s workers’ inquiry can be made, whereby feedback generated between the researcher and worker participants develops into a series of “dialogues” capable of traversing both micro and macro determinations.⁷⁴ To confirm this, Burawoy states that ECM creates, “a dialogue, virtual and real, between observer and participants,” before embedding this conversation, “within a second dialogue, between local processes and extra-local forces that in turn can only be comprehended through a third expanding dialogue with itself” (5). This nested dialectic thus facilitates conceptual leaps across time and space, highlighting discrepancies and normalising prescriptions within the everyday, while at the same time, displacing consensual

⁷² Associated with Garfinkel and later Bourdieu, reflexive sociology involves the critique of positive science’s claims to objectivity, favouring qualitative ethnomethodological approaches to everyday practices.

⁷³ See Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Critical Philosophy* (1958) which foregrounds the participation of the scientist as an “act” of interpretation.

⁷⁴ “[J]ust as sociology has borrowed much from Marx and emerged in part through a debate with him, so Marxism cannot afford to dismiss sociology” (Burawoy 1979, xiii).

norms (or that which Gramsci describes to be the bourgeois component of dual consciousness).

In this manner, Burawoy seeks to uphold reflexive science as indispensable, yet he is also aware of reflexivity's phenomenological shortcomings, which he attempts to replace with a dual methodology that is both positive and reflexive (therefore requiring the mutual interdependence of both models). To better understand this methodological innovation, it is necessary to elaborate on exactly how "virtue" is wrought from the perceived deficiencies of both and consequently, Burawoy outlines four key concepts to help navigate the limitations of reflexive sociology without lapsing into the pure empiricism of rigid positivism. In practice, this means that the researcher must take advantage of "context effects" thrown off by social scientist's intervention while remaining mindful of conditioning "power effects" which limit the reach of reflexive science.

The first context effect is therefore *intervention* which comes about in the interview (i.e. the necessary the intrusion of the researcher into the life of the interviewee, whereby the act of recording clinically isolates the participant's experience). While this encounter is unavoidable, the act of interruption has benefits, since:

Interventions create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world (Burawoy 1998, 14).

This is then followed by the second context effect: *process*, which responds to the way in which multivalent meanings, attached to the interviewer's "stimulus" can undermine research. This a consequence of the non-standardised responses that interviewees frequently produce, making it impossible to collapse their replies into a single datapoint. Under such circumstances, even common-sense notions, such as gender and race, can easily be misconstrued and therefore, situational comprehension on the part of the sociologist is a necessity. Yet, to offset this effect, the researcher must subsequently work to unpack routine elements by explicating underlying

practical and non-discursive meanings from the social situation. Considering this, Burawoy suggests that the activist researcher should endeavour to build situational knowledge through the *praxis* of socially “doing with those being studied” (Garfinkel 1967).

Meanwhile, the third context effect is *structuration*, i.e. that which pertains to impersonal forces external to the field site, yet which shape the interview situation (or to put it another way, that which makes the field site unique and replication difficult) and hence, by employing positive methods, such as the use of empirical data, the researcher can better apprehend how the overall context is shaped by wider social forces beyond the purview of the study’s participants. For example, this might mean analysing the ethnic composition of the workforce or describing the significance of a particular type of labour within the wider economy.

Finally, the fourth context effect is *reconstruction*, which is derivative of the process; or to put it alternately, the priority of the social situation over the individual, and as such, this effect aims to compensate for the limited scope of small-scale ethnographic inquiry. Thus, in response to the boundedness of most case studies, Burawoy asks: “Is there another way to produce generality?” (Burawoy 1998, 16). In turn, he sees these limitations as an opportunity to reconstruct theory (wherein ‘theory’ means local consensus or abstract law), thereby avoiding findings that are representative of pre-given or favoured concepts. In this manner, Burawoy impels the researcher to extend themselves beyond prior knowledge, in order to discover existing theory’s “refutation” through fieldwork.

While emphasising the affordances of reflexive science, Burawoy also examines its coercive limitations (i.e. “power effects”) with the hope of reducing them. In this regard, the first power effect is *domination* and accordingly, Burawoy contends that the social researcher “cannot avoid” either dominating or being dominated, since entry into the field site is always a power struggle between insiders and outsiders. This means that on occasion, deception might be necessary against both the powerful and powerless (especially since even powerlessness

has its own defences).⁷⁵ It should be assumed therefore, that the participants within any field study are already implicated in hierarchies of power and subsequently, situational knowledge for any sociologist entering the field is always partial.

The second power effect is *silencing*: a natural by-product of “ruling class ideology” in the Gramscian sense, whereby the bourgeois interests of hegemonic elites are presumed to be the interests of all and consequently, there is an onus on the researcher to unearth “concealed diverse class and racial interests” (23). Any researcher hoping to excavate such meanings must therefore record discordant voices which in turn, allows for the reconstruction of theory in line with their findings.

The third power effect is *objectification*, which Burawoy perceives to be concomitant with the forces of social structuration shaping the lifeworld of participants (i.e. “the real power exercised by economic forces, and cultural systems” [23]). Burawoy warns us, however, that these forces are not absolute, but instead inherently unstable and therefore, can be dislodged at any time by social movements from below. This implies that the researcher “should always be prepared for subterranean processes to erupt and break up the social field” (23-4).

Finally, the fourth power effect is *normalisation*, which by definition is a consequence of the contextual effect of reconstruction; whereby the complexity of the field site is reduced to a single case study. Frequently, this particularising operation can result in the forcing of theory into the case (or indeed, vice versa) which in turn, leads to a straitjacketing of findings to theoretical norms. As such, normalisation might be typified as the “unproblematized relations of power” and thus, to mitigate this would mean “working more closely with those who the study

⁷⁵ See Burawoy, M., *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines: From African Advancement to Zambianisation*, Manchester University Press (1972). As Burawoy points during his Zambian mine case study, whiteness was observed to be a resource and blackness a defence

[purports] to serve” (24).

In this manner, ECM recommends itself as an ethnographic method since it allows the sociologist to exploit their mediatory role as both researcher and organiser (see Section 2.7). Hence, if this study aspires to index the qualitative shifts in consciousness among the project’s vendor members, then it must consider the coercive power effects of the field site, which at SVP includes: (i) gendered practices; (ii) racist administrative structures; and (iii) the wider impersonal forces that impact the lives of vendors both at work and at home.

2.6 The Problem of Proletarian Differentiation

So far in this chapter, I have examined workers’ inquiry, not simply as a sociological method, but an approach that specifically intervenes from the standpoint of workers and as such, attenuates itself to the work of organising. Complicating matters however, each of these prior methods was developed in response to the situation of workers under Fordism and hence, it is questionable whether such methodologies remain entirely relevant given the subsequent global expansion of informal labour markets under flexible accumulation.

Despite their oft-stated intentions, these techniques have tended to selectively focus on the waged portion of the proletariat, overlooking the contiguous and ever-growing mass of unwaged workers excluded from formal employment. Moreover, in terms of the practical application of theory, this oversight has produced a conspicuous divide between workplace and community organising strategies in the US (see Katznelson 1981) which in turn, has profound consequences for this study and consequently from here on, I will refer to the under-theorisation of the divide between waged and unwaged workers as the problem of *proletarian differentiation* (see Denning 2010; Rübner Hansen 2015).

As Castoriadis previously stated (see Section 2.2) workers' inquiry provides an opportunity for the social scientist to learn from proletarian experience, both at work and in struggle and therefore, it is mode of pedagogic inquiry which in turn informs praxis: a dialogic process through which the collective worker comes to understand their precise social role in capital's overall reproduction. For Castoriadis, the development of autonomy is hence an exercise in the mastery of transformative knowledge, allowing workers to critically interrogate the mystificatory structures that occult capitalism's founding presuppositions.

While deviating from vanguardist orthodoxy, JFT saw workers' inquiry as a method commodious to the politics of working-class organisation. As such, it was an approach that began by recording the "gripes and grievances" of individual workers, so that their concerns might be developed into collective questions to be decisively answered by the class itself. In this manner, JFT's approach was a laudable attempt to reaffirm the connection between intellectuals and the working-class, by revealing the preconditions of social solidarity present within the existing bonds of cooperation found on the shop floor.

In the final analysis however, JFT were unable to realise the full potential of their innovative approach, since too often their investigation remained arrested at the level of intellectual reflection. Moreover, the group's tendency to ventriloquise workers only served to maintain the manual-intellectual division of labour within their method. So, while JFT were successful in identifying new subjects of struggle (principally black workers, women and youth), they were unable to integrate these minority viewpoints into their overall analysis, leaving the group at a loss when attempting to adequately grasp the profound recomposition of class during this crucial period of struggle.

While Panzieri would start out with a similar critique of bureaucratic management, he was able to advance the question of class composition more decisively. Thus, by combining Marxist analysis with US sociological traditions, Panzieri's proposal for co-research

constructively addresses the question of worker self-organisation. Moreover, co-research presses intellectuals to participate more purposefully in struggle, while remaining subordinate to the interests of the class. This refinement consequently allows the social researcher to remain attentive to the experiences of workers, while also potentiating workers themselves around a wider set of social relations. Of critical importance to Panzieri's analysis, however, was the parallel development of Tronti's concept of the social factory: the real subsumption thesis that reflects on the increasing socialisation of work under capitalism, which in turn, mandates an expansion in the scope of the workers' inquiry.

By drawing on Marx's notes about formal and real subsumption in the *Grundrisse*, Tronti subsequently theorised the social factory to be a by-product of the historical development of capital in its overbearing attempt to master the social relations of production; an effort which over time, would transform all of society into its own image. As Tronti comments:

When the factory seizes the whole of society—all of social production is turned into industrial production—the specific traits of which are lost in the generic traits of society. When the whole of society is reduced to the factory, the factory—as such—appears to disappear (Tronti 1962).

Tronti implies therefore that by broadening of the category of productive labour, capitalist development and its disciplinary modalities come to impose the reign of production over the entire process of socialisation.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (2010) Friedrich Engels⁷⁶ in an attempt to extend Marx's materialist conception of history, states that: "the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life" which he contends has "a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of

⁷⁶ Accessed here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>

food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species” (86).

Yet, beyond this transhistorical definition, social reproduction functions within capitalism to maintain and daily restore existing labour power. So, while before now, productive activity had taken place within the domestic household, which in agrarian societies was the original the site of collective familial production, under capitalism, domestic labour has become delimited from productive labour, reducing it to an apparently separate sphere of activity. The expansion of the wage system under capitalism, however, has always been historically dependant on the social transformation and subsumption of the proletarian household, yet over time this development has created an ideological and spatial separation between the seemingly value-producing productive and devalued reproductive spheres of life, and as a result, this disjunction has only further ensconced the division of labour between male proletarians, who remain free-floating and mutually competitive bodies, available for direct capitalist exploitation, and women working within the household, in turn privatising and subordinating their labour, while devaluing it as a free input of overall production.

Beginning from the 1970's onwards, Marxist feminists, along with theorists of intersectional oppression have contributed to what is now known as Social Reproduction Theory (SRT): a theoretical attempt to refine and unify the relationship between race, class, gender and sexuality, in order to better understand the coincidence of gendered oppressions under capitalism. Yet, to fully explain socially reproductive labour and its devaluation, Aaron Jaffe (2020) states we must draw on Marx's original definition of labour power as a needs-satisfying activity, set in motion for the purposes of survival; a process which successively changes “social conditions and relations” (5). Hence, while “patterns of labour power” are variable, on aggregate self-valorising capital is only narrowly concerned with labour's output, in turn constraining and distorting “the development of human powers,” (7) while side-lining some capacities and

disabling others. SRT therefore attempts to think gender and its attendant oppressions “in relation to class,” (7) in order to shed light on the reproductive work carried out in the home, which at first glance, “would seem to be governed by laws very different from production” (Fortunati 1995, 8).

Within present-day capitalism, labour carried out at the point of production thus appears to be uniquely value producing, while by contrast, domestic labour is considered to be non-productive of value. Leopoldina Fortunati in *The Arcane of Reproduction* (1995) states, however, that despite appearances, the capitalist mode of production in fact rests on an “indissoluble connection that links reproduction with production, because the second is both a precondition and a condition of the existence of the first” (8). As a result, she goes on to claim that while work carried out at the point of production first appears “as an exchange of equivalents between equals, [it] is in reality an exchange of non-equivalents between unequals” (9). Likewise, production within the home initially appears to be an exchange taking place between “male workers and women, but in reality, takes place between capital and women, with the male workers acting as intermediaries” (9). Consequently, at the level the totality, domestic labour is a relation of production; the family unit the site of that production; and the family home its appropriate machinery. As Fortunati states, the proletarian family is, as a result, a “necessary and sufficient nucleus of the relations of production” (19) and accordingly, the “*chain of capitalist exploitation does not [...] stop at the factory gates, but enters the house*” (129).

While seemingly a “place of love” the family is thus, by necessity also “a place of alienation, of commoditisation, or non-communication” (192)⁷⁷ and therefore, as dialogue within Marxist studies, SRT attempts to shift theoretical focus from cooperation at the point of

⁷⁷ This is something to bear in mind when Kathleen Dunn claims that the organisational resources of the flexible Latina vending family, a work unit expressly formed in opposition to the “vicissitudes of capitalist relations,” (Graaf & Ha *et al.* 2015; Dunn 20) is also a potential site of resistance (see Section 1.7).

production towards survival strategies within the sphere of social reproduction, while simultaneously illuminating a new terrain on which to fight. As Mohendesi and Teitleman point out, SRT deepens “our understanding of the capitalist mode of production by showing how its rise was [...] based on the manifold subsumption of socially reproductive activities under capitalist relations” (Bhattacharya *et al* 2017, 64; Mohendesi & Teitleman). However, this is not simply a concern for historians, but an urgent present-day consideration, due to the return of degraded labour practices, accompanied by “rising precarity, soaring surplus populations and an imperilled wage system” (100).

As it stands, therefore, socialist theory and practice currently lag behind SRT’s attempt to unify theories of intersectional oppression, meaning that all too often the “terrain of social reproduction” is neglected as a site of resistance within contemporary struggle. In this regard, Mohendesi and Teitleman keenly point out that the history of proletarian contestation carries with it valuable lessons, since it is clear from historical struggles, that food, rent and the overall cost of living were in the past, “key points of contestation”.⁷⁸ Hence, within what presently seems like a widespread crisis of social reproduction, the current assault on the working class is observably waged “just as much, if not more so, on the terrain of social reproduction.” (Bhattacharya *et al* 2017, 155; Mohendesi & Teitleman).

For these reasons, co-research becomes a sociologically significant task; one that is well-suited to apprehend the totality of productive and socially reproductive relations. Or to put it another way, the sum of moments in which “the practices of the social individual emerge as

⁷⁸ Mohendesi and Teitleman illustrate this point with an account from New York City’s Lower East Side, where in 1902 working-class Jewish women, mainly housewives, organised a series of tenant strikes and consumer boycotts: “They rioted, picketed, coordinated with labour unions, and planned cooperatives, pooling resources to subsidize not only food but also arrest funds. Their organizing model inspired a wave of tenant organizing just a few years later, initiating a round of rent strikes beginning in 1907” (Bhattacharya *et al* 2017, 116; Mohendesi & Teitleman).

work” (Thoburn 2003). As the social factory progressively encompasses the lifeworld of workers, therefore, the historic task of the proletariat becomes transformed and whereas in the past, the revolutionary task of the collective worker was to take control of the means of production, under real subsumption, the terrain of struggle is subsequently expanded into circulation.⁷⁹

In this regard, and concomitant with the expanded analysis of Italian Operaismo, STO grappled with the socialisation of racially specific US labour practices, in turn leading them to re-theorise how the instantiation of colour bar, both at work and in public space, was crucial to the establishment of US wage-relations. In addition, the notion of “white skin privilege” afforded STO analytical purchase on the dual phenomenon of wildcat strikes at the point of production and Black liberation struggles within the wider social and international field. It was these subsequent innovations that permitted STO to draw the inevitable comparison between ruling-class hegemony and the preferential treatment of white workers, which in terms of development, would later become the rotten foundation of US organised labour. In STO’s hands, however, workers’ inquiry instead became a tool for developing militancy among white workers, while at the same time, advancing Black liberation; an attack therefore, on the very coordinates of racial hierarchy with the hope of confronting the class enemy common to all. The disruption of white supremacy was hence for STO, the most urgent and fundamental of tasks, since as Lukács (1971) states: “Ideology is [...] not merely a consequence of the economic structure of society but also the precondition of its smooth functioning.”⁸⁰

If both bourgeois and racist ideology are to be effectively challenged, however, then it is

⁷⁹ This likely explains why by mid-70s Italian autonomism had turned its back on “factoryism” in search of broader struggles, see Broder, D., ‘Autumn and the Fall of Italian Workerism’ (2020). Accessible here: <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol3/no4/the-autumn-and-fall-of-italian-workerism>

⁸⁰ Lukács, G., *History of Class Consciousness*, ‘Legality and Illegality’ (1920). Accessed here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/lukacs3.htm>

during moments of mass action and rebellion (i.e. moments when, as Gramsci observes, the working class begins to spontaneously undertake acts of illegality). Consequently, such insights are of key importance to my study, since, due to the informality of their work, SVP's vendor members are routinely treated as "illegal" even when working legitimately, while moreover, the undocumented status of the vendors, in turn makes them extremely vulnerable to the law, limiting the scope of self-activity, while also denying opportunities for the development of militant consciousness typically available to both waged citizens and more formal workers.⁸¹

To this extent, while workers' inquiry as a methodology clearly lends itself to this study, it is also worth noting that many of the aforesaid approaches are mainly silent about the cultural lives of workers and their social milieu, and hence for all its theoretical advances, autonomism would too often remain focused on workerist struggle at the point of production; a mode of contestation, which during the 1970s, heavily relied on the existing industrial strength of organised assembly-line workers. During the subsequent period of defeat however, widespread automation would soon expel a great multitude of proletarians from the heart of production and as a result, working class organisation dramatically declined. Consequently, while many of the abovementioned theorists have gestured beyond the factory gates, the social separation between the spheres of work and social reproduction still presents a problem for any inquiry that seeks to assess the potentials for class formation within a community setting.

This dilemma is examined in earnest by US sociologist Ira Katznelson (1981) in his seminal study of the social movements of Upper Manhattan during the 1970s. As such, Katznelson's thesis maintains that patterns of class formation in the US have been chronically disrupted by a separation between workplace and community struggles, leading him to contend

⁸¹ This tension was most present during the Fuck the Police (FTP) protests, as described in Section 3.8. During this insurgency, the vendors also wanted to protest their exclusions, but could not take part in the illegal acts of trespassing that the protests entailed.

that local politics in the US, rather than being built around commonplace class distinctions, is instead founded on race and ethnicity (meaning that the political and economic demands of the working class have tended to be pursued separately). Because of this disjunction and despite the fervour for community organising during the radical 60s, there has as a consequence been very few victories won at the level of community politics.

For Katznelson, this separation has subsequently been fatal, since to maintain power, most urban political machines have catered to older, whiter and more established communities; while conversely, the insurgent demands of Black and Latinx proletarians have often foundered, in turn, allowing Alinskyite organising practices to become the dominant within community struggles.⁸² Yet, Katznelson deems such techniques to be deleterious, since rather than relying on any suitable class analysis, Alinsky's outlook tends to divide the world into two reductive factions: the "haves" and "have-nots." Furthermore, due to this analytical insufficiency, most community-based circulation struggles of the 1960s left little in the way of durable working-class organisation. Alternately however, Katznelson argues that community organising cannot succeed unless it pays close attention to "the country's special pattern of class formation" (i.e. the split between the quotidian consciousness of American workers and the politics of community [Katznelson 1981, 194]).

In turn, this insight leads Katznelson towards deeper speculation about class formation in the US (or the lack thereof). To mark this lacuna, he observes how, in terms of everyday consciousness, working-class Americans live on the margin of history and as such, "their lives are shaped by inherited and shifting limits." Yet, he also adds that "people are never merely passive agents of structural imperatives [but instead] create culture, which [...] composes a set

⁸² For a full critique of Alinskyite organising practices, see Jane McAlevey's dissertation 'No Short Cuts: The Case for Organising' (2015). Accessed here: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1043/

of resources for living in society and for affecting the contours of society” (1). Hence, for Katznelson, the submerged culture of the working-class poor only remains “hidden from view” so long as they do not “disturb the regular routines [...] of middle- and upper-class America” (2).

Consequently, in his community study of Washington Heights and Inwood, Katznelson reflects on how low-income people are able to organise themselves politically within their own communities, while at the same time, being separated from the workplace struggles that had until recently, defined the class. Hence, it is this observation which subsequently allows him to outline the stakes for urban sociology, stating that, “[if] we do not self-consciously understand this key feature of our urban-class inheritance, we shall continue to play a losing game whose very rules [...] remain obscure” (194).

Rising to the challenge, he then broadens his argument to index “the expansion of Marxist social theory beyond the narrowly economic,” a determination that accords “a uniquely privileged role to workplace relations” (194). Yet, rather than dispensing with class as a category of analysis altogether (be it Marxist or Weberian), Katznelson adds the further caveat that neither tradition has yet adequately addressed the separation of work and community struggles. To this extent, the divide between workplace sociology and community studies finds its mirror in theory, since on the one hand, Marx opts for the primacy of the relations of production, while on the other, Weber insists on processes of social differentiation. Nevertheless, Katznelson sees both traditions as being incomplete and inaccurate; a deficiency which in turn distorts the unit of analysis whenever discussing community, ultimately leaving the entire debate floating in a “historical and relational void [which is] bounded, presentist and positivist” in orientation (198).

Given that Marxism’s productivist understanding of class appears to be somewhat presumptive when compared to Weberian sociology, Katznelson instead seeks to interrogate the certainties of objective classification vis-a-vis the actual historical patterning of US class

formation. In this endeavour, he draws on E. P. Thompson⁸³ who encourages us to think of class as a “very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests [and who] have a *disposition to behave* as a class” (204). Thompson in his rejection of any rigid objective classificatory system thus understands that the history of class is itself a process of self-making in relation to experience-based *dispositions*. To which Katznelson adds:

Dispositions are tendencies [and so much] as language imposes areas of silence, cognitive structures define boundaries between the probable and improbable. Individuals who share in a set of class dispositions may do so in a variety of ways, but what they have in common, is a motivational construction that may, *or may not*, produce common organisation or action (Katznelson 1981, 206).

Here Katznelson is obviously referring to the working-class’ capacity for self-transformation and abolition, whereby the contingency of class as a historical grouping is only realised “at the level of organisation and action [in] the crucible of interaction and struggle.” Within US history however, the ideological trenches of urban experience were “constructed before and after the Civil War” (209) and have thereafter, continued to pattern what is politically possible in terms of organisation.

In this regard, Katznelson recognises the crucial difference between class as disposition and class as organisation, further suggesting that it is important to study these contradictions in the “genesis and practice of urban movements” (201). As such, he finds himself in general agreement with Manuel Castells, who considers urban social movements to be characteristic of advanced capitalism, since cities are now the principal site of contemporary social reproduction; a shift which has in turn, led to the widespread the politicisation of urban issues (most notably,

⁸³ Original quotation Thompson, E. P., ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, accessed here:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1965/english.htm>

contestation over the state's distribution of goods and services, i.e. the social wage).

However, Katznelson is also critical of those who would assume the automaticity of urban struggle, since the ties between urban community movements and organised labour have always been tenuous at best; an organisational constraint that, when push comes to shove, limits "strategic possibilities for defiance" (214). He thus finds himself agreeing with Piven and Cloward's thesis, that, in the absence of any meaningful working-class party or socialist trade union movement, poor people's community-based campaigns will always tend to "irregular action, not organisation" (214); a clear inheritance of the split consciousness between workplace and community organising as defined by the "special features of race and class in American cities." Moreover, this determination prompts Katznelson to further comment that US working-class self-activity has all the "ingredients but few utensils and no cookbook" (214-5).

Despite this useful identification of the divide between work and community organising, Katznelson's study provides no positive prescription for the overcoming of this differentiation. This is perhaps because his analysis leans too heavily on the normalisation of employment during the 20th Century and in so doing, he overlooks the conditions (or perhaps preconditions) of proletarian existence; a lapse that too often treats the superfluous and unemployed portion of the proletariat as "spectres" haunting the domain of political economy from beyond.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this dislocation between waged and unwaged proletarians, that Michael Denning's 'Wageless Life' (2010) draws our attention to. Moreover, his subsequent analysis places a healthy emphasis on the unwaged portion of the proletariat, since in his words, "bare life is not without practical activity" (Denning 2010, 80). This consideration therefore defines Denning's approach, whereby he attempts to address the theoretical shortcomings of both Marx and political economy in general, by asking us to reimagine the basis of the economy, not simply as beginning with the "offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living" (80):

Rather than seeing the bread-winning factory worker [...] imagine the dispossessed proletarian household as a wageless base of subsistence labour—the ‘women’s work’ of cooking, cleaning and caring—which supports a superstructure of migrant wage seekers who are ambassadors, or perhaps hostages, to the wage economy (Denning 2010, 81).

Within this formula, unemployment precedes employment, just as the informal economy precedes the formal. Yet, it is important to distinguish that this occurs “both historically and conceptually” (81) since by implication, the working class have never been purely defined by the preponderance of wage labour, since after all, there is not always a buyer for proletarian labour-power.

With this in mind, Denning next examines the problem of *proletarian differentiation* from a historical perspective, pointing out how “the modern notion of unemployment depended on the normalisation of employment,” which itself was a consequence of the struggle over the length of the working day. So, while unemployment has become an “unavoidable aspect of industrial society,” (83) it is only within socialised democracies that have already systematically normalised wage-work, that one can presume a normalised subject (i.e. the wage earner). Although, it has always been the case, however, that a preponderance of the proletariat has consistently lived outside of the breadwinner paradigm (most notably, women and wageless communities of colour working in the home).

In addition, while employment was normalised in the Global North, this was clearly not the case in the former-colonial countries of the so-called developing world, where the rural-to-urban migration of peasants and their subsequent demand to live in cities was integral to colonial liberation struggles, whereby new forms of informal self-employment were often born out of acts of mass squatting. Consequently, it was these acts of illegality that led Frantz Fanon (1963) to categorially re-theorise the status of those thrown off the land by colonial exploitation, reappraising them to be rebellious, rather than parasitic subjects. This was therefore an

important re-evaluation, since, as Fanon observed, the waged proletariat in the former colonies had ultimately formed into “the nucleus of the colonized population most pampered by the colonial regime” and thus, constituted “the most faithful followers of the nationalist parties” with the most to lose to the insurgent demands of the landless masses (Fanon 1963, 108).

By providing this historical account of the autonomy of the so-called *lumpen-* within anti-colonialism, Fanon was then able underwrite Aimé Césaire’s denunciation of Eurocentric conceptions of universality, as outlined in the poet and politician’s famous resignation letter to Maurice Thorez (1956) which interrogated the metropolitan and colonial character of the French Communist Party (PCF) which had, until then, ranked the question of Black liberation as less important than the struggle of the French proletariat (see Robin D. G. Kelley’s account in *The Poetics of Anti-colonialism* [1999]) and whereby, as a result of the PCF’s chauvinism, Césaire judged the party to have eschewed any “living brotherhood” in favour of “the coldest of all chill abstractions” (Césaire 1956).

Central to Césaire’s complaint was the reluctance of the PCF to de-Stalinise, combined with the party’s insouciance when meeting the rising consciousness of Black post-colonial insurgents, whose experience could not be reduced to any dogmatic question of class. In its place, Césaire invoked an entirely new axiom of inclusivity, which subsequently demanded by a wholly new culture, wherein communism might only be thinkable through a universal that embraced the “singularity” that colonial experience had wrought. In Césaire’s words, this new world and its subjects would require, “a universal, rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars that are, the deepening of each particular [and] the coexistence of them all” (Césaire 1956).

The critical interventions of Fanon and Césaire would as a result, condition the nascent New Left’s appreciation for the so-called ‘lumpenproletariat’ as a revolutionary class and subsequently, similar views came to dominate Third Worldist politics throughout the 1960s,

while in turn influencing the urban political strategies of the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords, who as a consequence of the internal neo-colonisation of US inner cities saw strategic merit in solidaristic organising among the poor, sick, unemployed and racially excluded sections of the proletariat (see Fernández 2021).

Consequently, the ascendancy of post-colonial thought would signal a sea-change in conceptions about class since, against Marxist orthodoxy, the unwaged masses of the former colonies (i.e. those who were previously considered landless and therefore *déclassé*) would come to precisely embody proletarian agency. Moreover, as Denning notes, this watershed moment was also reflected in the literature of economic development, most notably in Keith Hart's (1973) landmark study of Ghana's vast informal sector,⁸⁴ a survey that indexes what many consider to be "the beginning of the normalisation of the [global] informal economy" (Denning 2010, 90).

In advance of such discoveries however, Marx had already anticipated the global expansion of informality in the *Grundrisse*, whereby he states that any "greater attraction of workers by capital is accompanied by their greater repulsion" (Marx 1973, 604). In this manner, Marx illuminates the central contradiction lying at the heart of proletarian differentiation, since wherever the masses are dispossessed by capital's vast expansion, in turn "free" labourers are created with nothing to exchange but their "hides." It is therefore Marx's insight which accordingly enables Denning to affirm that, both formal employment and wageless informality are two sides of the same coin and hence, every wage worker is dialectically at the same time also a *virtual pauper*.

Building on Denning's insights, the double character of the working class is further

⁸⁴ Hart, K., 'Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 11, No. 1 (March 1973), pp. 61-89.

explored by Bue Rübner Hansen (2015) in his investigation into the relationship between surplus populations, social reproduction and class formation.⁸⁵ According to Rübner Hansen, free labour is therefore “defined by its separation from the means of reproduction,” whereby it is compelled “to reproduce itself by reproducing capital” (3). Hence, the capital relation purposefully maintains a separation between waged and unwaged life for the purposes of securing its own reproduction, since in order to maintain the status quo, it must prevent the demands of the employed and unemployed from combining. Moreover, the state at times resorts to violence to maintain the separation whenever necessary, while also ensuring “the production of and accentuation of differences within the proletariat along gendered and racialised lines” (4). In turn, this generation of social difference contributes to the discretionary policing of the separation, not only for the purposes of social control, but principally as a function of the pursuit of absolute surplus value.

We can translate this into distinct Marxian terms however, by describing how capital strives to increase surplus labour time and subsequently, surplus value by lowering the cost of social reproduction. Moreover, concomitant with this phenomenon, is the tendency to increase the overall labouring population, part of which capital constantly posits as the reserve army of labour, since in its pursuit of relative surplus value, capital introduces new machinery, which in turn produces “an internal secular tendency towards the growth of surplus populations” (4).

Synchronously, these dual tendencies produce an ever-enlarging workforce, combined with an ever-greater number of workers superfluous to the needs of production. For Marx, this runaway effect constitutes the *absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*, a principle that sees the scale of the “reserve army of labour” rise in direct proportion to that of the “active

⁸⁵ Rübner Hansen, B., ‘Surplus Population, Social Reproduction and the Problem of Class Formation,’ *Viewpoint Magazine* (2015). Accessible here: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/surplus-population-social-reproduction-and-the-problem-of-class-formation/>

labour army.” This occurs precisely because, “the same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also [develops the amount of available] labour-power at its disposal,” and subsequently this spiralling dynamic leads to the superfluity of the working poor, cast out from production under expanded capital; or to put it another way, the great mass of paupers “whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour” (Marx 1990, 798).

Under the wage system, the number of employed, unemployed and even “semi-employed hands” (786) therefore expands in parallel, yet despite their unwaged condition, even unemployed proletarians must sustain themselves by obtaining money and hence, whenever penniless, they are “compelled to obtain it [...] by working, stealing, selling yourself or by marrying someone” (Rübner Hansen 2015, 10). In other words, without the means of subsistence, “proletarians have to reproduce themselves through exchange” (10).

Historically however, the normalisation of the wage did nothing to abolish the need for proletarian self-reproduction and instead, the social relation had to be imposed through primitive accumulation (i.e. the violent enclosure of the commons and the “war on women” which ultimately led to their subordination to wage-earning men [see for example, Federici, Fortunati, Dalla Costa and James]). Rübner Hansen is therefore keen to remind us, that enclosure did not once and for all “entail the destruction of proletarian reproduction,” but instead led to “the creation of the modern nuclear family,” thereby permitting reproductive work to go unpaid, while allowing male workers to “remain free-floating mutually competitive [and] productive bodies.”

Hence, we can understand the family as an essential survival unit in a condition of insecurity, but we [also] have to understand how the stability of this nuclear family model is inextricably linked to the stability of the male wage (Rübner Hansen 2015, 11).

Thus, whenever separated from the wage, pauperised life increasingly strives to secure its own reproduction. As a result, class conflict under wageless conditions typically manifests in

circulation struggles and as a consequence, is often expressed as either a defence of the social wage or “struggles to appropriate the means of reproduction or against their expropriation” (11).

In the *18th Brumaire* (1852), Marx moralistically characterises the lumpenproletariat as a parasitic class due to their collaboration with the Bonapartists, yet he goes beyond this in the *Grundrisse*, affirming the “common condition” of waged and unwaged proletarians, and “the often-blurred borderline between them” (Rübner Hansen 2015, 12). In response, Rübner Hansen suggests that the theorisation of proletarian differentiation, “entails not prioritising the problem of exploitation over domination, but rather seeing the way proletarians live their condition” (12). To encapsulate this, he states: “If the proletarian is a *virtual* pauper” then within their overall condition “the proletariat is stratified into different strategies for dealing with this problem” (12).⁸⁶

Rübner Hansen subsequently goes on to schematise the proletarian condition, splitting the masses into four strata of relative privilege: the working class (employed, temporarily under- and un-employed); the lumpenproletariat (the unemployable); wage-earner dependants (particularly women); and semi-proletarians (indebted peasants and seasonal workers); thereby allowing him to conclude that the ‘average’ proletarian is not simply an industrial worker (“so central to trade union, socialist and communist strategy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” [13]). As a result, the various gradations of Rübner Hansen’s schema cannot under any circumstances be considered incompatible “agglomerations of concrete individuals,” but should instead be seen as consonant “modes of life that individuals slip in and out of according to the need and availability of work or other strategies of survival” (13).⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Here “different strategies” is synonymous with the adoption of informal coping mechanisms, as we see in Dunn’s description of the Latina flexible family (see Section 1.7).

⁸⁷ Much like the “dispositions and congeries of experience” that E. P. Thompson earlier described.

As Rübner Hansen goes on to assert, it is only when the proletarian condition is understood to be co-constitutive does it become precisely apparent “what is at stake in the problem of class formation” (13). Within Marxist analysis therefore, class formation is commonly distinguished by *active* and *passive* processes, whereby the *class-in-itself* only passively coheres through “subsumption and limitation in the web of necessities,” while the *class-for-itself* actively forms “through a common struggle” (14). Yet, as Rübner Hansen is also keen to point out, supplementary to such processes are forms of intra-proletarian competition, defined as they are by citizenship, race and gender; inequalities which subsequently act to undermine the possibility of active class formation.

In this regard, Rübner Hansen’s position somewhat overlaps with Stuart Hall’s formulation that “[r]ace is the modality in which class is lived” (Hall et al 1978, 394), thus giving due consideration to how subsumption and separation, in turn, impact on the “composition of those that are not part of the workplace” (Rübner Hansen 2015, 15). In practice, this means giving equal consideration to the condition of the subproletariat whose needs are typically more immediate than those of waged workers, since, as Rübner Hansen reminds us, it was the Black Panther Party who first addressed the question of “self-defence [for] a surplus population,” while in addition, prioritising “its hustling and informal economies.”⁸⁸ Hence, his argument culminates with the claim that, since the proletarian condition *is de facto* the separation between waged and wageless life, it is this division within the division of labour that needs to be abolished if class society is to be dissolved altogether.

Tempting as it may be to think otherwise, the self-abolition of the proletariat cannot be thought of as a unitary process but is instead one that requires a combination of different

⁸⁸ Furthermore, he states that “such strategies that have long been relevant where ‘development’ was always a fiction” (Rübner Hansen 2015, 22-3).

strategies and links between struggles. Somewhat anticipating this, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1979) point out that working-class movements are principally formed through a dialectical process that reflects the “institutional logic of capitalist arrangements,” which in turn inhibits “the emergence of a unified and revolutionary working class” (Piven & Cloward 1979, ix). With this in mind, the authors preface their intervention with a statement on the semantics of wagelessness, explaining that, in their study, the use of the terms “lower class” or “poor” are not deployed in the “contemporary sociological sense of a stratum beneath the working class, but rather as a stratum within the working class” itself (xxiii).

Moreover, the authors claim this usage to be “consistent with classical Marxist definitions,” yet decline to describe the poor as the *lumpenproletariat*, a designation they deem to be “offensive” and “an abuse of Marx, who meant the term to refer to deviant and criminal elements from all classes” (xxiv). Clearly, they consider such distinctions to be important, since in the view of traditional left, contemporary popular movements have deviated from those of industrial societies and as a result, poor people’s struggles have often been met with disapproval, since in the eyes of labour elites, too often “[t]he wrong people have mobilised” (x).

Beyond this opprobrium however, Piven and Cloward also claim that many of those who wish to organise the poor have, until now, treated formal mass membership organisation as axiomatic, without further questioning the effectiveness of this approach. Thus, equivalent to the autonomist critique of both organised labour and bureaucratic socialism, Piven and Cloward assert that mass membership-based organisations are “acutely vulnerable to internal oligarchy [...] stasis and to external integration with elites.” As a result, these organisations tend “to blunt the militancy that was the fundamental source of such influence as movements exerted” (xv-xvi).

Meanwhile, the preponderant expectation among most US political organisations has been to “ensure regular, disciplined, and continuing” engagement from their members (xx); an

expectation based on the ability of mass organisations to secure and sustain participation. Yet, as Piven and Cloward explain, this model is gravely flawed, since it is impossible to “compel concessions from elites that can be used as resources to sustain oppositional organisations over time.” (xxi) and hence, the authors claim:

[A]ctivists do not recognise the flaw inherent in the mass based permanent organisation model because they are attracted to the possibility of organising the lower classes at extraordinary times (Piven & Cloward 1979, xxi).

It is not organisers therefore who create extraordinary moments, instead, they are “excited by them,” and during social upheaval, “the signs of the moment conspire to support the organiser's faith.” So, while the “sheer excess of political energy among the masses” does breathe life into the illusion that mass membership can be developed and sustained over the long term, such organisations misunderstand that, when elites do grant concessions, they are responding not to the pressure of representative organisations, but instead to “the underlying force of insurgency” and to this end, organisations “endure [...] by abandoning their oppositional politics” (xxi).

This is not to say that Piven and Cloward think that building poor people's organisations is altogether futile, but “by endeavouring to do what they cannot do, organisers [often] fail to do what they can” (xxi). Mass membership organisations have, as a consequence, generally failed to escalate during moments of ‘hot’ insurgency, in part because they are “preoccupied” with their own durability as institutions, as the following passage illustrates:

[W]hen workers erupted in strikes, organisers collected due cards; when tenants refused to pay rent and stood off marshals, organisers formed building committees; when people were burning and looting, organisers used that “moment of madness” to draft constitutions. (Piven & Cloward 1979, xxii).

Thus, while in the past, organisers have failed to seize on the affordances of proletarian unrest, they have also tended to act in ways that can only further blunt militancy and hence, by

convention, they are apt to work “against disruption” due to a stubborn adherence to the internal prerogatives around which they have shaped their institutions. Yet, perhaps more injuriously, their leaders often simultaneously request resources from the self-same elites that oppose lower-class insurgency altogether. These powerful elites are however, only inclined to patronise mass membership organisations precisely because they offer them the possibility of funnelling the insurgent masses into “normal politics.”

Piven and Cloward define such a procedure as “the structuring institution of electoral politics” which in turn, conditions poor people’s organisations by imposing institutional limits on their members and thereby restoring quiescence to the lower classes. The authors thus rightly identify elite engagement as a form of hegemonic counterinsurgency, while also suggesting that it is the task of organisers to appreciate such limitations, while at the same time being prepared to escalate the momentum of struggle “at each stage [of] its emergence and evolution” (37).

In summary, the problem of proletarian differentiation assists us in understanding how street vendors precisely embody its condition, since lacking any opportunity for formal employment, SVP’s vendor members are in turn, compelled to seek the means of subsistence through exchange. Concomitantly however, the state feels obligated to punish vendors for their attempted survival within the space of social reproduction, since it declines to recognise them a legitimate class of street worker, while simultaneously, racially policing their separation from the wage. In light of these considerations, the re-conceptualisation of informality that proletarian differentiation now affords, has deep implications for my methodology, since the vendors are a stratified multiethnic group, unrecognised by the local state, yet in their struggle for recognition are actively in the process of becoming as a class. Within this process however, there are enormous pressures for SVP to conform to conventional politics and as a result, this informs my decision to not only record the individual grievances of the vendors, but also include interviews with their organisers to better understand how, through their combined efforts, lasting solidarity

might be built.

2.7 Conclusion: Reflection on Methods

Marx originally proposed the method of workers' inquiry to the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) with the hope of inspiring "communication and cooperation" among different groups of workers across Europe (McAllister 2022). With the same founding intention, I therefore sought to work alongside SVP's vendor members in order to help them co-investigate limits to their participation and analyse what it might take to get vendors truly engaged on a multiethnic basis. As my research progressed, this participatory aspect was to take on increasing significance, when as recorded in Sections 3.9 & 4.3, the results of SVP's groundbreaking women's survey, in turn led to a profound dialogue initiated among Latina vendor members, which then evolved into a wider analysis of commonly experienced obstacles to the women's full participation.

In keeping with the theme of affinity, perhaps the most important lesson to draw from Marx's 1880 questionnaire is the overarching determination that any prospective inquiry into the conditions of the proletariat must include qualitative dimensions that only workers themselves can address through correspondence.⁸⁹ Workers' inquiry should thus be considered complimentary to the self-activity of workers in struggle, since praxis is nothing without critical reflection and analysis (cf. Paulo Freire 2000). If "positive and exact knowledge is required," this means recording the workers' constituent and intersubjective reality as the only sufficient way of assessing their organisational potential, since as Burawoy explains, it is only from the

⁸⁹ As Clark McAllister summarises: "Inquiry is a political act, aimed at enforcing a particular material reality, not simply a quest to uncover truth or uphold ideas of justice" (McAllister 2022, 14).

standpoint of the worker that we can appreciate the forms of critical rationality that workers themselves are able develop.

As Lukács notes, in *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the Right*, Marx accords a “special position” to workers, declaring that they occupy an identical “subject-object” position vis-à-vis “social and historical processes of evolution,” meaning that the “self-understanding of the proletariat is [...] simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society” (Lukács 1971, 149). This theoretical prioritisation of the proletarian viewpoint, hence, accords well with the member-led mission of worker centres, as well as providing guiding orientations for my own methodology. In accordance with the practice of autonomy, sufficient workers’ inquiry can only be conducted from below and consequently, to reduce the intellectual and manual division within my own analysis, I had a responsibility to foreground the voices of the vendors themselves, since as Freire states, critical intervention must be “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (Freire 2000, 48).

In the writings of Johnson Forest Tendency we see this same emphasis on worker self-activity; an insight that was based on the observation that “revolution [is] driven by human agency rather than structured historical ‘laws’.”⁹⁰ Inquiry as method is thus an attempt to invert top-down orthodoxies by studying the creative practices of workers in struggle and their necessary forms of organisation, while at the same time elevating such self-activity as “the highest expression of human creativity.”⁹¹ During my research, this meant being attuned to the concerns of the vendors; the inventive strategies they collectively deliberated over; the forms of

⁹⁰ Pizzolato, N, ‘The Revolutionary Task of Self-Activity: A Note on Grace Lee Boggs,’ *Viewpoint Magazine*, 4 Jan 2016. Accessed here (May 2023): <https://viewpointmag.com/2016/01/04/the-revolutionary-task-of-self-activity-a-note-on-grace-lee-boggs/>

⁹¹ Original source: CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya & Grace Lee Boggs. *State Capitalism and World Revolution*. Chicago: Charles Kerr Publishing, 1986. p. 49.

engagement they valued; as well as the bonds that they would ultimately forge around defining themes that they themselves had identified through mutual co-investigation. Guided by the inquiries of JFT and Burawoy's ECM, I was hence ever alert to questions of composition, internal differences among the vendors and hierarchies within the vending community. In particular, this meant recording minoritarian views, particularly whenever such grievances were culturally specific and found among less-well represented groups in a manner that affected their participation at the project.

As Castoriadis describes, workers' self-governance has the potential to rupture the static order of any heteronomous society and with this in mind, I attempted to record instances in which the vendors were able to collectively reflect on their own immediate circumstances and in turn, develop effective organisational strategies. Meanwhile, alongside this, I documented opportunities for political education arising from themes developed by the vendors themselves. In this regard, the deliberative style practiced at SVP conforms with Castoriadis' view that, through self-management, workers can overcome institutional intransigence and at a larger scale, upset the static reproduction of any wider society that oppresses them. This understanding thus accords well with my experiences at SVP, whereby the project deepened the degree to which ordinary members could deliberate over strategy, thereby breaking prior organisational inertia (Section 5.1).

If intellectual engagement with proletarian self-organisation can neither be neutral nor disinterested, but instead must actively contribute to worker self-management, then it is Panzieri who perhaps best lays out of the priorities for "hot inquiry" as a sociological method capable of sharpening the contradictions of struggle. Under present yet transformed conditions however (see Section 2.6), the capitalist labour process has come to overstep the bounds of the factory and now penetrates the sphere of social reproduction, putting further fetters on how workers think and act. Yet, while real (or even total) subsumption is in concrete terms a deepening of

capitalist social relations, this transformation opens up new fronts of (“non-parliamentary”) struggle within the lifeworld of workers and therefore, for this reason, Panzieri states: the “Enlightened educator” must be thrown into the water in which workers already “swim.”⁹²

Panzieri’s co-research is thus intimately linked to the inauguration of new institutions of struggle under worker control and hence, it is the internal democracy of SVP’s process that guarantees the cooperation and communication of vendor members, or that which Freire refers to as the “communion with others” (Freire 2000, 91). In my field research, it was therefore always important to not only record tensions and communicational deficits among the membership, but to also highlight points of antagonism between staff and members, since such impasses can impact and potentially deform both organisation and action; or even in the worst instances, suppress the voices of vulnerable sections of the membership (for example, when the Chinese women vendors lacked enough confidence to give testimony at the hearing [see Section 4.2] or the failure to fully recruit pushcart vendor Elsa [see Section 4.3] following her arrest).

Likewise, Sojourner Truth Organisation’s reworking of Du Bois was also methodologically useful to this study, since given the uneven distribution of vendors within the vending hierarchy and their varying levels of privilege and market access, STO’s theorisation of racial hierarchies within US labour relations goes some way towards explaining the inchoate and often contradictory subjectivities of the vendors. Moreover, Du Bois’ identification of the compensatory nature of whiteness likewise found analogy in the manner in which the vendors often seek to legitimate themselves by disparaging other vendor groups; a dynamic, which overall, keeps members of the same profession divided in a self-contradictory manner, while they each

⁹² Panzieri, R. ‘Seven Theses on Workers’ Control’ 1958. Accessed here (May 2023): <https://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/09/seven-theses-on-workers-control-1958/>

compete for exclusive access to the public space that they all require for survival.

Burawoy's ECM is also instructive in this regard, since if workplace sociology's deficit was its tendency to isolate the workplace from any wider social milieu, thereby failing to comprehend how workers' socially reproductive concerns might influence rational decision-making, then likewise, the study of street vending offers a rare degree of access and the novel opportunity to study alongside the vendors and understand their often-complex motivations. By acquiring "situational knowledge" as both a participant and observer, in the field I was subsequently able to identify and bring to the surface the submerged rationality and concealed interests of particular subsections of the membership that had before now, remained unspoken.

Additionally, Burawoy's insights were useful for two more significant reasons. Firstly, it was apparent when conducting outreach how many vendors (and in particular non-member vendors) would offer up their life story as a form of defence against that which Burawoy characterises as the power effect of *domination*; typically constructing narratives that allowed to them to be viewed favourably in terms of ruling-class ideology. Such narratives thus function to enhance the vendors' legitimacy, aware that they are often viewed negatively, as criminal or "illegal" elements and consequently, this form of hustle and self-accounting allows the vendors to present themselves to whoever is in earshot as entrepreneurs, in line with broader aspirational American values and on favourable terms with local figures of authority. Moreover, this self-accounting behaviour would likewise often involve the disparagement of other categories of vendor and for a long while, I had difficulty in identifying emergent themes within their accounts, since the well-developed defences of the vendors also enacted a second power effect: *silencing* (i.e. conformity and acceptance of the status quo).

As explained in Section 2.6, because of problem of proletarian differentiation, the socially reproductive work of the vendors throws up new challenges when attempting to interview them, and this is where some innovation to workers' inquiry as method was required,

since for all its benefits, Marx's inquiry was initially conceived as a means by which to illuminate the potentials for solidarity at the point of production (albeit, while keeping one eye on socially reproductive concerns such as the cost of living and consumption). Informality is nonetheless the defining condition of the vendors' work, since they are not waged in the most obvious sense.⁹³ Accordingly, the distinction between the productive and socially reproductive aspects of their labour is often blurred and in practice, this meant remodelling my approach, since there was frequently no clear delimitation between the work- and non-work-related concerns of vendors; something that was doubly so for women pushcart vendors who often produce their wares at home.

Responding to this ambiguity, I therefore endeavoured to correct prevalent views on the organisation of street vendors as informal workers, giving equal consideration to the socially reproductive aspects of their lives, which in the final instance, greatly determines why they enter into the profession in the first place, as well as, ultimately defining where they come to be situated in the vending hierarchy. Thus, with the vendors' wageless conditions in mind, here are some of the questions that I initially wanted to ask; yet given that the women's survey (SVP 2019) was being developed around the same time, many of my intended questions were subsequently surpassed by the project's own inquiry:

1. What first motivated you to come to New York and become a street vendor?
2. Do you work any other jobs other than street vending?
3. Who is the principal breadwinner in your family and who does the majority of work in your household?

⁹³ Both sociologists of casual labour and Marxist scholars (Dinler 2016; Breman 1996; Banaji 2003; Bernstein 2007) have argued that informality disguises the wage relation through complex combinations of labour and selling practices and as a consequence, most informal work should rightly be considered wage work.

4. How does your work at home compare to your work in the street?
5. What service do you provide for your customers and more generally, your neighbourhood?
6. What type of backgrounds are the people you serve in your community and how do they see you?
7. Do you feel secure at work and what makes you feel unsafe?
8. Do you face competition from other vendors and if so, for what reasons do you come into conflict?
9. Do you feel secure at home and what are your sources of anxiety when not at work?
10. What difficulties have you had to overcome to maintain the health and safety of your family?
11. How could your work be made safer?
12. How important is the support of SVP to you?
13. What would owning your own permit mean?
14. Do you experience friendships with other SVP members?
15. What, if anything has made participation difficult at SVP?
16. Do you have difficulty accessing important services such as immigration advice, healthcare, housing and childcare?
17. Beyond assistance with ticketing and permits, what services do you think would help you in your work and life in general?

The purpose of these questions was therefore to illuminate the connections between work- and non-work-related themes; to better understand the vendor's motivations for vending; discover the points of overlap between the vendors' productive and socially reproductive work; to better understand how vendors are enmeshed within their communities; and lastly, to assess the

impact of inter-vendor competition, police harassment and other issues of anxiety, health and safety.

Yet from the outset, it became apparent that it was going to be difficult to get the vendors to commit to lengthy interviews without imposing on their ability to earn. In my favour however, SVP has a policy of training the vendors to self-advocate in order to counteract the invisibility of their work and to this degree, vendor members were often freely forthcoming in conversation about the professional issues that confront them. Moreover, the hearing for Intro 1116 was a great opportunity to record a cross-section of vendor opinion and thereby, document the types of rhetoric employed by SVP's vendor members when performing non-citizen citizenship in front of legislators. Hence, the work-related views of the vendors were made a matter of public record during the hearing, wherein they listed their principal grievances with the permit system.

However, this would only produce a partial picture, since one of the shortcomings of the hearing is that such efforts are heavily slanted towards advocacy and accordingly, at the hearing for Intro 1116 the vendors were obliged to make appeals often on the lawmaker's own terms. As Jennifer Gordon describes (see Section 1.2), whenever performing non-citizen citizenship, worker centre members will often engage in rhetorical strategies in line with the expectations of lawmakers. Rhetorical appeals made during hearing, therefore, regularly referred to ideological constructs such as the "American Dream," (see Section 4.2) and in the hope of persuading NYCC council members, the vendors tended to present street vending as an entrepreneurial activity much like any other. So, while my account of the hearing contains many insights into current vending conditions, these testimonies do not necessarily accurately represent the true subjectivity of the vendors from their own standpoint.

While working at SVP I was fortunate enough to have unparalleled access to the vendors, whether it was in the street, in their garages and even at home. Yet, after several months, I was still unable to identify common themes and grievances that had not already been discovered by

prior surveys and research (see Sections 3.2 & 3.6 for a description of SVP's two main vendor surveys [2006 & 2019]). Consequently, it was not immediately clear how to proceed in terms of interviewing the vendors, since their most common concerns were already well-understood at the project and in this regard, I did not want to replicate existing research, but instead think about how my own research might be complimentary to the ever-evolving organisational work being conducted at SVP.

Around the same time, however, it was apparent to me that Latina vendors would often come into the office to arrange personal, individual meetings with an externally contracted social worker. These one-on-one meetings were considered private and therefore, not fully integrated within SVP's normal order of business. Although, by the time of the visit of the LA Street Vendor Campaign, it was already evident that a significant sub-set of social reproduction issues common to Latina vendors had strong organising potential at the project. Yet, after the women's survey was published, there was still a discrete dimension to the women's concerns; mostly notably, the near ubiquity of the experience of domestic violence; an issue which could only be fully explored through face-to-face emotional work conducted within the confidential setting of the Women's Committee by the women vendors themselves. This disjunctive aspect consequently posed a problem for my research, since as a male organiser and due to the intimate nature of these conversations, I was not privy to the submerged themes that the women were now discussing.

It was these discrete issues that in turn transformed the question of how I might "thematise" my participation, since: (a) I could neither directly record the emotional conversations taking place in the Women's Committee; and (b) the interviews I had planned to conduct among this section of the membership were made impossible by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby ending in-person meetings at SVP and ultimately, preventing my return to New York. By way of compromise, however, I instead decided interview the organisers of the Women's

Committee, and while this was perhaps suboptimal from standpoint of recording the voices of the women vendors directly, it did however grant me insight into how the two organisers assisted the women in creating a unique solidarity-building space.

Because of these unanticipated difficulties, I subsequently decided to split my inquiry into three sections, so as to index precisely how the vendors deliberate, advocate and organise around their work. Accordingly, Section 4.0 describes changes to the internal process at SVP and how these enhancements to inclusion allowed a wider cross-section of the membership to engage in direct deliberation. Section 4.2 documents the vendors' testimonies at the hearing for Intro 1116, primarily reflecting on the manner in which SVP's vendor members performed non-citizen citizenship. While finally in Section 4.3, I conduct interviews with the two organisers of the Women's Committee, who explain how the dialogue initiated among Latina pushcart vendors allowed the women to "break silence" around the theme of domestic violence, which when combined with political education around social reproduction issues, carried with it potentials for renewed base-building at the project.

Chapter 3: Surveying the Vending Hierarchy

3.0 Introduction: The Context and Conditions of Vending

This chapter examines the situational context in which SVP organises, while also evaluating the programme of reform that the project aims to affect. The purpose of this analysis is to build an up-to-date snapshot of the working conditions of vendors, while also recording the composition of the various ethnic groups that make up SVP's base. Within this summary, particular attention is given to Latina pushcart vendors who until very recently, remained underserved by the organisation. As previously mentioned, the LA Street Vendor Campaign (see Section 1.8) conducted targeted base-building among Latina vendors, an emphasis which ultimately paid dividends by inspiring vendors from other backgrounds to get involved (something which was considered replicable at SVP). I subsequently aim to examine, how in practical terms, SVP organises across multiple ethnic boundaries, while at the same time assessing how persistent features found within the vending hierarchy work either for or against the continuing goals of the organisation.

It is equally important however to recognise that New York's vending population is continuously in flux, and while some vendors remain in the profession for many decades, others are transient, picking up work seasonally (i.e. whenever the weather allows, or financial necessity requires). From a historical perspective, we can therefore observe how, as a rite of settlement, successive waves of immigrants have passed through the profession upon arrival in New York and consequently, mapping this ever-changing demographic has always been a difficult task, especially since at present permit scarcity ensures that many vendors work

unlicensed and below the radar. In this regard, the current permit system stratifies and excludes vendors by ethnicity, creating an uneven distribution of vendors across the city in a manner that is highly gendered. As a result, there is a large constituency of unlicensed mobile Latina vendors, currently working in the outer boroughs, who until now have been somewhat difficult to reach and organise due to their position at the margins of the industry (see Section 3.6).

Accordingly, the statistics presented in this chapter are primarily gathered from SVP's own surveys combined with recent reports by WIEGO,⁹⁴ since currently the city collects little data on vending as a profession and while the Office of Administrative Hearings and Trials (OATH) does publish a list of vending infractions, not much can be gleaned from these lists, since they do not provide any useful data on the vendors themselves. In fact, the first-ever contemporary survey of general vending conditions in New York was authored by SVP under the title *Peddling Uphill* (Basinski & Sluzska 2006). This was then followed a decade later by a second report: *Vulnerable in Itself* (SVP 2019), a survey of women vendors that draws from a much smaller sample yet has proven useful in bringing to public attention the underappreciated concerns of mobile women vendors. The latter survey, therefore, serves as a convenient vantage-point on the discrete sub-issues of Latina vendors, an important constituency who remain underrepresented in the profession.

Moreover, to provide a fuller account of the vending hierarchy, this chapter also presents a detailed description of New York's racially and ethnically segmented low-wage communities, explaining how, at the lower end of the industry, the vendors tend to serve their own local neighbourhoods directly. In turn, this allows for a contextual analysis of the range of multiethnic organising potentials available to SVP, based as they are on the structural realities of New

⁹⁴ Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global policy network focused on improving the conditions of informal workers worldwide: <https://www.wiego.org>

York's vending hierarchy. In addition, I will also endeavour to explain how the unique concerns of Latina vendors first came to be identified as an organisational resource, whereby the socially reproductive work of the women, performed within their own enclave communities, came to be recognised as emblematic of informality overall.

3.1 The Institutional Aims and Reform Efforts of Street Vendor Project

Founded in 2001 by Sean Basinski who worked as a vendor during law school, SVP is New York's largest vendor organisation. Early in the project's history, Basinski enlisted the help of then undergraduate researcher Ryan Devlin, and together they familiarised themselves with New York's complex vending laws in order to assist vendors in their fight against the city's unfair and burdensome regulations. Shortly thereafter, they were joined by the project's legal director, Matt Shapiro who now offers SVP's vendor members free legal advice and assistance on an everyday basis.

In 2019 Basinski announced that he would be stepping down to allow vendor board member Mohammed Attia to become director of the organisation. Soon thereafter, Attia was joined by co-director Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez and together they helped reorientate the work of SVP to meet the city's changing vending conditions. In addition to this, and assisting the two directors, are the project's small yet committed staff of full-time professional organisers, legal assistants and volunteer interns. As such, SVP's staff assist and facilitate the vendor members and their various committees on a daily basis.

The project's principal daily work is therefore legal advocacy, provided for free to any vendor member who wishes to dispute the penalties they regularly receive from the city's multiple enforcement agencies. Once a week Matt Shapiro collects up the vendors' tickets in batches of fifty and takes them to the OATH offices where he typically gets their fines

cancelled.⁹⁵ This legal representation subsequently allows the vendors to avoid having to attend the hearings in person, thereby allowing them to continue work without any loss of earnings. In addition to legal advocacy, the main work of the project over the past seven years has been to build its principal campaign: Lift the Caps, a reform effort that addresses the current fixed ceiling on the total number of available vending permits. As such, the persistent fines that the vendors regularly receive are a direct consequence of artificial permit scarcity, an administrative deficit which further exacerbates what Ryan Devlin calls: a “state of legal confusion” (Devlin 2010, 2). This purposefully ambiguous administrative morass further complicates the work lives of the vendors and often leads to the confiscation of their carts, displacement from their spots and on occasion, even their arrest.

From 1965 onwards, a combination of prolonged economic stagnation and the growing influx of newly arrived immigrants to New York created a constant demand for vending licenses. The lack formal job opportunities and the city’s ever-expanding informal labour market, however, made vending an attractive profession for low-income New Yorkers. Yet, due to the perennial appeal of street vending, a consensus formed among building owners that immigrant vendors (and those perceived to be itinerant) were depressing potential land values and as a result, successive mayors have arbitrarily attempted to close the streets to vendors, wherever and whenever possible, eventually leading to the current thicket of regulations.

The first hard cap on vending licences was imposed in 1979, a restriction that was then extended throughout the 80s, pushing many vendors towards the outer boroughs and unlicensed vending (3). Since its inception, SVP has continuously worked to reverse these curbs and if successful, Lift the Caps would substantially reduce the cost of permits, ending the

⁹⁵ The Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings (OATH) is located at 66 John St, Lower Manhattan where hearings for administrative fines are held, yet work obligations often make it difficult for vendors to attend.

illegal market, while raising the living standard of all vendors. The aim of Lift the Caps is not, however, to simply expand the total number of permits and as such, the campaign also promotes a wider package of legislative reforms that would simplify existing regulations and cut through the attendant farrago of enforcement. Thus, as it currently stands, vendors are overregulated at multiple scales: by city law, state law and federal judicial rulings. Responding to this complexity however, vending reform bill Intro 1116 proposes to cut regulations and bring enforcement under the control of a single dedicated agency, something that all vendors would welcome and want to have a say in.

Here it should perhaps be mentioned that the illegal market for permits perniciously creates chains of subcontracting within the industry and transforms what should be a legally sanctioned enterprise into a form of indirect exploitation without responsibility. As mentioned by Mohamed Attia in the hearing for Intro 1116 (see Section 4.2), food vendors who are forced to rent a permit never get to meet the permit holder and typically, such transactions are instead conducted between the vendors and intermediary brokers. The vendors accordingly have no contact with the named licensees, many of whom live abroad. That said, it is important to distinguish between exploitative relationships within the vending hierarchy and communal kinship arrangements, since many vendors draw on family and community bonds when staffing their carts. As Attia also notes, these relationships are much more likely to be mutually beneficial. In this respect, SVP draws a strong distinction between those who use their food permits to exploit the labour others, and those who merely employ friends and family on their carts, which in most cases constitutes a form of basic solidarity. As a result, SVP refuses membership to anyone who rents their permit or benefits from the illegal market since such rent-seeking activity only victimises and further impoverishes other vendors.

In terms of licensing, there are at present five categories of vendor in New York⁹⁶ and as such, the city distinguishes between vendors who sell general merchandise (i.e. anything that is a non-food item) and food vendors themselves. This division also extends to the administrative level whereby general merchandise vendors are overseen by the Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA)⁹⁷ while the Department of Health (DOHMH) administrates food vendors separately. Most notably, permits required for the operation and ownership of a food cart are scarce, having been restricted since 1983 with only 3,000 licences in circulation. It is these valuable food permits that exchange hands on the black market for around \$15,000-\$25,000 for a two-year permit. Meanwhile, there are an unlimited number of food preparation licences, enabling the permit holders to easily subcontract the operation of their carts to other workers on an informal basis.⁹⁸

While general merchandise and food licences remain capped, special legal exemptions have been created for two distinct types of vendors: (a) First Amendment vendors; and (b) military veteran vendors. First Amendment vendors are mostly artists, sellers of books and other religious paraphernalia, whose speech and expression are constitutionally protected and consequently, they have successfully challenged the licence cap on two specific occasions: once in 1982 and then again, more recently in 1994. Likewise in the mid-1990s veteran vendors also won the right to sell across the city and as a result, their licences are exempt from any cap.

The veteran's licence, however, includes three conditional subcategories: white, yellow and blue licences. White is the lowest priority, allowing the licence holder to sell citywide except

⁹⁶ Although, as Ryan Devlin points out, 'unlicensed' is the unofficial sixth category (Devin 2010, 10).

⁹⁷ Now known as the NYC Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP).

⁹⁸ Intro 1116 calls for the issuance of 400 new permits a year, allowing the city to bring the cost of a permit down to around \$400 per year thereby undercutting the black market. As such, this change would allow unlicensed vendors the legal opportunity to work.

for Midtown and other restricted areas. The yellow license is allocated to disabled veterans and allows them to vend anywhere in the city (i.e. on otherwise restricted streets apart from in the Midtown Box). While lastly, the highly coveted blue licence (of which there are only 140) is allocated by seniority and as such, is a requirement if veterans want to vend in Midtown proper. That said, veteran's licences are somewhat conditional, requiring an honourable discharge from the military, yet uniquely among vending licences, can be transferred to one other dependent as a form of pension and as a result, it is not uncommon to meet the widow of a veteran working their former-spouse's licence.

In total, there are an estimated 20,000 vendors in New York,⁹⁹ yet only 3,000 year-round food permits, 1700 veteran licences, 853 general merchandise non-veteran licences, as well as an estimated 1,000 First Amendment vendors who vend licence-free. This leaves all remaining vendors (the fifth category) unlicensed. Moreover, at present there are currently over 10,000 people on the waiting-list for a general merchandise licence, indicating a much wider demand than the current system can accommodate.¹⁰⁰

To address this shortage, SVP must organise across the entirety of New York's vending community, meaning that the campaign to Lift the Caps is crucial in terms of organising. In theory, this principal campaign serves to sustain engagement at SVP, since the permit cap both seriously abates the earning potential of all vendors and furthermore threatens their safety. Hence, at present, if vendors wish to work, they must either rent a permit on the illegal market or risk police sanction for operating without license.¹⁰¹ This means that most food cart vendors can

⁹⁹ A recent report by WEIGO: "COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Street Vendors in New York City, USA" (2021) states that the figure is "estimated" as being between 10,000 and 20,000, yet consensus in the office was that the higher figure was more accurate.

¹⁰⁰ Reinforcing this, the city receives an average of thirteen calls a day inquiring about obtaining a licence.

¹⁰¹ Biannual permits exchange hands on the black market for around \$25,000, but there are instances of almost

only work by renting an illegal permit: a form of subcontracting, indicative of their status as informal non-owner petty producers. Moreover, smaller vendors are altogether excluded from the underground market, often for reasons of gender and status and therefore, the opportunity to own a licence would be life-changing for nearly every vendor in New York.

Accordingly, at the time of conducting this study, there were still considerable political obstacles to the lifting of the caps, while moreover, the previous vending reform bill had been unilaterally “killed” by Mayor Bill de Blasio, who used his executive veto to squash reform without giving any substantial reason for so doing. Alarming, the mayor wielded this veto despite widespread support for vending reform among the public and progressive elements of the city council (NYCC). This was not however, the end of the story and in 2020 there was a further opportunity to re-present the bill, although this time with majority support from council members, whose backing was won through the persistent advocacy efforts of SVP and its vendor members.

Given these obstacles, the organisation of street vendors in New York has never been a straightforward task, since while the majority of vendors feel that the current rules are punitive and unjust, the harmful effects of enforcement are felt unequally. This disparity is a direct result of the ethnically determined vending hierarchy, which in essence, is a system of market-access based upon seniority and privilege. It is consequently competition within this pay-to-play market that precludes any automatic vending “community,” let alone the public recognition of vendors as a legitimate class of street worker. Thus, the urgent task of building group cohesion among the vendors lies at the heart of SVP’s strategy.¹⁰²

double this amount (WIEGO 2021).

¹⁰² As Ryan Devlin points out, “[b]y virtue of legal divisions, fostering a shared subjectivity among vendors becomes extremely difficult” (Devlin 2010, 114).

Lift the Caps is therefore an important part of the project's appeal, since both licensed and unlicensed vendors want cheaper market access. Yet, despite their unanimous agreement over the unfairness of the law, it is not entirely uncommon when first meeting any vendor to hear them complain about competition from other vendors. This is particularly acute among vendor groups who are native-born; most notably military veterans and First Amendment vendors, both of whom enjoy specialised rights (see Devlin 2010). As such, inter-vendor competition is chiefly a direct result of the licensing system, which pitches different categories of vendors against one another, particularly wherever space is scarce and hence, SVP must at times mediate between vendors in dispute over territory,

To illustrate this, while I was conducting outreach in Upper Manhattan with organising fellow Tirtho Dutta, we visited the marketplace at the Plaza de las Americas, situated on the corner of W 175th and Broadway. Here in front of the grand United Palace Theatre, we encountered many vendors who saw themselves ethnically and legally distinct from the other vendors around St. Nicolas (the main thoroughfare that runs through Puerto Rican and Dominican Harlem up towards Washington Heights). At first, we approached an English-speaking vendor, introducing ourselves as SVP organisers. She explained however, that the stall holders at this particular spot were all licensed by a local body and therefore, not reliant on the city for permits. So, while talkative, she was reluctant to fully engage with us, suggesting instead that "your people" are more likely to be the "illegals" up near 181st. "Don't get me wrong," she said, "I'm Hispanic too, but you know what I mean." It was at this point that Tirtho politely said, "Goodbye" and we walked off, seeing no reason to continue the conversation.

This is a somewhat prevalent attitude among certain vendors, especially those who already enjoy specialised rights, whereby, in terms of legitimacy, they distinguish themselves from their fellow vendors on the basis of citizenship, thereby making recruitment difficult. The stall-holder's opinion that the other vendors were "illegal" was, however, later confounded when

we got further into the Heights, where nearly every vendor we encountered was fully licensed. As such, it was clearly their citizenship status that she was querying

Similarly, on another occasion we were conducting outreach on Fifth Avenue near the Trump building in Midtown,¹⁰³ one of the most competitive vending districts in New York. Here we stopped to speak to a senior African American vendor who introduced himself as a US Army veteran yet availed himself of the opportunity to complain to us about the legitimacy of Arabic-speaking vendors. To emphasise this, he pointed out a Halal cart on the opposite corner, singling out an Egyptian vendor, who in his view had less right to vend than he did, since he was a Gulf War veteran.

These anecdotes only serve to illustrate how permit scarcity ranks vendors, stratifying them by occupational niche and citizenship status. Moreover, even when market-access for the vendors is assured, competition demands that they distinguish themselves from each other at the level of exchange. It is therefore the specialised rights afforded to certain vendor groups that makes recruitment more challenging, since many US-born vendors have already formed the impression that the project is an immigrant-only organisation. Yet, SVP is open to all classes of vendor and accordingly, the project's membership also includes some highly motivated veterans and First Amendment vendors. It is subsequently only by attempting to be as inclusive as possible that the project's vendor members are able to speak with a single, unified political voice.

This consensus is produced within the organisation through the democratic participation of members, and further shaped by the project's internal decision-making processes (see Section 4.0). The membership therefore elects a leadership board of fifteen members annually

¹⁰³ Notably, Donald Trump was in fact one of the first building owners to complain about vendors on Fifth Avenue: <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/exclusive-donald-trump-push-street-vendors-article-1.2312519>

to plan and direct SVP's activities, meeting once a month to discuss the "business" of the organisation. Serving alongside the leadership board, is the campaign committee, which regularly meets to decide the campaigning emphasis of the project, while in addition, the whole membership is invited to the monthly general meeting at the UJC offices at Rector Street. This general assembly allows the membership to stay abreast of legal developments and the progress of the various campaigns, as well as serving as an opportunity to discuss innovations in vending practice.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, part of the purpose of the monthly meeting is to introduce the vendors to each other since they do not necessarily encounter one another at work. To enhance this social dimension, the meeting usually begins with a meal, typically provided by one of the vendors themselves, allowing the other members time for rest and refreshment. As such, the meeting is chaired by the vendor leaders and, through the use of translation headsets, it is conducted in five different languages simultaneously (i.e. Arabic, Bangladeshi, English, Mandarin and Spanish), making it a lively and noisy affair. Yet in addition, the meeting also acts as a clearing house, providing the members with up-to-date vending information, while giving them a more global appreciation of the sector and hence, the members are keen to participate, asking questions, querying the staff and describing their own experiences.

The monthly general meeting is thus a good opportunity for vendors to stay abreast of the ever-shifting vending regulations. For example, while I was at SVP, Matt Shapiro used one meeting to explain the new letter-grading system introduced by the DOH to ensure uniform hygiene standards; a measure designed to bring food vendors into line with the city's restaurants. In this instance, Matt was able to bring vendors up to speed on the issue and

¹⁰⁴ For example, at my first SVP meeting, vendor board member Mr. Wang demonstrated a plug-in for the Chinese-language messaging service WeChat, that allows vendors to take orders online and potentially double their income during down-time.

explain to them the requirements for an A-grade. Similarly, when environmental legislation against Styrofoam containers was introduced, Matt again showed the vendors various examples of other materials that they might use instead. Moreover, in the past, the general meeting has also doubled as a rights workshop, where for example, the vendors role-play interactions with the NYPD, in order to challenge police authority more effectively.

Yet, while enforcement is arbitrary and vending conditions are continuously in flux, SVP's mission over the years has broadly remained steady with its principal aims as follows:

- The alleviation of the unjust harassment and ticketing, and thereafter demanding the cancellation of fines where appropriate.
- The highlighting of police misconduct.
- Winning market access and the right to vend for all street vendors, particularly in areas where they are unfairly excluded.
- The education of vendors as to their legal rights and responsibilities under the law.
- The conduct of outreach across all five boroughs, recruiting among every class of vendor and thereby expanding diversity among SVP's membership.
- Building solidarity among the members in support of SVP's campaigns; most notably the campaign to Lift the Caps, along with the general reform of street vending regulations (i.e. the promotion of the Vendor Reform Bill Intro 1116 and its attendant legislation).

As such, these perennial activities clearly place the project within the standard range of activities that typify most worker centres.

Similarly, in terms of engagement, SVP's recruitment is mainly driven by the offer of free legal services and hence, the vendors commonly come into first contact with the project when seeking to contest their fines (averaging \$500-1000 per fine). These "walk-ins" are often accompanied by an existing vendor member who has suggested SVP to a friend or colleague. It

is during this somewhat transactional moment that recruitment occurs, whereby staff take the opportunity to explain SVP's campaigning purpose and how political participation at the project is a requirement in exchange for services. The recruitment process subsequently allows staff to assess the likely commitment of any potential vendor member. If the vendor seems unwilling to participate or attend meetings, then it is politely suggested that the organisation might not be for them, thus preventing "free riders" who seek to reap the benefits of membership without active participation.

For example, one day while I was in the office, an existing vendor member introduced an Afghani friend who had received several tickets from the NYPD for working too close to the entrance of a shop. Yet, when the duties of membership were explained to the vendor, he was not responsive to the suggestion that he would have to actively participate. Moreover, at this point he became evasive and instead, disparaged Egyptian vendors, naming them as his principal problem. After he had vented, it was then suggested to him by Matt Shapiro that the organisation might not suit him.¹⁰⁵

If the potential vendor member shows willing commitment, however, they are then asked watch short video about SVP's organisational aims in their own language. In addition, they must also contribute an annual fee for membership of \$100, an amount that is considered affordable to most vendors and subsequently, these dues help pay for the services that membership entitles. Each new member is then issued with a membership card and their contact details are then submitted to the organisational database. All vendors are thus welcome to join, except for those permit-holders who rent out their licences on underground market; an activity that is

¹⁰⁵ Afterwards, Matt Shapiro explained to me that turning down a potential member is sometimes a "hard call," although allowances are sometimes made for vendors in dire straits, for example if they are sick, elderly or have difficulty reaching the office.

considered to be exploitative and completely at odds with the campaign to Lift the Caps.

In addition to the offer of free legal services, SVP also assists the vendors with the filing of taxes. Prompt tax payment ensures that vendor members come into the office at regular intervals and furthermore, allows them to renew their licences (something not possible for any vendors with outstanding fines or tax debts). Moreover, this regular interaction provides staff with a further opportunity to get to know the vendors more intimately. As such, the office is a relaxed setting in which the vendors can tell their stories and thereafter, they will often come in asking for a particular member of staff by name, indicating both familiarity and trust.

As a responsibility of membership, the vendor members are expected to speak up for street vendors in general, publicly advocating for their right to sell, while taking action whenever necessary. SVP therefore uses its database to rally the vendors in support of vending reform, as happened in April 2019, when the project assembled over 300 vendor members at New York City Hall ahead of the hearing for Intro 1116. Yet, while most actions are not this large, SVP also undertakes many smaller weekly activities, including testifying at district community boards and the targeting of local politicians, whose offices they often picket.

Beyond this, SVP will also take action to preserve the spots in which vendor members work, mobilising to dismantle and remove planters, bike racks and other impediments that building owners use to displace the vendors from sidewalks around their buildings. SVP is consequently not only happy to advocate for the rights of vendors, but also contests the space in which vendors work and so desperately need to earn a living. The project can therefore expect to call on its members to participate in these activities in return for the organisation's support on individual issues.

This exchange of collective support in return for individual assistance, means that building solidarity between the vendors is perhaps the principal task of any SVP organiser. Vending work is however, both a transient and seasonal profession, making sustained outreach

a highly important activity if SVP's organisers wish to maintain contact with non-affiliated vendors. As such, one of the main duties of the vendor leaders is to take time off work to help with outreach, a weekly effort for which they are compensated. In this regard, the vendors leaders are considered to be much more convincing recruiters than SVP's staff organisers. The organisers thus conduct outreach most weekday afternoons, after lunch and at least once a week, invite members of the leadership board to join them. In this regard, any time after two o'clock is best, since the vendors are typically more relaxed after the lunchtime rush and more likely to spend time talking.

Outreach involves discussing both local and citywide vending issues with non-member vendors, handing out recruitment materials and distributing business cards (along with the all-important *Vendor Power!* poster-pamphlet).¹⁰⁶ Typically, as organisers, we would pick a new district daily, ideally somewhere with a reasonable density of vendors and thereafter, actively walk the location looking to meet new faces and catch up with more familiar ones. Yet, when required, we also travelled to any location where vendors were currently experiencing difficulties, looking to offer support, while also targeting the districts of any politician that SVP was hoping to influence. Outreach is thus considered to be an integral part of SVP's media strategy, whereby we would often take photos with of the vendors, while recording their grievances, before posting their stories to social media. Thereafter, we would tag local politicians on Instagram to either thank them for their support or alternately, shame them into voting for Intro 1116.

By spending time conversing with the vendors, SVP's organisers are then able to learn more about them and their current concerns. Moreover, an important part of outreach is the

¹⁰⁶A fold-out poster that explains in detail how to deal with police harassment using a series of illustrated panels to explain vending rights.

recording of vendors' personal details (i.e. name, vendor-type, phone number and location).

This information is then collated and submitted to the SVP database, before being followed up with an invitation to the next general meeting. In addition, the outreach sheet is also used to record the potential engagement levels; rating the vendors enthusiasm since the project is always on the lookout for new recruits and particularly those with leadership potential.¹⁰⁷

Outreach at SVP therefore serves several goals at once, constituting a two-way process that both collects information from the vendors on the state of vending in their district, while at the same time informing them about the goals of SVP. Beyond making connections with individual vendors on the street however, another important aspect SVP's out-of-office work includes partnering with other immigrant worker centres and rights groups on shared issues. The building of external networks is hence just as important as building internal solidarity between the vendors, since by coalescing around shared concerns, worker centres and other non-profits can amplify their collective leverage.

To this extent, SVP is part of the mosaic of affiliated organisations, and during my time at the project they partnered with a number of other groups, including: the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA), The MTA Riders Alliance, the Small Business Alliance (SBA), Lead and Dust Free NYC (LDFNYC), E Bike NYC and other worker centre-type unions such as the Laundry Workers Center (LWC), Jackson Heights Community Development Organisation (CCHYA), Desis Rising Up (DRUM), Jews for Economic Justice (JFREG) and the international non-profit, Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (WEIGO). Moreover, in response to the pandemic, SVP has recently begun building a strategic partnership with Make the Road

¹⁰⁷ Engaging a potential member can require multiple visits, since it takes time for the vendors to build up trust and familiarity. During my time at SVP, fellow organiser Tirtho Dutta built up a small database of vendors on Google Maps, allowing us to see which areas we had visited last, making a note of the vendors name, language requirements and any other information that we deemed pertinent.

(MRNY) and other worker's rights groups around the exclusion of essential immigrant workers from Covid-related benefits.

3.2 *Peddling Uphill*: An Initial Survey

Street Vendor Project's *Peddling Uphill* report published in 2006 was at the time the most comprehensive survey of vendors ever conducted in New York. To undertake this landmark survey SVP selected a sample of a hundred vendors and asked them detailed questions about their work lives and the difficulties they face. As the report discovered, the greatest impediment to New York's vendors is the labyrinthine system of vending regulations and daily penalties they face while working. These fines consequently hurt earning potential so much that, the majority of the respondents were found to be barely subsisting, while in addition, the convoluted vending rules were deemed not only an economic disincentive, but also a political one, since hostile enforcement daily stigmatises the vendors as "quality of life criminals" and accordingly, they are "hindered at every turn" (Basinski & Sluzska 2006, 4).

Yet, from the outset, *Peddling Uphill* upends the multiple negative stereotypes about street vendors, instead solidifying the view that the current system of fines is not only a financial impediment, but also a racialising operation that denigrates the whole profession. Vending enforcement's ocular regime thus only contributes to the public perception that street vendors are unhygienic, abnormal and even, on occasion, criminal. As a result, New York's vendors face the daily consequences of these adverse stereotypes, reinforced in the minds of the public by the summary and insulting treatment they receive from the NYPD and other city officials. Consequently, the discretionary tickets that the vendors regularly receive, only contribute to the negative perception that vendors are a "criminal element" whether they are selling legitimately or not. Such prejudices are consequently recorded in the report, whereby, in the immediate

aftermath of 9/11, Arabic-speaking vendors working around the World Trade Centre were characterised as “money grubbing hucksters,” and even falsely accused of “financing terrorism” as part of an intentional campaign to displace them from the area around the WTC Memorial (8).

In response to the report’s findings, SVP subsequently mounted a successful campaign to Lower the Fines, whereby the membership lobbied the NYCC for reforms to the penalty system. As a result, in 2010, two bills proposing a reduction in fines were introduced by council member Steven Levin, before passing shortly thereafter. The first bill (Intro 434) lowered the maximum fines from \$1,000 to \$250, while the second bill (Intro 435) ensured that fines would only escalate when vendors repeatedly committed the same infraction. Regardless of these gains however, the widely held public misconception that vendors are engaged in criminality still persists.

This victory notwithstanding, burdensome penalties, complex regulations and the flexible interpretation of the law remain a significant source of distress for the vendors and while I was working at the project, vendors would regularly come into the office waving a bundle of DOH-issued fines, which when laid end-to-end would often measure several feet long. Hence, ticketing is more than just an inconvenience since a string of consecutive fines can easily put a vendor out of business. This is exactly happened to vendor leader Juan Salas and his wife while they were selling tamales between 2009 and 2012. After receiving \$3000 worth of tickets in quick succession, the couple were forced quit vending. This was a great hardship since Juan is disabled and not all types of work are available to him. On another occasion, a Mexican vendor called Claudia came into the office with a thick wad of tickets that she wanted to contest. Upon talking to her, I discovered she had paid as much as \$15,000 in tickets in one year, yet she accepted this as merely “the cost of doing business.”

Nonetheless, fines are not the only consequence of over-zealous enforcement, since the

vendors are regularly belittled by the authorities as a matter of routine, in turn hurting their professional pride. Such harassment therefore often results in generalised “anxiety and fear,”¹⁰⁸ as vendor leader Sonia Pérez Garcia testified in a meeting at the offices of the Public Advocate Jumaane Williams. As Sonia explained to the PA’s staff, she had previously been stopped by the NYPD while vending and was subsequently, accused of selling drugs: “It was humiliating for me,” she said, “since my daughter was with me, and they told me I’d go to prison for a very long time.” Again, this is exactly the type of racial profiling that is a normal part of the vendors’ experience, often resulting in them being intimidated off the streets or worse.

The vendors are thus routinely made to feel worthless for simply trying to work. Mohammed, an Egyptian food vendor from Midtown, told me that one particular local policeman always refers to him as “the hot dog guy,” as if he was “nothing,” never once having learned his name, despite interacting with him on almost a daily basis. On another occasion, while conducting outreach on 125th Street in Harlem, I talked with Marcus, a middle-aged general merchandise vendor selling CDs, who told me that he had recently faced harassment from a couple of local cops. While Marcus was of the opinion that one of the police officers was “just doing his job,” he complained that the other one was a new officer, “who had it in for me and was looking to impress her captain.” Yet, he added defiantly, “I hope they do put the cuffs on me, so I can sue the NYPD like I successfully did in 2011.” He told me that he appreciated SVP’s offer of legal assistance, but he had his own lawyer and as a black American, he was aware of his rights. Hence, this somewhat demonstrates how different groups of vendors have access to different legal resources and therefore, not all vendors require SVP’s immediate

¹⁰⁸ See WIEGO report “COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Street Vendors in New York City, USA” (WIEGO 2021, 4). Accessible here: <https://www.wiego.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-and-informal-economy-street-vendors-new-york-city-usa>

assistance. That said, the daily humiliation that vendors experience at the hands of the police is ubiquitous, whereby they are stripped of their dignity and rights as a matter of routine.

3.3 Who Are Vendors and What Do They Sell?

At the time of publication, *Peddling Uphill* (2006) estimated that there were a total 12,000 vendors in New York, although more recent estimates put this figure perhaps as high as 20,000 (WIEGO 2021). While I was at SVP, the total number of vendors in the city was debated among the staff, yet opinions diverged. Matt Shapiro said that we can definitively point to there being 9,000 licences, yet Sean Basinski said that the number of total vendors was more likely to be between 10,000 and 20,000, yet the lack of permits makes accurate figures hard to pin down. Sarah Orleans Reed, a research associate with WEIGO concurred with Sean’s estimate, adding that the shrinking space of legitimacy for vendors has created further exploitation, rendering their true numbers opaque.

Indeed, *Peddling Uphill* makes this same point, explaining that vendors are such a fixture in New York that often they go barely noticed or remarked upon, despite being featured in nearly every film and TV show made about the city. Moreover, the illegal market for permits creates chains of subcontracting within the industry further obscuring the true number of vendors. At minimum, *Peddling Uphill* (2006) puts the number of licensed vendors at:

Food (Full year)	3000
General (non-veteran)	853
Military Veterans	1074
First Amendment	1000

Unlicensed	6000
Total Estimate:	12,557

While these figures are over a decade old, the number of licensed vendors has not changed much in the interim, since there has been no expansion in the number of permits issued since 1983 (although, what has definitely changed is the ethnic- and gender-makeup of the vending community). Yet, despite this ambiguity, it is known that the overall demand for permits is high, since in 2006 the city created a lottery, making available a handful of new general merchandise licences and in response, 10,000 potential vendors applied to be on the waiting list. This demonstrates that, at the very least, there is a huge demand for permits among those who wish to legally vend.

More apparent, however, is that by 2006 around 46% of street sales were for food alone, while about 26% of sales were for general merchandise and hence, while food vendors tend to sell the same items day in day out, general merchandise vendors, who acquire their goods from wholesalers in Midtown, are much more dependent on the vagaries of consumer fashion, changing up their stock regularly to meet fresh demand from tourists, both for memorabilia and gifts and accordingly, alternate and adapt their wares according to the season.

To illustrate this, one day while I was working in the office at SVP, a Jamerican veteran called Vixton came into office with his friend Wayne. Vixton explained that Wayne was looking to get into vending, so they thought it would be a good idea to get him signed up as a member. I then explained the responsibilities of membership to Wayne and how, in return for access to SVP's free services, he would be expected to participate in the work of the project. While I was processing Wayne's membership, Vixton began to tell me how he had been diagnosed with PTSD following a serious explosion while serving in Japan during the 70s, an accident in which many of his colleagues died and as a result, he now had trouble sleeping. Post-traumatic stress is extremely common among veterans and as a result, many of them have both visible and

invisible disabilities, making it difficult for them to hold down regular employment of any sort. As veteran vendor Michelle once told me during outreach: “If you didn’t have PTSD before you joined the service, then you certainly do afterwards.”

Following nightmares and bouts of insomnia, Vixton went on to describe how his daughter, a doctor, had helped him receive treatment and as a result of his diagnosis, he was due to get compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) extending all the way back to the 1970s. His disability therefore entitled him to a disabled veteran vendor’s licence, which is how he first got into the profession. Since Wayne was also a veteran, Vixton wanted to set him up as a general merchandise vendor and although, Wayne was currently vending at the VA hospital where he sold t-shirts, Vixton was encouraging him to get into vending proper. “We’re going to make crazy money on the ramp to the Brooklyn Bridge,” he said excitedly to Wayne, explaining that they were planning to sell their wares to commuting pedestrians.

He then advised Wayne that he should probably sell souvenir key fobs; ones that resemble Brooklyn number plates, since immigrant New Yorkers love to buy them as a status symbol, sending them back home to their relatives. “You better get ready, you’ll need an assistant,” Vixton said to Wayne, “since the customers buy batches of thirty at a time. They love it!” This is typical of the way in which merchandise vendors, unlike food vendors, vary their wares depending on location, season and the demands of fashion; picking up on trends that will bag them extra income.

Accordingly, vendors give various motivations for vending, with around half of the vendors surveyed in *Peddling Uphill* saying that, despite being proud of their job, they vend as a necessity (for further commentary on ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ entry into informal labour markets, see Section 5.3). In spite of this, the vendors generally enjoy the “freedom” that vending provides, since for the most part they are unsupervised. As SVP’s director Mohammed Attia explained to me, even if you are working a cart on someone else’s permit, “It’s better than

the fast-food job you had when arrived in the country.” Moreover, vendors will even go as far as declaring vending to be an “ideal job” (Basinski & Sluzska 2006, 8). This is especially true for those who are parents and caregivers since it affords them greater flexibility. In addition, while many feel that they have become “stuck” in the profession, it is also considered a job that keeps them meaningfully in touch with their wider communities, whereby the vendors come to be seen as local fixtures who are “friends” with their customers. “We are like family,” says one of the vendors in the survey (8).

Although, flexibility and relative autonomy are motivating factors for taking up the profession, income and money are not and as a result, only 6% of vendors surveyed in *Peddling Uphill* thought it was more lucrative than other options, with very few expecting to become wealthy from their work. For 38% of respondents, it was a job of last resort, since it was the only employment that they could find. For many immigrant vendors, the absence of language skills, low-educational attainment, lack of social capital and the inability to secure small business loans, were all given as reasons as to why they were unable to find their job of choice.

In terms of composition, *Peddling Uphill* (2006) found that 83% of Lower Manhattan vendors came from around 20 countries other than the US. The top nationalities recorded included Bangladeshi (18%), Chinese (16%) and Afghani (12%), with only around 6% being primary Spanish-speakers, although those percentages have certainly changed in recent years. Back then, the average vendor had been in the US for around 11 years. Moreover, US native-born vendors in Lower Manhattan were a minority (17%) and as such, most were military veterans. Perhaps most significantly, the 2006 survey skewed heavily towards male vendors, with 87% of respondents being men. Yet, a recent WEIGO survey (2021) found 57% of respondents to be women, thereby indexing a shift in the gender balance of the profession in

the intervening years.¹⁰⁹

In addition, *Peddling Uphill* was also able to establish the degree to which ethnicity determines the branch of the industry vendors enter into and as a result, it can be said that their occupational niche is largely determined by nativity (i.e. country of origin). For example, fruit and vegetable sellers are most generally Bangladeshi (44%) or Chinese (56%), coffee vendors are mostly Afghani, while clothing and art vendors are much more likely to be US-born (82%).¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the report also suggests that this distribution demonstrates how “new immigrants are often introduced to vending by friends or relatives who teach them how to vend a particular good” (18).

It was therefore not uncommon whenever conducting outreach to meet a Halal or Biryani vendor operating a cart with a friend or relative; often an associate that they were training on the job. Likewise, vendors often store and clean their carts in garages shared with members of the same ethnic or cultural group. For instance, when I visited the W 38th St garage in the Garment District, I noticed that the vendors there were predominantly Muslim, either Arabic-speaking or Bangladeshi men. The garage as a result, even had a mosque in an upstairs room and while I was there, the vendors were called to prayer by a muezzin over the public address-system. Similarly, many of the garage owners, cart manufacturers and permit holders are Greek, having occupied positions in the vending hierarchy since the 70s and 80s and accordingly, they have now graduated to higher, more lucrative positions, often the running garages and overseeing

¹⁰⁹ WEIGO: “COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Street Vendors in New York City, USA” (2021). Findings here: https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_FactSheet_NYC_SVP_web.pdf

¹¹⁰ During outreach in Harlem and Brooklyn, I noticed that African American vendors often sold incense and books about Black culture. No licence is required for these cultural and artistic wares since their sale is protected under the First Amendment. However, when Bangladeshi vendors also attempt to sell Muslim religious paraphernalia, yet often have their merchandise confiscated by the police due to anti-Muslim prejudices.

the manufacture of carts.

Yet perhaps the biggest transformation since the publication of *Peddling Uphill* is the prevalence of Egyptian vendors in Manhattan, many of whom moved to the US after the Arab Spring and Egyptian Revolution of 2011. These vendors tend to work on Halal carts in Lower Manhattan, Midtown and the Hudson Yards and consequently, they are a numerically significant vendor group, making the name “Mohammed” (and variations thereof) the most prevalent name on the SVP database. Nevertheless, almost entirely overlooked at the time of the 2006 survey were unlicensed mobile Latina pushcart vendors, about whom very little was statistically known at the time (for further details see Section 3.6).

3.4 Earnings and Working Conditions

Peddling Uphill also reported that the average working day for a vendor is 8.2 hours yet varies depending on what the vendor sells. For instance, fruit and vegetable sellers must work late, often past midnight, because the profit margin for groceries is slender and perishables require a rapid turnover. This work is made more difficult during the winter months when produce can freeze and spoil, further diminishing revenues. By contrast however, coffee and breakfast vendors are up early in the morning and generally finish by 12pm, before returning their carts to the Long Island garages for cleaning around lunchtime. To accommodate them therefore, SVP regularly organises early-morning meetings, since coffee vendors are generally unable to make the monthly general meeting at Rector Street, customarily held in the evenings.

In addition to the long work hours, commuting and transportation time considerably lengthens the working day for most vendors, the majority of whom live in the outer boroughs, making their commute a necessity. On occasion, I even met vendors working in Brooklyn and Uptown Manhattan who told me they had travel in from either Long Island or Upstate, since

living in New York is now completely unaffordable to them. This means that some vendors get up as early as 2am to begin their day, although 4am is more regularly cited. Many vendors work irregular shifts, with some avoiding vending altogether during January and February because it is simply too cold and as a result, there is much less customer footfall on the street than in the summer months. This pause in trade allows some vendors to visit their home countries or take more formal jobs, while others are obligated to work in the coldest of conditions to maintain an income for their families and dependents.

Obviously, working on a Halal cart is much warmer than selling from a pushcart and therefore, the mobile Latina vendors, who often sell churros or chili mangoes on street corners during the summer months, disappear over the winter or huddle into the MTA stations, seeking out warmer spots. As a result, bad weather can bring them into conflict with the transit police and building owners, yet occasionally, vendors have agreements with local shop owners, who allow them to keep warm in their doorways, use the bathroom or hide in the shop whenever the police come down the street. Hence, not all store owners are opposed to vendors.

On average, the vendors work between 200 and 250 days a year (Basinski & Sluzska 2006, 11-13). This means that income can vary, with only a minority of vendors able to raise their income above the poverty line. The annual median net income for vendors is therefore cited as \$7,500, which puts them in the bottom 9% of earners in New York. Only a small proportion, a mere 7%, make over \$25,000 a year, while only one vendor cited in *Peddling Uphill* made over \$35,000. The vast majority, nearly half of all vendors, earned less than \$5,000, which is well below subsistence, meaning that many of the vendors take on debt at very high rates of repayment just to get by.

In my conversations with vendors during outreach, they would often nostalgically recall the boom of the late nineties; the last time that vendors were able to make “good money” from New Yorkers with disposable income. This was certainly the case with Jackie, a general

merchandise vendor I met on Bedford Ave in Williamsburg. She told me that she used to own a jewellery business in an indoor market in Manhattan in the late-80s, but unfortunately the market went bust and she lost her spot. So instead, she turned to selling fashion items in the street, and for a while, it was a good substitute. Yet, she went on to lament that vending was no longer as lucrative as it was in its heyday, adding that during the 90s a well-placed vendor could make money easily. This type of nostalgia is common amongst more experienced vendors, yet most vendors today feel that business is sluggish at best.

The chronic low-income of vendors was further revealed when SVP's members gave testimony at the hearing for Intro 1116 at City Hall (see Section 4.2), with one Bangladeshi vendor giving the following account of his impoverished situation:

I have to pay someone who already has a permit. I pay a lot of cash. Last time I paid \$20,000, but I don't have enough money this time [...] We couldn't pay the rent and bills, and I had to use my credit card. So, now I have a lot of credit card debt and subsequently, I couldn't buy my son a new winter jacket this year. My son was so sad when I gave him my own jacket. If I owned my permit, I could take care of my family and pay my debts. After a few years, I could even afford my own business.

This testimony speaks to the difficult circumstances that immigrant vendors endure and as such, council members at the hearing were visibly moved. Yet, the situation described is somewhat typical and consequently, if the cap on permits were to be lifted then many vendors would simply be able to keep the money, they currently spend on renting a permit, as well as any income they presently hand over in fines. Thus, as it stands, the current vending system creates a poverty trap which many vendors struggle to escape.

If low levels of income, the punitive cost of renting a permit and ceaseless fines were not draining enough, robbery is often cited as a further hazard. In February 2019, Tirtho Dutta and I had to follow up on a spate of robberies that had affected vendors around 96th Street on the

Upper East Side, after three fruit sellers had been robbed on adjacent street corners, all in the space of forty-five minutes. Sean Basinski therefore asked us to contact the vendors in a show of support, so we headed out to see if there was anything that SVP could do to assist. After much walking we were unable to locate the affected vendors, in part because it was bitterly cold, and the streets were empty. It was then we met a sole Bengali fruit vendor who also happened to be one of SVP's long-time members. He was wrapped-up warmly, wearing many layers against the cold, with only his face showing, yet he admitted that he had to continue working for financial reasons despite the freezing temperatures threatening to ruin his stock. He told Tirtho that he only knew one of the affected fruit sellers; another Bangladeshi vendor working on 3rd Ave. However, this vendor was so traumatised by the robbery, he had not worked since, too fearful to continue.

On occasion street vendors have been seriously injured during such incidents. This was certainly the case for Souleymane Porgo, a Bronx vendor who in 2017 was knocked unconscious and suffered a fractured skull after being attacked by a group six men looking to steal his merchandise. In response to this assault, however, SVP was able raise \$30,000 for Souleymane and his family, after he was left with life-changing injuries and was consequently unable to work.¹¹¹

As it stands, 60% of vendors lack any health insurance, making them extremely vulnerable to work-related injuries. Moreover, in addition to the dangers of street crime, vending comes with many health and safety concerns, such as harmful air quality, injury from standing for long periods and cuts and burns from cooking. Meanwhile, the current permit system and accompanying vending regulations mean that licenced food vendors can only operate in strictly

¹¹¹ Atkinson, K., 'Brutal Gang Assault, Two Skull Surgeries and a "Miraculous Recovery,"' *New York Times*, August 16, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/nyregion/street-vendor-beaten-gang-assault-bronx.html>

appointed positions on the street, often just feet from passing traffic and hence, from time to time, they are hit by vehicles. Indeed, while talking to vendors during outreach, they would often have pull me out of the way of traffic.

3.5 Confiscation and Displacement

In 2006, 23% of vendors claimed police harassment to be their biggest problem, since the current regulatory system of licences, permits and fines puts vendors into regular contact with the NYPD. In the worst examples, this adverse contact can result in the excessive use of force, leading to injury, arrest and sometimes even the threat of deportation (although more commonly, the vendors experience discourtesy and racial discrimination during these interactions). While vendors have recourse to complain to the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) about police malpractice, making any complaint against the police is a formidable process and therefore, SVP's legal support is the much more attractive option for vendors. As one Bengali vendor joked to me: "Who's brave enough to photograph the police and file their own complaint?"

Arabic-speaking vendors have experienced some of the highest levels of discrimination, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, when 57% of this vendor group experienced anti-Muslim harassment. Moreover, nearly all vendors suffer harassment from city agencies other than the police, including the Department of Health (NYSDOH) and the Department of Sanitation (DSNY), both of whom can order the confiscation and disposal of any carts deemed to be in violation of the rules. As a result, 40% of all vendors surveyed in *Peddling Uphill* had been subject to the confiscation of their carts and disposal of their merchandise.

The regular confiscation of carts can thus be considered an everyday form of racialised dispossession that keeps vendors operating on a knife edge; often occurring even when the

police or other city agencies have no right to do so. Moreover, according to SVP lawyer Matt Shapiro, the NYPD is known to incorrectly process violations, making recovery even more difficult, particularly if the paperwork has been improperly filed. As a consequence, affected vendors are often unable to pursue the recovery of confiscated merchandise, while only 21% of vendors surveyed reported having their merchandise successfully returned. In response, SVP's legal team has worked hard on this issue and in 2019 the project was able to win a class-action on behalf of 300 vendors, who were awarded a share of \$250,000 in recognition of the illegal destruction of their carts. Somewhat predictably however, this successful court ruling did not prohibit the further seizure of carts by the NYPD and the DOH.

As well as having to deal with the police and city officials, 7% of vendors surveyed in *Peddling Uphill* said they had also suffered at the hands of the BIDs and their private security guards. Many building managers will therefore speciously misreport vendors over legal distance requirements and as a consequence, the legal informality enables the harassment of vendors by private interests. Moreover, building managers will go as far as positioning planters and other street furniture on the sidewalk to displace permitted vendors from their legal spots.

By way of example, in January 2019, I accompanied a small delegation of vendor members to give testimony at Community Board 4 situated close to Hudson Yards (which is by area the largest private real estate development in the United States).¹¹² At the community board, Egyptian vendor Mohamed Awad gave testimony about how he had received daily harassment from a nearby hotel manager, who would regularly berate him with foul language. Moreover, the same building manager also made malicious calls to city officials about the placement of Mohamed's cart and those of other Egyptian vendors operating around Hudson Yards. As a result, multiple city agencies would sporadically turn up to inspect Mohamed's cart,

¹¹² Community Board 4 is situated in NYCC speaker Corey Johnson's district.

despite the fact he occupied a legally permitted spot. As Mohamed told the community board, on one such occasion, as many as twenty inspectors arrived, issuing him with eight separate tickets for a variety of violations. This was considered to be a serious matter, since nine different Egyptian vending families were supported by the carts around Hudson Yards and the loss of these spots would have serious repercussions for the vendors and their dependents.

In addition to the harassment they receive from building owners, vendors are also often reported to the NYC 311 citizens' hotline, whereby affluent residents in gentrifying neighbourhoods are prone to make vexatious and racialised complaints about the nearby presence of immigrant vendors. Yet, as Mohamed explained to the community board, vendors like him would also like to benefit from urban revitalisation and the increased footfall that gentrification brings, although, they are typically prevented from doing so by general NIMBYism. As it stands, therefore, immigrant vendors tend to be excluded from new vending opportunities such as farmer's markets, indoor street food experiences and other gentrifying efforts that have sprung up around New York in recent years. It is consequently with no little irony that these attractions often appropriate the food and culture of the vendors themselves.¹¹³

As a result, gentrification tends to further limit market access for immigrant vendors, who are often in danger of losing their spots and customer-base to rising rents. In line with this trend, I asked general merchandise vendor Kareem about the displacement of vendors in Harlem, whereby he lamented: "It's gentrifying here like a motherfucker. Excuse my language, it's the way we were raised. I remember old New York. But I'm going to ride it out, so I'm planning to move Upstate and drive into the city to sell."

¹¹³ Currently, there seems to be a trend in New York to bring the 'street vendor experience' indoors, with the creation of large indoor food courts such as the Essex Market on Delancey, further commodifying street food, while excluding existing vendors, who do not have access to the loans required to start such enterprises.

Public-private partnership and the renovation of real estate thus stands in opposition to the subsistence of vendors, meaning that, not only are the vendors intentionally displaced by bike racks and planters, but buildings under renovation will also erect scaffolding in an attempt to get the vendors to move their carts. This scaffolding can remain in place for years since, as Matt Shapiro explained to me, in normal circumstances, any building hoping to place objects on the sidewalk has to apply for a revocable licence. Yet, building owners often circumvent the rules with the hope of pushing the vendors away from their property with the hostile placement of impediments. However, because this interference can put vendors out of business, in response, SVP regularly mounts direct actions to remove such obstacles, using power saws on illegally placed bike-racks and dismantling awkwardly placed planters; an activity that remains extremely popular with the vendor members.

Meanwhile, scaffolding is a much more difficult proposition and while at SVP, I spoke with couple of vendors on Broadway, who told me that they had recently been displaced by obstructive scaffolding. They then went on to explain how construction work on a nearby building was running-over and as a result, they had to move down the block to the opposite sidewalk, where there were far fewer customers, resulting in a substantial loss in income. On another occasion an Egyptian vendor member told me how he had successfully gone to war with a building owner, running a negative PR-campaign against him, after the building had purposefully erected scaffolding so low that the vendor's cart would not fit under it. Eventually, the building owner caved, and the scaffolding was raised to accommodate the cart, demonstrating the tenacity of the vendors even as individuals.

3.6 Women Vendors and their Vulnerability

In 2019, SVP conducted a further survey: a report into the conditions of women vendors in New York, the findings of which were published under the title *Vulnerable in Itself. If Peddling Uphill* had been mainly focused on male vendors, this new report sought to uncover the “unique experiences and needs that are often obscured in gender-neutral narratives on street vending” (SVP 2019, 4). Hence, the women’s survey brought to light a distinct set of sub-issues uniquely relevant to women vendors and concerns, which until now, had remained somewhat invisible.

Hoping to address this oversight, a questionnaire was drawn up with the help of the newly established SVP Women’s Committee, with responses to be gathered by staff, vendor leaders and interns, who together carried out a total of 50 interviews in-person and by phone. Much like their male counterparts, the women vendors voiced concerns about over-policing, burdensome fines and the need for more permits. Yet, while *Peddling Uphill* had addressed issues common to better-known locations, such as Lower Manhattan and Midtown, settings in which mostly male vendors work, the women’s survey instead drew attention to the specific concerns of unlicensed Latina pushcart vendors who predominantly work in the outer boroughs.

This geographic disparity is made abundantly clear in the survey’s findings and while it was reported that only 22% of the 46,000 vendors who received mobile food vending licences between 2000-2018 were women (figure from the Environmental Control Board 2018), it can now be said that women vendors dominate vending in the outer boroughs. For instance, the women’s survey found that in Corona Queens, 79% of vendors are now in fact women. These vendors are, however, much less likely to hold either permits or licences and as such, 57% of tickets issued for unlicensed food vending in 2018 were given to women vendors (figures from OATH 2018).

In turn, this sheds further light on how unlicensed women vendors are doubly restricted in terms of market access. Not only are they penalised and displaced under the official permit system, but they are also altogether excluded from the “male dominated underground market” (SVP 2019, 4). This is certainly true of women vendors I spoke to, whereby they typically possess a food handling licence, yet were unable to obtain a food permit and subsequently, were not entitled to a permanent spot. Thus, as women vendors they tend to accept the unavoidable fines that are a facet of their work.

In terms of ethnic composition, nearly all fifty of the survey’s respondents were originally from outside the US, with 23 originating in Ecuador; 13 from Mexico; 4 from China; 2 from Côte d’Ivoire; 2 from Egypt; 1 from El Salvador; 1 from Peru; 1 from Jamaica; 1 from Burkina Faso; and 1 from Chile. In addition to this, only one of the women vendors was found to be native born. The ages of the women ranged between 22 and 69, yet their average age was 48. Moreover, by composition, 82% of the women were food vendors, 14% sold general merchandise, while only 4% were First Amendment vendors. Around 58% of the women worked in the outer boroughs, while 32% commuted to Manhattan to work. Most significantly however, the majority lived in just three boroughs, with 76% of respondents living in either Queens, Brooklyn or the Bronx, showing a high concentration in these outlying districts, with more than 40% living in Queens specifically.

As previously mentioned, only 28% of respondents had a licence or permit, while 71% of the women held no licence of any type. Yet in addition, only two of the general merchandise vendors surveyed held any appropriate licence. As a result, those without licences are continuously at risk of “steep fines, arrests and confiscation of their goods” (5). However, even licence-holding women vendors were found to be at risk from harassment. One respondent reported that she had recently given up her permit after the police had intimidated her from her long-held vending spot. It is therefore not uncommon for the police to tell the women scare-

stories about street crime with the hope that they will quit vending altogether.

Over 80% the women surveyed worked solely as vendors without any other form of employment, while those who have additional non-vending jobs are mainly employed in domestic or care work. On this point, some women explained that the scarcity of permits has caused them to leave vending altogether and seek alternative occupations. This was not an easy choice however and many expressed concerns about domestic work which comes with its own risks and insecurities. Thus, the women stated a preference for vending when compared to other types of employment, since the profession is generally seen to be a “relief from exploitative forms of wage labour” (6). As a result, vending is often viewed as a flexible alternative, one that allows women to select their work hours, drop their children off at school, care for elderly relatives and attend medical appointments. In this regard, it is not uncommon to find women vendors working close to home while accompanied by their daughters or nieces, who join them after school.

Most of the women in the survey prepared food at home, whereas food sold from the carts in Manhattan is typically produced in the commissary kitchens situated in the garages where vendors typically store and clean their carts. Beneficially, home preparation allows the women to spend further worktime with their children. This is seen an important benefit since women vendors are more likely to be the sole breadwinner in their families, with 32% of respondents to the survey being exclusive providers, contributing all their income to the family home. On average, women vendors support 3.8 people, including themselves, while just under half of respondents (44%) supported 4 people or more. 36% supported as many as five and two of the fifty respondents supported more than 10 other people. Moreover, 52% of respondents reported that they contributed half or more of their income to the household. Yet in addition to this, many of the women also reported sending a portion of their earnings back to their home countries in the form of remittances.

In terms of safety, the women vendors were asked if, “they ever felt unsafe doing their job?” To this 44% replied that they regularly felt unsafe as vendors and correspondingly, the most prevalent source of fear was the negative attention the women received from the NYPD and health inspectors, with many reporting that they felt as if they were “constantly being watched” (6). Language barriers also increased the feeling of powerlessness, and while legally entitled to translation services, this was rarely provided by either police or city agencies. Further compounding this, the women also complained that local business owners and competing vendors were sometimes unhappy with their presence, using the threat of health inspection and complaints to the police to move them on.

Moreover, beyond interactions with the police, 26% of the respondents said they had experienced gender-based harassment at work, on occasion from male vendors who had verbally and physically threatened the women while attempting to steal their spots. In addition, the women felt they were easy targets for the DOH on account of being more easily intimidated and browbeaten (“being a woman on the streets is vulnerable in itself,” as one vendor stated [7]). By contrast, the women said they received the most support from their customers and this appreciation adds to their sense of well-being and security, especially when working in areas with high footfall. Additionally, having a secure spot to sell from was also very important to their overall sense of community, allowing them over time, to become accepted by both the police and regulatory enforcement, while in turn receiving less tickets if their presence was perceived to be familiar.

For women vendors, work and lack of money are the main sources of stress and anxiety. As such, the irregularity of their income has both material and emotional consequences, making bill payment difficult, which additionally, threatens their ability to keep their families healthy and together (7). Vending work gives the women little time for other chores, however, since it is deemed so physically demanding that the resulting health issues are widespread and thus,

often described as a significant stressor. Even worse, some respondents said they had to return to work immediately after illness or surgery for fear of losing income.

When asked about which services and activities SVP might better provide, many of the women replied they would like the project to help them with market opportunities. For example, better access to street fairs and other safe locations where licences are not required. English language training and assistance with social, financial and immigration services were also requested, along with a desire for better access to leadership classes and know-your-rights workshops. Furthermore, the women also wanted SVP to conduct more dedicated outreach, tailored specifically to women vendors working in the outer boroughs. As a result, the women suggested outreach clinics situated in the neighbourhoods in which they live and work, since it would overall better fit with their own familial obligations.

In summary, *Vulnerable in Itself* confirms that women vendors are severely constrained in terms of market access since permit scarcity only serves to reinforce the male-dominated underground market. They are therefore doubly excluded, since on the one hand, permit costs are extremely prohibitive, while on the other, because the black market for permits is a criminal market, it is considered too risky for women vendors. In addition, because the majority of women lack any appropriate licence, their precarity brings them into potentially harmful contact with the NYPD. Counterbalancing these fears however, the women vendors also reported that membership of SVP helps them feel protected, providing them with a greater sense of identity and community.

This feeling of well-being is doubly important, since women vendors are highly susceptible to assault, robbery and threats, in addition to the administrative harassment they regularly receive. Yet, despite this extra vulnerability, the women also explained that a different kind of relationship is sometimes possible with the police, especially with sympathetic officers. In this regard, local recognition and being able to maintain a regular spot was important to them.

As the report goes on to suggest however, “broken windows” policing is still in effect in New York and as such, there needs to be better training and education for police officers, so that they might recognise the “unique vulnerabilities” of women vendors (9).

In conclusion, the women’s survey recommends a series of changes, so that the concerns of women vendors might be better integrated into SVP’s process. The recommendations include:

- Further “decentralisation” through more sustained outreach in the outer boroughs, making legal support and know-your-rights training more accessible and inclusive.
- Assistance for women vendors who wish to sell at events and locations where permits are not required, such as summer fairs and holiday markets, thereby increasing access to safer environments and more reliable income streams.¹¹⁴
- Developing “the capacity to act as a clearinghouse” for vendors, directing them to social, financial and immigration support services in New York (specifically those that assist domestic workers, since this is an overlapping field of employment for the women).
- “Exploring innovative ways for women street vendors [...] to form more formal cooperative arrangements.”

This final recommendation is thus perhaps the most significant, since it recognises the pre-existing organic bonds that women vendors form around their common needs (as earlier identified by Dunn, see Section 1.7). As such, the survey suggests that women vendors would benefit from shared cooking locations and equipment, so that preparatory work can be done communally, while making ingredients more affordable at wholesale prices. Similarly, shared childcare arrangements would be hugely beneficial to women vendors, allowing them to pool

¹¹⁴ Following up on this recommendation, SVP is looking into a pilot program announced by Senator Jessica Ramos to allow vendors to sell from empty MTA subway station storefronts.

their time.

While the women's survey identifies the need for practical communal arrangements among the women, it says little about the development of solidarity based around shared life experiences. So, while there is some mention of gender-based violence at work, the common experience of domestic violence among Latina women goes unmentioned and as such, this near ubiquitous experience is something that the organisers of the Women's Committee would later draw on, in order to develop strong ties between SVP's Latina vendors (see Section 4.3).

3.7 VAMOS Unidos: Organising Women in the Outer Boroughs

Prior to the women's survey, Kathleen Dunn had already conducted several studies of pushcart vendors and their organisations: one examining Red Hook Food Vendors (RHFV) and another describing the organising efforts of VAMOS Unidos (Vendedoras Ambulantes Movilizando y Organizando en Solidaridad); a now defunct organisation that had success in bringing together vendors in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens (Graaf & Ha *et al.* 2015; Milkman *et al* 2010). Founded in 2007 by Rafael Samanez and Jennifer Arieta, VAMOS grew out of another disbanded group from East Harlem called Esperanza Del Barrio.

In her study of VAMOS, Dunn records in detail the experiences of a Latina vendor named Virginia, through whom the activities of the organisation are described. At the time of Dunn's account, over 70% of VAMOS' members were women, with half being single mothers for whom childcare was of principal importance (Milkman *et al* 2010; Dunn). As such, the majority of the organisation's members worked in the outer boroughs since for many, commuting to Manhattan was impossible due to family obligations. Yet, while working close to home was seen as preferable for the women, these Latina vendors would face considerable opposition from local restaurant owners and storefront businesses. Vending in these districts is thus commonly

perceived by the police, politicians, community boards, the BIDs and retailers, “to be a source of social disorder” (135) and as a result, the vendors are often stereotyped as unhygienic and subsequently, unfairly blamed for the dumping of rubbish. In turn, this can lead to the erroneous perception that vending is backward practice and therefore, incompatible with gentrification and its supposedly modernising impulses.

In response, VAMOS Unidos was established to dispute the conditions of Latina vendors and in addition, promote neighbourhood streets as an “underrecognised workplace” (135). Just as in Manhattan however, vendors in the outer boroughs must contend with the BIDS, who are central political actors in these outlying districts, functioning as local chambers of commerce that uniformly advocate for the tighter regulation of public space. As Dunn states, such opposition has therefore created a long running “racialised moral panic” since due to their focus on gentrification, the BIDs have become preoccupied with the “growing visibility of the poor on the city streets.” Hence, it is mobile vendors in particular who have come to be seen as “quality of life criminals” (136).

To contest these exclusions, VAMOS set about politically educating their vendor members, while raising consciousness around their legitimate role as “street workers.” As it stands, “[t]he majority of VAMOS members turned to street labour, either because they could not access the formal labour market or because they could not withstand its degraded conditions” (137). In response, women vendors in the outer boroughs have successfully created their own employment and often prefer vending work to other waged occupations. To this extent, Dunn characterises their work as a “form of resistance to the unacceptable conditions of the formal employment available to them” (137). Vending work, however, leaves the women vulnerable, since the public nature of their work renders them susceptible to the ocular regime of police and state surveillance, which in turn, criminalises them as a matter of routine.

At the time of Dunn’s study, VAMOS had almost 500 members, nearly all of whom were

Latinas. Half of the members were Mexican in origin, while the remainder were from a variety of South and Latin American countries. Moreover, many of the women were single mothers and in response, VAMOS provided free childcare during meetings, along with a youth program that introduced the children of members to community organising.¹¹⁵ As such, childcare was deemed to be an essential service, since it facilitated attendance at the meetings, which was mandatory for VAMOS members if they wished to participate in the organisation and benefit from its services.¹¹⁶ In return for such assistance, the members were thereafter expected to help with recruitment as a condition of participation.

As Dunn mentions: “Some VAMOS vendors earn as little as \$2.00 per hour and can work up to fourteen-hour shifts” (138) and therefore, to reflect the lower earning status of vendors in the outer boroughs, VAMOS’s dues were subsequently set at \$30 a year. Yet, beyond the need for basic assistance however, Dunn states that many members simply joined up to share “the challenges of single motherhood or [their experiences of] domestic violence” (143).¹¹⁷ Building upon this desire for community and the need to share costs, VAMOS was at the time, also planning a bulk-buying system, in order to raise revenue for the organisation and in so doing, hoped to bring down the cost of food preparation for their members.

While Dunn recognises VAMOS’s many innovations, she concludes that the organisation’s advocacy efforts were too defensive, with too time spent contesting unfair tickets, negotiating with local police precincts and helping members renew their food handling licences. Yet ironically, despite the organisational focus on such activities, the majority of VAMOS’s members lacked any proper vending licence and as a result, there was little incentive for the

¹¹⁵ Childcare is a major issue that SVP’s Women’s Committee has identified as a necessary service that would help women participate in the organisation and attend meetings.

¹¹⁶ In this respect VAMOS Unidos differs from SVP, which has a lower threshold for attendance and participation.

¹¹⁷ This is a good example of what ‘non-vending’ issues might be in the case of SVP.

members to their pay fines, since they were altogether excluded from the permit system.

There are hence clear comparisons to be drawn between VAMOS and SVP's broader, more multiethnic approach, since in the end, the organisation could only address "splintering [labour] conditions by building a base unified by ethnicity, class, and gender" (148-9). Yet, despite this mono-linguistic focus however, there were substantial benefits that flowed from VAMOS's concentration on Latina vendors; most notably, the potential for greater bonds of solidarity, which in turn firmed up the group's capacity for mobilisation. Thus, despite some obvious drawbacks, the focus on Latinas working in the outer boroughs did give the organisation some relative advantage, since in spite its modest size, VAMOS' strength lay in the high participation rates of its vendor members.

In addition to Dunn's observations, we are granted further insight into the activities of VAMOS's members, through a short film called *Judith: Portrait of a Street Vendor* (Zahida Pirani 2014). As such, the film documents the life of the Judith Ruano, a VAMOS organiser and mobile vendor. In the film Judith explains her routine, which is typical of a pushcart vendor, balancing both work and childcare. Judith's family is comprised of four women, who wake at 3am everyday to prepare the tortillas and other food, which she then sells locally. While preparing the food, Judith goes on to describe how she came to the US yet struggled to find a job that allowed her daughter Carla to get to school on time. Judith explains that while still in Guatemala she was married at the age of 18 while already pregnant, however she suffered domestic abuse at the hands of her husband, before leaving for the US to protect herself and her daughter.

After this introduction, we see Judith getting ready for work. She worries that her shopping cart might have been stolen, since it was chained up outside her apartment overnight. Similarly, Judith's sister, who also vends, reveals that she has faced threats from men on the street and is concerned that that people will report her to the police or immigration while she is working. At around 7am, when food preparation is complete, Judith loads her cart and begins to

deliver hot breakfasts to auto-repair workers and car washes in the nearby light-industrial district. Despite a clear demand from appreciative local people, Judith explains that if caught by the police, they will throw away her food. Taking an early break, she then returns home to eat, before taking the cart out again at 11:30am to sell lunch to passing truck drivers.

Judith tearfully explains that while her work is very hard, overall, she feels it is worthwhile since it will help put her children through school and college. Yet in addition, she hopes that her children follow her example and help organise the community (“Si se Puede!” she says). Later that night we see her chairing a meeting at VAMOS in the organisation’s basement, where she listens to the concerns of other vendor members about over-policing. At the end of meeting, she encourages everyone to attend an upcoming press conference about immigrant rights, urging them to bring their families along. Then, later at the rally, Judith and other members give testimony, calling for the reform of immigration laws.

In summary, Zahida Pirani’s film reflects in detail the hidden lives of mobile vendors in the outer boroughs. It draws our attention to the fact that, despite the dissolution of VAMOS in 2015, there remains a large constituency of women like Judith operating at the margins of the industry. SVP did manage to assimilate some of the members of both VAMOS Unidos and Esperanza Del Barrio, yet until recently, it was difficult for the project to maintain outreach in these outlying districts. That said, SVP has certainly learnt from experiences of VAMOS, RHFV and the LA Street Vendor Campaign and as a result, a consensus emerged within SVP that the organisation of Latina pushcart vendors in outer boroughs was now a priority and since then, the project redoubled its efforts, pivoting to meet the needs of these most difficult to reach street workers (see Section 4.3 for a fuller account).

3.8 Elsa's Arrest

Perhaps the most noteworthy episode to take place during the period of my research was the arrest of Elsa, a Latina churros vendor and consequently, this incident helps illustrate the special vulnerability of women vendors when working in the outer boroughs. While it is commonplace for women pushcart vendors to be subject to police harassment and even arrest, such discrimination remains underreported and invisible to the wider the public. Yet, in vivid terms, Elsa's arrest demonstrated the unique vulnerability of unlicensed mobile vendors and serves to illustrate how the continual dispossession and displacement of these immigrant women of colour contradicts New York's claim to be a sanctuary city.

On the 8 November 2019 subway rider Sofia B. Newman was travelling through Broadway Junction when she noticed Elsa, surrounded by police officers, who at the time, were hand-cuffing the unlicensed mobile vendor while attempting to confiscate her cart. Broadway Junction is a large complex station and an interchange for various lines that run through East Brooklyn. The station therefore contains a long concourse that allows commuters to crossover between the A, C, J, L and Z trains. It is here that Latina vendors and their families can regularly be found selling churros, drinks and candy from their pushcarts. This is also where Newman filmed the arrest on her mobile phone, before posting it to social media, whereafter a variety of news outlets quickly circulated the footage.¹¹⁸

Elsa, like many vendors, works in and around the station, having long sold churros to commuters, since there is a continuous footfall along the concourse, supplying the vendors with a steady flow of customers. Moreover, it is a safe and warm location to sell from, especially

¹¹⁸ The video and a full account of the arrest can be found here: Paybrah, A., 'Police Face a Backlash After Woman Selling Churros Is Handcuffed,' *New York Times*, 11 November 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/nyregion/churro-lady-subway-arrest.html>

during the winter months and although previously ignored, on this occasion, Elsa was confronted by three uniformed police officers and one plain clothed from Transit District 33 (the NYC Transit Police office located just inside the entrance to Broadway Junction station).

In Newman's video, Elsa is therefore seen crying as an officer informs her that she can either accept a fine or face arrest, along with the confiscation of her cart. To add insult to injury, the officers also refused to provide Elsa with Spanish language translation services, despite the presence of a Spanish-speaking officer. Undeniably, this was a clear contravention of Elsa's rights, yet eventually, the police officers handcuffed her, before taking her to the transit office, out of public sight. Newman then reported the arrest on Twitter, adding the following commentary: "I was really fucking angry [...] there is no reason why that many officers needed to encircle, demean and police the poverty of [a] woman of colour. It was an abuse of power, and yet another example of how broken our system is."¹¹⁹

Newman was not alone in taking offence and shortly thereafter, the video went viral, amplified not only by members of the public, but also by New York's activist community and the non-profits. Part of the reason that the footage became so widely shared was because it well demonstrated the impact of Governor Cuomo's controversial plan to add 500 extra police officers to the MTA. Hence, this incident was seen as part of a more general crackdown on fare evasion, which the governor was determined to proceed with, despite many civil organisations objecting to the idea that such infractions can ever simply be "policed away."¹²⁰ So while the majority of New Yorkers saw these measures as a continuation of long discredited broken windows policing (see Harcourt 2001; Camp & Heatherton *et al* 2016), Governor Cuomo instead

¹¹⁹ From Sofia B. Newman's Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/SofiaBNewman/status/1193038094028754944?>

¹²⁰ Stolper, H., 'The MTA's False Fair Evasion Narrative', Community Service Society, 12 January 2020: <https://www.cssny.org/news/entry/mta-false-fare-evasion-narrative-data>

preferred frame the increase as an improvement to “quality of life.”

Extra policing patrols were therefore deemed necessary as part the proposed infrastructural overhaul of the MTA, with the hope of raising revenues through the introduction of the new OMNY ticketing system (a system which makes it possible to digitally track individual journeys). Yet, as was apparent to many, these changes would disproportionately affect low-income transit users, particularly in the outer boroughs, since it would undoubtedly increase the cost of travel for those who generally have the longest commutes.

As a result, the plan to increase police numbers on the MTA was widely seen to be discriminatory, specifically affecting low-income people of colour, the main users of the network and in particular, younger riders who often jump the turnstiles, unprepared to pay for a transport system that is already unaffordable.¹²¹ Moreover, such measures also put vulnerable groups into dangerous contact with the NYPD, potentially subjecting them to even more ‘stop and frisk’ searches. Thus, as well as cracking down on fare evasion, the NYPD were now also expected to displace houseless people, many of whom use the subway to sleep. However, the order to disrupt ‘vagrancy’ also includes mobile vendors, and particularly Latina vendors, who often use the MTA stations to sell their wares.

This displacement ahead of the MTA refurbishment was thus seen by both transit- and anti-police activists as an attempt to police poverty and subsequently, with public feeling already running high, Elsa’s arrest was seen as yet another instance of racialised policing. Meanwhile, only a few months before, the DOJ had dropped the case against former NYPD-officer Daniel Pantaleo for the murder of Eric Garner (following an earlier failed grand jury indictment in 2018).

¹²¹ As it currently stands, over 120,000 low-income New Yorkers have been made eligible for the Fair Fares scheme which halves the price of MTA travel, cutting single rides from \$2.75 to \$1.38 and monthly cards down from \$127 to \$63.50. The scheme thus stands as an admission that the MTA and the Governor already recognise that low-income transit users struggle to pay the existing fares.

Originally in 2014, Ramsey Orta had filmed officer Pantaleo stop Eric Garner for selling loose cigarettes (i.e. 'loosies') in his local neighbourhood on Staten Island, restraining Garner to the point of strangulation and murdering him. As a result, Eric Garner's final words, "I Can't Breathe" thereafter became the nationwide slogan of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, although it is often overlooked that Garner was in fact working as an unlicensed vendor at the time of his death at the hands of police.

More recently still, on 25 October 2019, several black teenagers were caught up in a brawl with a group of police officers responding to a report of fare evasion at Jay St MetroTech in Brooklyn. Upon their arrival at the station, the officers were unable to locate the reported offenders and proceeded to snatch random teenagers on the station platform, starting what was variously reported as a "wild brawl" and "mêlée."¹²² In direct response to this provocation on 1 November, a coalition of anti-racist activist groups organised a mass trespass at Jay Street MetroTech under the banner of Fuck the Police (FTP): an escalation that attempted to give form to the now clamorous public disquiet over police violence on the MTA.

Accordingly, these events somewhat prefigure public unease over Elsa's arrest, and responding to the outcry, SVP's legal director Matt Shapiro was then promptly able to discover Elsa's contact details via her civil summons. Next, through their contacts in Queens, the project's organisers were then able to reach out to Elsa and offer her immediate assistance. As a result, on 11 November 2020, SVP arranged for a press conference in support of Elsa, while also inviting a number of speakers, including an array of civil rights and transit advocacy groups, such as the Riders Alliance, along with several local politicians, including the Public Advocate Jumaane Williams.

¹²² 'Video Shows Wild Subway Melee Between Cops and Teens,' *New York Post*, 26 October 2019: <https://nypost.com/2019/10/26/video-shows-wild-brooklyn-subway-melee-between-cops-and-teens/>

The press conference hence not only allowed SVP to highlight this one specific injustice against Elsa, but it also turned public attention towards the plight of women vendors in general, excluded as they are from the permit system. Elsa, who was not yet a member of SVP, was then able to explain to the assembled press, the unique vulnerabilities of being woman pushcart vendor. In this regard, Elsa's story was able to capture public interest, precisely because her concerns intersected with many of the urgent social reproduction issues faced by New Yorkers in general; namely, gentrification, police violence, racial discrimination, the abduction of undocumented people by ICE, food insecurity and finally, the underfunding of the transit system, which itself relates to low-income New Yorkers' ability to travel to work cheaply and safely.¹²³

Held at the Truxton Street entrance to Broadway Junction, SVP director Mohamed Attia initiated the press conference by providing journalists with an introduction to vending issues. In so doing, he emphasised how "elected officials need to step up and change the law so that vendors can make a living legally and safely, without being victimised by the NYPD and broken windows policing." Supported by fellow churros vendors who stood behind her with their carts, Elsa spoke next, providing a straight-forward account of the incident, having rehearsed what she would say with SVP beforehand. During the subsequent Q&A, Elsa explained that she currently felt "very nervous, stressed and emotionally devastated":

They took absolutely everything away from me, I was left crying and broken [...] They took me to an area where there are no cameras and started laughing at me. In the past the interactions have not been as violent, and they haven't taken away my merchandise. I have five children most of whom are in Ecuador and one daughter who is here in the

¹²³ For further detail on these issues see Battle, A., 'The Subway Belongs to Us,' Commune, 14 October 2018: <https://communemag.com/the-subway-belongs-to-us/>

United States. They made me feel like a *burro* (a dumb person, a donkey) who didn't know anything.

At this point Elsa had to be consoled by the other vendors, while in turn, Sofia Newman was asked to recount what she had witnessed. In so doing, Newman added her own commentary, thereby touching on many of the concerns she shares with ordinary New Yorkers:

This is what happens when five-hundred extra police officers are assigned to patrol the subways. This is what happens when poverty is criminalised and policed. This is what happens when resources are used to target vendors and people who can't afford the fare, rather than improve a dysfunctional transit system [...] This woman has made an honest living selling churros for over a decade. She is a cherished member of community, and she deserves to be protected by the law, not victimised by it.

Following Newman's testimony, various other activist groups spoke, along with politicians who offered supportive rhetoric around immigration (although some were heckled for their previous support of the police and prison expansion). As such, nearly all of the speakers highlighted how Elsa's arrest flew in the face of Mayor Bill De Blasio's earlier stated declaration that New York should be a sanctuary city.¹²⁴

After the politicians had spoken, an impromptu demonstration was held outside of the Transit District 33 office, located just to the side of the turnstiles at the entrance of the station. Here vendors and other activists remonstrated with police over their handling of the arrest. SVP vendor Maria Marin, who was both a new member and had been recently appointed to the leadership board, aggressively pushed back against the police tasked with protecting the office. In so doing, she gave a passionate defence of street vending in full view of the assembled

¹²⁴ De Blasio's announcement that New York would be a sanctuary city was made in response President Donald Trump's plan to speed the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

press, holding a placard that read: “No New Cops.” “We are workers!” she shouted, “We respect you; you *must* respect us! We are human beings, honourable individuals. You don’t need to treat us this way. Give us a ticket, but don’t steal our merchandise [...] You are hurting us!” Yet alarmingly, at the very same moment, news filtered through that a second pushcart vendor named Maria Curillio had just been arrested at Myrtle-Wyckoff station in Bushwick, just a few stops further down the line.

In the week following the press conference, SVP began a Crowdfunder for Elsa to compensate her for the confiscation of her cart and thus, the project was able to quickly raise over \$10,000 in emergency funds. Moreover, Elsa’s story was picked up by the national and international press,¹²⁵ with subsequent coverage being so widespread that it prompted a response from the mayor who was asked for comment during the Veteran’s Day Parade. Mayor de Blasio’s reply was, however, wholly unsympathetic since he unequivocally stated that Elsa had no right to sell from inside the station.

As a result, the mayor’s high-handed response, provoked a certain degree of media scrutiny, since his comments would coincide with the launch his short-lived run for the Democratic presidential nomination; an effort that if successful, would once again require him to court big real estate. Moreover, during a subsequent interview on local news channel Spectrum News NY1, de Blasio would ruefully admit that the permit system was “screwed up,” yet he demurred to answer whether this might have anything to do with him. Instead, he argued that “geographic restrictions” on vendors ought to remain in place, while vigorously asserting that small vendors like Elsa were hurting the very mom-and-pop stores “that we all love.” He then followed up by dissembling over stop-and-frisk, a practice that he is both perversely for and

¹²⁵ Aratani, L., ‘NYC police’s ‘quality of life’ strategy for subways: arrest food vendors,’ *The Guardian*, 22 November 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/22/nyc-subways-500-police-officers-vendors>

against at the same time, thereby defaulting to his typical pro-police stance, stating: “Inevitably you need some type of enforcement.”¹²⁶

As the TV interview proceeded, de Blasio continued to blame Elsa for her own arrest (despite initially having described her as a “sympathetic person” just trying to make a living); further claiming that she had been warned multiple times, before pressing the point that Elsa was in the wrong all along. “You can’t choose favourites,” he added, once again washing his hands of the incident. Nevertheless, the mayor clearly has his favourites: the NYPD who he has backed over ordinary New Yorkers time and time again. Most revealing of all, de Blasio, when defending the actions of the police, deployed the BID’s familiar talking points, while more generally absolving himself of any direct responsibility in terms of law-making and enforcement. To this end, he declared the whole business to be an “MTA issue” while knowing full well that the MTA comes under the jurisdiction of State Governor Cuomo.

De Blasio thus likes to pretend that the rules are ineluctable, while neglecting to mention that he alone vetoed the previous 2017 vending reform bill, which if passed, would have clarified vending regulations and granted affordable permits to vendors like Elsa. Moreover, by decrying the decline of local “mom-and-pop” stores, de Blasio was surely blaming street vendors for New York’s ongoing storefront vacancy crisis, which in essence is a problem created solely by the BIDs and their allies. So, while censuring Elsa for just trying to earn a living, the mayor attempted to signal that he was both race- and gender-blind, thereby pulling off a canny rhetorical double-move that admits stop-and-frisk to be inefficient from a police perspective, while redoubling his commitment to long discredited broken windows strategies (albeit at a lower intensity than the peak of 700,000 stops in one year, as it was under Bloomberg).

¹²⁶ Mayor de Blasio on the arrest of churros vendor Elsa, Spectrum News NY1: <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/inside-city-hall/2019/11/12/mayor-de-blasio-on-veterans-day-and-churro-vendor-arrest--part-1-#>

This was not the final response to Elsa's arrest however and on 22 November protestors held an emergency action known as FTP #N22 (the promotional posters for which featured a photo of Maria Curillio's arrest).¹²⁷ As such, FTP #N22 was considered to be part of an escalating strategy of contestation against police violence, while further advancing the demand that the MTA be free to use. The plan therefore was to split the protest into two portions: beginning at an initial assembly point beneath the Harriet Tubman memorial statue on the intersection of St. Nicholas and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, before marching to a second rally point at the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. building in Central Harlem. Here a balaclavaed speaker briefed the protestors on safety protocols, before the crowd headed off to a variety of locations to engage in public trespass, a tried and tested decolonial tactic.

Earlier in the week however, SVP's members had expressed a desire to attend the protest, yet because of their undocumented status, it was not entirely safe for them to engage in the high-risk, mass-trespassing portion of the event. SVP staff thus accompanied the vendors to the initial rally point, where they and their families held placards proclaiming: "More Churros Less Cops," a slogan that was also taken up by some of the FTP protestors. Eventually, several hundred protestors were to occupy the 125th St subway station, opening the turnstiles and filling the platforms. Meanwhile a splinter group marched towards the Bronx, where they occupied the Third Avenue Bridge, halting the traffic for several hours. Overall, during the protests, there were 58 arrests, with some protestors claiming that they were treated violently by the police, who almost matched them in numbers. This portion of the action was hence considered far too dangerous for SVP's vendor members to fully take part in despite their clear enthusiasm.

¹²⁷ FTP stands for both Fuck the Police and Feed the People, a reference to the social programs of the Black Panther Party. However, it should be noted that Maria Curillio was not pleased by the use of her photo by protestors since it made her feel doubly humiliated.

3.9 The Foregrounding of Women Vendors at SVP

Most remarkable about the episode of Elsa's arrest was the adoption of her cause by a wider public, since only a few months before, it would have been hard to imagine mobile vending and permit scarcity becoming a topic of public debate among New Yorkers. Yet, it was the organisational readiness of SVP that allowed the project to mount a swift response, assisting Elsa by mobilising a network of alliances in her defence. Additionally, the growing publicity provided SVP with a further opportunity to raise the permit issue as one of public concern and hence, the police mistreatment of this vulnerable Latina vendor resonated widely, precisely because Elsa's arrest was symptomatic of the many burgeoning social reproduction problems, now ubiquitously experienced by New York residents (i.e. the high cost of living, the degraded subway system, concerns about ICE and the wider trend of protest around racialised policing).

At SVP, the incident thus confirmed the need to foreground women vendors and their unmet concerns, while moreover, it was becoming ever apparent that the organisation of Latina vendors might serve as a rallying point for the vending community in general. Consequently, in early-2020, SVP would establish new chapters in the outer boroughs, hiring Leticia Ochoa as a dedicated organiser for vendors in Queens, and whose first priority would be to coordinate mobile Latina vendors working around Corona Plaza, a well-known vending location.

Favourably, Leticia's mother, Maria Crespo was a well-known vendor on Roosevelt Avenue and her cart "La Chola Cuencana" is considered to be a local landmark.¹²⁸ Accordingly, Leticia,

¹²⁸ Maria describes her vending experience in an SVP update: "As an immigrant to this country, a vendor and with limited English. I've seen and experienced police brutality. I've been arrested, summoned, had bleach thrown on my

having grown up in Queens, already had an organic connection to Latina vendors in her district. Moreover, by providing local chapters, it was hoped that SVP could better connect with pushcart vendors, tethered as they are to their local neighbourhoods by work and family commitments. It was thus anticipated that this development would allow for deeper engagement, since in the past, contact with vendors in the outer boroughs had been difficult to sustain through ordinary outreach methods.

Nonetheless, SVP's renewed focus on Latina vendors should not be accepted as simply a pivot towards one specific ethnic group, since the move was considered to be broadly compatible with the project's other campaigning goals. Yet, by organising around the women's shared concerns, SVP created an opportunity to bolster participation across the board, much as organisers had previously done in Los Angeles by first engaging Latina vendors around the issue of domestic violence. Hence, it was only after the LA campaign had fostered integral solidarity among a core group of locally situated Latinas, were organisers then able to build upon the women's subsequent victories as a way to tie in other vendor groups.

Prior to these developments however, *Peddling Uphill* had already helped establish the general aims of SVP, cementing Lift the Caps as the central plank of the project's strategy and thus prioritising vending reform as the most universal appeal that SVP could make to all vendors. Yet following on from the women's survey, during the period of my research, the Women's Committee had already begun to address the question women's empowerment, unearthing series of previously unrecognised needs, while at the same time, highlighting the degree to which Lift Caps had not been sufficient or comprehensive enough to capture the entirety of what motivates these most marginal of vendors. In this regard, the newly identified

food and more. Everything that was done to me, to other vendors or community members, hasn't stopped me from fighting for my livelihood or my community. Like many street vendors I stopped working in March. I was afraid for my health and my community. Like many people I am behind on payments."

concerns of unlicensed Latina vendors would more closely coincide with the ambitions of the NY State senate bill (S6817A) introduced by Queens Senator Jessica Ramos in 2020. As such, the newly proposed bill, which was closely modelled on LA's successful legislation, sought to completely decriminalise vending state-wide.

The state-level bill might thus be seen as part of a broader effort to protect immigrants working in public space by altogether eradicating any unnecessary contact between undocumented vendors and law enforcement. Hence, in the next chapter, I consider how the various elements of SVP's current strategy might combine, while also describing how the project's internal process was enhanced to allow the vendor members to participate more fully in decision-making at the project.

Chapter 4: Empowering the Vendors

4.0 Collective Decision Making: Campaigns, Projects and Committees

This chapter examines the development of campaigns, projects and committees at SVP, describing how these elements combine to structure the recruitment, training and retention of vendor members and it is therefore, this unique blend that duly ensures active participation at the project, binding members to the organisation and more importantly, to each other. In the first section, I describe how recent changes to the internal process at SVP, and in particular, enhancements to deliberative democracy, have helped reorient the project's evolving mission. Thereafter, I present various vendor testimonies as recorded during the hearing for Intro 1116 (Section 4.2) followed by a pair of interviews conducted with the organisers of the Women's Committee, discussing the emergent potentials for organising found among Latina vendors (see Section 4.3), before the chapter concludes with an appraisal of how the various strands of the process combined to help SVP achieve victory in January 2021, when the NYCC passed Intro 1116, fulfilling the project's major long-term goal of vending reform (Section 4.4).

The core mission of SVP is to empower street vendors by building class consciousness and leadership skills among the base and as such, empowerment relies on the vendor's ability to overcome their fear of authority, thereby building their confidence, so that they might collectively assert their rights. In this regard, the training of SVP's vendor members involves their active participation in the organisation's democratic decision-making committees and thereafter, participating in actions that stem from the project's collectively decided goals. Through this engagement, the members acquire both political education and organisational

knowledge, while fighting for just working conditions and a better quality of life. In this manner, the project hopes to build a community of vendors capable of advocating for their rights as street workers and political stakeholders of equal worth to other small businesspeople in the city.

In practice, this means raising the profile of vendors, so that they can be 'seen' and 'heard' by city officials and the public alike. Through this training, the vendors subsequently come to learn the grammar of self-advocacy and over time, they are able to develop an awareness of their own collective agency. The vendors are therefore regularly called upon to give testimony, thereby combatting negative perceptions, while creating a positive image for the profession, not only among the public, but for themselves and each other.

The work of destigmatisation is consequently an important precursor to the work organising proper, since the negative stereotypes that vendors encounter at work can often become internalised, preventing them from fully participating at the project. For instance, some native-born vendors see SVP as being an organisation exclusively for 'rightless' immigrants and as such, not appropriate for them. Others, because of entrepreneurial pride, do not always see themselves as anything less than completely self-sufficient. Yet, by combatting these perceptions, SVP attempts to raise the confidence of its vendor members in the hope of developing a shared sense of occupational dignity. Navigating and mitigating these tensions, however, means a continual reassessment of SVP's goals, if the organisation is to remain resilient, relevant and ready to meet changing conditions.

One such reassessment occurred in early-2020, when SVP's director Mohamed Attia and co-director Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez sought to reorganise SVP's internal decision-making

process, as part of an effort to reinvigorate participation among the membership.¹²⁹ Thus, to get the ball rolling, Carina asked the Campaign Committee to come up with a series of fresh goals for the year and shortly thereafter, organised a special general meeting, whereby these renewed goals could be discussed and deliberated upon by ordinary members.

Before now, at any given monthly meeting, the vendors would typically sit in rows facing the speaker, only standing to ask occasional questions. Although informative, this could at times feel quite staid, with the members typically listening, while staff and leadership did all the talking. At this special general meeting however, the vendors were instead invited to sit in circles, so that they might debate the committee's proposals. As such, I counted at least four tables for Spanish speakers, one for English speakers and another combined table for Chinese and Arabic speakers, with over 60 members in attendance at the meeting in total.

After debating the renewed goals, the members were then asked to elaborate, while contributing their own ideas. This workshop activity clearly enthused the vendors and as a result, each group generated further suggestions. These included new methods of recruitment, a heat map to show enforcement hot spots, training to instruct vendors on how to take credit cards and plans to actively protest police harassment. Each table then prioritised their proposals, before presenting them back to the group and thereafter, holding a vote. Accordingly, the vendors decided that in coming year, SVP should: (i) push for the decriminalisation of state-wide street vending; (ii) fight for more open streets; (iii) pushback against racialised policing; (iv) continue to pressure elected officials for legal reform; (v) advocate for vendors to be recognised as small businesspeople; and (vi) continue to build unity among the vendors and their allies.

¹²⁹ The staff retreat was part of an ongoing effort by SVP's directors Mohamed and Carina to update aspects of the process. Accordingly, changes to staffing at project were also mirrored by a reorganisation of the vendor member's various committees. Moreover, with the establishment of the Women's Committee, new organisers were hired to address specific organisational goals, such as the building of neighbourhood chapters in Queens.

Although some of these goals were simply a reaffirmation of existing SVP priorities, more importantly, they signalled a reinvigoration of the core membership, who were clearly excited by the introduction of the state-wide bill. While also enhancing internal democracy, the special general meeting also served as a confidence-building exercise, designed to engage the membership more fully. At the end of workshop, SVP's staff and leadership were then able to turn to the members and legitimately say: "These are *your* goals and ideas!"

By making the project's decision-making process more transparent, an equitable balance was struck between the concerns of staff, vendor leaders and the general membership. Moreover, as Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez would declare: "We have become better at decision making!" This was certainly an improvement on previous meetings, during which members sometimes voiced dissatisfaction, either about the direction of campaigns or their lengthy duration. Hence, this frustration was often the result of members only having partial information, leading to confusion about organisational goals and outcomes. The renewed decision-making structure, therefore, allowed for improved lines of communication, granting members the capacity to directly comment on decisions made by the project's various committees and thereby giving them a sense of ownership over the direction of the organisation.

Co-extensive with this re-engagement at the level of ordinary members, was a reappraisal by SVP's staff, who developed a parallel set of ambitions, that would allow them to better serve the vendors members in pursuit of their chosen goals. Thus, as the result of a daylong retreat, the staff settled on a series of new priorities for the coming year, which included: the integration of women's empowerment within SVP's core process; a renewed emphasis on vendors as street workers within the project's messaging; the development of rapid responses to vendor emergencies; the strengthening of external coalitions with other organisations and related industries; the further development of self-sufficient local chapters; and a renewed organisational emphasis on vending as a local economy that reinvests in the

community.

Furthermore, staff were able to agree that each component of the overall strategy should operate at a different scale. For example, the Save Our Spots campaign was designed as an effort to protect local neighbourhood vending locations, thereby deescalating tensions between vendors, the police and storefronts. Meanwhile, at a citywide scale, Lift the Caps would continue to promote vending reform (and as such, address issues of criminal justice, informality, civic engagement, worker's rights and access to public space). Yet, over and above this, the proposed 'decrim' bill would, if passed, operate at the level of the New York State legislature and hence, while decriminalisation addresses many of the same concerns as Lift the Caps, it points towards large-scale systemic change since it directly addresses issues of national concern such as immigration.

Alongside these big-ticket items, SVP's staff also identified a series of smaller-scale projects with the potential to speak to a wider gamut of issues. The first of these was the 74th St Project: a collaboration between SVP, the office of Senator Jessica Ramos and the MTA, who together came up with a plan to lease unused shop space in subway stations for use as secure vending locations. Next was a plan to support the New York census count, thereby ensuring the statistical visibility of vendors as a community. Although perhaps most significant, was the development of the Women's Committee (see Section 4.3), a project deemed crucial to reinvigorating participation among the Latina vendors and beyond.

By introducing a variety of new deliberative forums, project was thus able to overcome its prior organisational inertia, generated as it was, by an almost exclusive focus on the long-running campaign to Lift the Caps. In the following sections, I will therefore not only examine how SVP engaged the vendor members around this most universal of issues (i.e. by recording and analysing vendor testimony during the hearing for Intro 1116), but in addition, also include interviews with the organisers of the Women's Committee to explain how, through the intensive

one-on-one work of women vendors, SVP was able to foster solidarity in earnest.

4.1 Vending Reform Bill Intro 1116 and The Rally to Lift the Caps

In late-2018, the vending reform bill Intro 1116 was reintroduced by the Committee for Consumer Affairs and Business Licensing, after the original bill had been ‘laid over’ following its veto by Mayor Bill de Blasio. However, a second attempt was proposed by the bill’s principal sponsor, Margaret S. Chin (District 1, Chinatown), a long-time supporter of SVP. As such, this package of reforms was intended to: “expand the availability of food vendor permits, [create] an office of street vendor enforcement, and [establish] a street vendor advisory board.”¹³⁰

Consequently, if passed, Intro 1116 would amend the municipal charter of New York, along with the Administrative Code that governs the ordinances, rules and regulations relevant to vending laws and most significantly, allow for a phased expansion of the existing number of available permits.

These newly created “supervisory licenses” would therefore be introduced incrementally over the next ten years with the intention of deflating the price of illegal permits, thereby eradicating the underground market altogether. In addition, the new regulations would require at least one licensee to be always present on the cart, preventing the subcontracting of work through the illegal renting of permits. To administer this, an exclusive new vending enforcement agency would be established, thereby getting rid of the regulatory overlap that currently exists between the NYPD and other city agencies. While in addition, the bill would also create a street vendor advisory board to mediate between the vendors, storefronts, community groups, labour

¹³⁰ The details and transcript of Intro 1116 are accessible here: <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/>

unions, property owners and New York city agencies. Accordingly, the purpose of this new advisory board would be to clarify “unclear or unnecessary provisions,” while allowing vendors to have a say in the drafting of new regulations.

Back in 2017 there had been significant opposition to the bill from the BIDs and their allies, who in turn put pressure on Mayor de Blasio to veto the proposed legislation. Hence, in line with powerful private interests, the mayor subsequently made the unfounded claim that vending reform was being rushed through without any sufficient public consultation. In response however, SVP blamed the mayor for needlessly holding up the bill, since before now de Blasio had rarely used his executive privilege to block any legislation. In fact, the only other conspicuous occasion on which the mayor’s veto had been used was to prevent the criminalisation of police chokeholds, whereby de Blasio bowed to pressure from the so-called police unions, following the murder of Eric Garner in 2014.¹³¹

Despite this flagrant abuse of process, de Blasio more recently hinted that he might soften his position on the expansion of permits, while at the same time expressing familiar concerns about the harm vending was supposedly doing to brick-and-mortar businesses. Favourably for SVP however, the mayor’s veto could be overridden if two-thirds of NYCC council members voted to do so and subsequently, the following year, Intro 1116 was reintroduced. To this end, SVP worked hard during 2018-19 to influence council members and by early 2020 they had convinced 30 of the 51 legislators to support the bill.

As a result, a hearing was scheduled at New York City Hall to allow both proponents and opponents of the bill to give public testimony. Moreover, it was also an opportunity for council members to question city agencies about proposed implementation. To prepare for the hearing,

¹³¹ Goodman, J., ‘Mayor De Blasio vows to veto chokehold bill,’ *New York Times* 15 January 2013: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/14/nyregion/mayor-de-blasio-vows-to-veto-chokehold-bill.html>

SVP consequently needed to rally its members and supporters in sufficient numbers, since this was a rare opportunity for the vendors to express their grievances in front of public officials; an effort that involved several weeks of phone-banking by office staff, interns and vendor leaders, who had to call every single member on the database to explain the importance of showing up.

To achieve this however, multiple calls had to be made to each member to ensure their attendance. In my experience, it was easy to get members to say, "Yes, I'll come to the rally," but since the vendor members lead busy lives, repeated follow-up calls were often required. It was during this period that Tirtho and I conducted daily outreach, hoping to convince members and non-members alike to give testimony. To this end, we designed flyers and gave out Day-Glo rally stickers for the vendors to put on their carts, thereby announcing the hearing. By and large, the vendors were keen to talk about the bill, although some remained reticent, due to the mayor's previous interference. It therefore often took extra effort to convince the vendors that this was a unique opportunity to raise their voice and consequently, we spent as much time as was necessary to win their assurances.

Alongside this show of strength from the vendors, it was also important to gather public support, so SVP director Sean Basinski came up with the idea of photographing customers holding up supportive placards. These images were then uploaded to social media, tagging any wavering politicians that SVP was hoping to target and subsequently, over the next few weeks, I went out each lunchtime to meet as many members of the public as I could, asking them to pose with a sign that read "I SUPPORT STREET VENDORS and INTRO #1116." Ironically, the only customers to decline to be photographed worked for the mayor's office, although, in private they all confided that, they did in fact support vending reform.¹³²

¹³² As a result of this campaign to shame reluctant legislators, Francisco Moya, a council member for Queens relented, saying that he would vote for the bill if only SVP would "stop @'ing" him on social media.

Perhaps more influential, were the walking tours that SVP arranged with council members, inviting them to walk their own districts while meeting local vendors. As a result, this was a highly effective strategy and in one instance, council member Vanessa Gibson (District 16) signed up to vote for the bill only a day after meeting vendors in her own district. On the downside however, arranging these walking tours was very time-consuming and not all NYCC members were available. Yet, ultimately this tactic was to pay off, swinging key votes and as such, it demonstrates the ability of SVP's vendor members to be convincing self-advocates.

Meanwhile, the project's senior staff organised media coverage ahead of the hearing, developing a series of talking points around the issue of vending reform to raise public awareness. The project was assisted in this task by Ryan Devlin, who gathered statistical evidence and archival material to enhance SVP's media strategy, while in addition, the project called upon academics and experts in the field to give further testimony. Meanwhile, seeking support from further afield, Sean Basinski arranged for Los Angeles council member Curren Price to fly to New York and address the Consumer Affairs (CA) committee. As it was, the decriminalisation of vending in LA represented a huge shift in public policy and during his visit, Price would explain to the committee how New York's vending regulations had been used as a negative example during LA's deliberations (i.e. "a case study in how not to legislate").

Thankfully, all of this preparation would pay off and on the morning 11 April 2020, hundreds of vendors turned up to rally at City Hall, queuing outside in their distinctive yellow 'Vendor Power!' caps and t-shirts. They were clearly enthusiastic to be gathered in such large numbers, helping themselves to free doughnuts, provided by a nearby coffee cart. In attendance were current members, long-time friends of the project and new faces who had been encouraged to come to the rally by SVP's outreach efforts. Yet, moreover, there was a joyful and festive atmosphere, since many of the vendors had never experienced such a large gathering of co-workers before. Some vendors even wore national costume, representing their

various communities, further contributing to the celebratory mood.

Also invited to the rally were the local media, including Spanish-speaking channels such as Telemundo 47, who interviewed the vendors as they queued to go through security. Once inside the perimeter, SVP leaders Heleodora, Eliana and Poli mustered the vendors on the steps in regimented lines, telling them to hold up their signs and slogans for the press. A large banner painted by Bogdan, a Central Park artist was stretched across the front of the crowd, reading “Support NYC’s Smallest Businesses aka Street Vendors.” In addition, each of the vendors held up their own handwritten signs, including giant cut-out hot dogs and coffee cups bearing the slogan: “More Permits, Less Fines.” Meanwhile, other smaller handwritten signs were hung around necks of vendors, bearing messages such as: “I’ve been waiting a lifetime for a permit,” “Vendors are small businesses” and “I love Immigrant NY.”

After listening to speeches from Mohammed Attia and council members Margaret S. Chin and Carlos Menchaca, the vendors then queued through the foyer of City Hall, filing into the Council Chamber, while also filling the upstairs gallery with a sea of yellow baseball caps. Meanwhile, the opponents of SVP, could only occupy the front two rows of the chamber, conspicuously not mingling or sharing the excitement of the vendors. Awed by the setting, many of the vendors who had previously been reluctant to speak, then realised that anybody could give testimony and as a result, eagerly volunteered their names to the sergeant-at-arms, who struggled to transcribe them correctly: “It’s like the United Nations up in here,” he remarked. Very obviously, this was a moment of empowerment for the vendors, who were more used to being insulted and disregarded by the city. An African American merchandise vendor who was sitting next to me seemed overjoyed, commenting, how it was “wild” to see so many vendors show up at the hearing: “I regret not preparing anything to say,” he told me.

Yet, as is evident in the next section, while the hearing for Intro 1116 was roundly a success, there are clear ideological tensions within the vendors’ given testimonies, which are

somewhat redolent of the concessionary nature of the performance of non-citizen citizenship that Gordon earlier identified and critiqued (see Section 1.2). Evidently, whenever performing non-citizen citizenship in front of lawmakers, SVP's vendor members are prone to make the rights-based claim that they are New York's smallest businesses. So, while SVP certainly rehearsed its vendors members ahead of the hearing, these statements should not necessarily be read entirely as the subjective views of the vendors, since they rarely refer to themselves in such entrepreneurial terms.

As mentioned in Section 4.3, SVP organiser Lisa states that the vendors very rarely consider themselves to be entrepreneurs, yet by contrast, they do positively identify as immigrants working on the lowest rungs, just struggling to keep their families together. Likewise, during my research there were many instances when the vendors actively identified as workers, such as when, during the protest against Elsa's arrest, vendor leader Maria Marin confronted transit police, shouting "We are workers! You *must* respect us!" Furthermore, during the FTP protests, it was also apparent that the vendors were keen to join in with what was clearly an exciting sequence of working-class rebellion against police repression. Hence, while vendors do want to be perceived as legitimate citizens with the right to operate their own businesses, there were also many instances, such as at Women's Strike NYC, when SVP's vendor members strongly identified, not only with other workers in New York, but with a larger wave of rent, work and housing struggles worldwide.

As both prior SVP surveys have already identified, most street vendors live a life of near subsistence, therefore, it should perhaps be understood that while SVP does promote vendors as workers, it also, for the purposes of policy reform, trains the vendors to advocate for themselves in line with mainstream US values and ideological constructs such as the entrepreneurial American dream. Consequently, as organiser Stella goes on to point out, there are still conversations to be had among the membership about the wider political purpose of

SVP, especially if the project aspires, ultimately to the unionisation of all street vendors and the full decriminalisation of the industry.

As Abel Valenzuela (2010) states, there are strong pressures for immigrant workers to conform to not only US values, but also bourgeois ones and hence, for the purposes of political expediency, worker centres often feel compelled to engage in entrepreneurial platitudes. At the same time, however, New York's hustling street vendors are of course "survivalist or disadvantage entrepreneurs" to use a phrase coined by Valenzuela and hence, much like the day laborers in Valenzuela's account, most find that vending as a profession appeals to their overall "sense of being," especially when formal employment opportunities are not always available to them.

So, while many of the vendors that gave testimony at the hearing voice an aspiration for their children to enter the so-called US middle class, there also exists a pervasive sense realism about on which side of the class divide they sit; a limitation that was only further reinforced by their opponents at the hearing, when building owners, storefront businesses and some of the more privileged native-born vendors lined up to disparage them. Likewise, SVP has in the past struggled to make an alliance with the leadership of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), because in New York the grocery union also represents bodega and small supermarket owners who often complain of unfair competition from the vendors. The line between the vendors and those who oppose them is thus underlined at every turn, making the vendors acutely aware of their class position within New York's existing neoliberal order.

Hence, while the battlelines drawn across the city have never been clearer, it was evident to me, while working at SVP, that there is still plenty of consciousness-raising work to be done at the project to make these contradictions more apparent. However, in 2021 when SVP conducted organisational work around Corona Plaza after the early waves of the pandemic, the vendors in this location became increasingly aware that, through joint association, they are much

stronger when they band together as street workers. As Mayra Condo, who runs the Tacos al Gusto food cart, states, “I see a lot of [unity], a lot of organization. The vendors don't feel as fearful as before. We have some sense of calmness when we come to sell [...] we [don't] have to be on the lookout.”¹³³

Here Mayra gets to the heart of what the vendors require: basic yet reliable market access to the means of the subsistence; something which was practically achieved by vendors coming together in Corona Plaza, and winning for themselves a collective stake in regulating the very public space on which their work relies (see Section 4.4 for a fuller account). As a result, the vendors in this location now see each other as stakeholders of equal worth, who through their unity avoided eviction from plaza by local storefront owners who were concerned about the influx of new vendors.

4.2 Vendor Testimony at the Hearing for Intro 1116

In this section, I examine the testimonies of SVP's vendor members, presented at the hearing for Intro 1116 in April 2020. As such, the hearing was an opportunity for the vendors to marshal their arguments in public, thereby demonstrating that they too can be formidable political actors. By unpicking the justifications of their opponents, the vendors were consequently able to repudiate the claims of the business community who turned up with the intention of waylaying reform. I include a sample of these representations, therefore, to show how in real time, the vendors were able to counter adversarial arguments and as a result, they

¹³³ Interview here, Gonella C. 'A Beacon of Hope': 3 years after COVID-19 devastated Queens, Corona Plaza becomes bustling market,' *Gothamist*, 22 March 2023: <https://gothamist.com/news/a-beacon-of-hope-3-years-after-covid-19-devastated-queens-corona-plaza-becomes-bustling-market>

more than adequately performed the role of non-citizen citizenship (as described by Jennifer Gordon, see Section 1.2), while laying bare the distortions and double standards of their opponents. It was in these moments that the vendors were most impressive, using the occasion to test their collective power.

The hearing however revealed tensions in the types of rhetoric available to vendors, since, as Gordon has already explained, worker centres must sometimes use concessionary language when addressing legislators and as a result, during the hearing, the vendors had to make their address at several discursive levels, hoping to win recognition, not only as legitimate street workers, but also as immigrants, parents, taxpayers and small businesses. Yet, despite these entanglements, SVP's vendor members were pugnacious and acquitted themselves consistently well. The account of their testimony is as follows.

Starting at 10 pm, the hearing for Intro 1116 would commence under the oversight of council member Margaret S. Chin (1st District, Chinatown) speaking on behalf of the Committee for Consumer Affairs and Business Licensing. Chin begins the proceedings by praising the efforts of street vendors, explaining that their work is a time-honoured city tradition: "Street vendors in New York City have contributed significantly to the vibrancy of the city streets and often offer food [...] in underserved areas that are considered food deserts."¹³⁴ It later became apparent during the proceedings, however, that "vibrancy" is a contested and coded term, used by both sides when making their arguments. Hence, in the case of SVP, "vibrancy" refers to the ethnic and cultural diversity that vendors bring to the neighbourhoods in which they live and work. Whereas, the term was reversed by the BIDs, to mean gentrification and cultural devitalisation, implying that "vibrant" streets are those which are free from crime and by

¹³⁴ Hearing Transcript Int_1116_A 4/11/19, p. 8. Accessible here: <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3686667&GUID=A0683818-66E6-4651-8B31-3D65EE4D61B1>

inference, immigrant vendors.

Following her introduction, Chin next describes the four main vendor types, listing the services that each provide, while explaining how, on occasion, there are “bad actors,” who are sometimes seen as unfair competition by the brick-and-mortars and subsequently, become subject to quality-of-life complaints.¹³⁵ In addition, Chin points out that the complexity of current legislation confuses everybody: “Vendors, residents and enforcement officers, alike.”¹³⁶ Yet, as she goes on to explain, the current cap on permits also contributes to the prevailing state of legal confusion and hence, existing legislation is directly responsible for creating the illegal market for permits. Following Chin’s introduction, council member Carlos Menchaca (District 38, Sunset Park) welcomes both the vendors and spokespeople from the BIDs, explaining that all voices will be heard. He further reminds everyone, however, that vending in New York is a venerable tradition and as such, has long been considered an economic pathway for low-income immigrants, thereby allowing them to assimilate and become full citizens. Although, as he sees it, the current vending regulations disrupt the smooth flow of legitimate market activity, making “both compliance and enforcement difficult to follow or execute.”¹³⁷

Hereafter Menchaca expands his complaint, describing how, as non-citizens, the vendors are already having to deal with the “toxic stress” emanating both from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the federal government. As such, he considers the current vending regulations to be completely at odds with New York’s status as a “sanctuary city.”¹³⁸ He then goes on to describe how in his home district of Sunset Park, he has been able to get all parties to work together, demonstrating that cooperative relationships are possible when all

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

sides are willing. Thus, to conclude, Menchaca declares that: “The system is broken, we want to fix that, and it is time.”¹³⁹

Next to speak is council member Ydanis Rodriguez (District 10), who believes that vending in its current state is an unsafe profession, while more positively pointing to the recent decriminalisation of vending in Los Angeles, stating that it is a workable example that New York should follow: “Los Angeles has made it clear that street vendors are vital to the city,” he states.¹⁴⁰ Yet to achieve any progress, he is certain that New York will first have to rid itself of the underground market for permits.

After these opening remarks, the council clerk then introduces the legislation, before swearing in the committee and calling for initial testimony from the various city agencies tasked with enforcing vending regulation. The first panel is therefore comprised of representatives from the Department of Health (DOH), the Department of Transport (DOT) and Consumer Affairs (CA). Their role at the hearing is to answer questions about the implementation of the bill and further report on the impact of the proposed changes. First up is Deputy Commissioner Corrine Schiff (DOH) who explains that if new permits are going to be issued, then new commissary spaces will also have to be provided for the safe operation of carts; a problem, she claims, since garage space in Manhattan is prohibitively expensive. Casey Adams of Consumer Affairs is up next. His department licences 80,000 businesses in New York and as such, CA is charged with enforcing the cap on vending permits. Adams goes on to assert however, that the department has no due authority to increase the total number of permits in New York, while at the same time underplaying his own agency’s responsibility for the safety of vendors. Michelle Craven, assistant commissioner of Cityscape and Franchises (DOT) also raises objections, saying that

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

the city's congested streets are already under pressure from vehicles and tourists. Hence, her concern is that if the proposed legislation were to be passed, new vending spots would have to be selected to allow pedestrian traffic to flow freely.

The city agencies are then cross-examined by the committee, yet the focus remains on the technicalities of cart placement (i.e. legal distances from subways entrances, doorways and bus-stops, etc.). While these technical details are pertinent to implementation, they are only minor practicalities when compared to the permit issue. This excursus, therefore, prompts Ydanis Rodriguez to make an intervention, before bringing the hearing back to more pressing matters, by asking how the city will address the issue of the black market for permits. Lindsay Greene, Senior Advisor to the Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development, therefore, attempts to answer this, claiming to have beefed up enforcement in this area, while admitting that they are having trouble deterring the illegal renting of permits. Rodriguez is somewhat annoyed by Greene's passive reply, responding: "Do you recognise there is a crisis—that there are situations in the industry where individuals are renting [out] a number of permits?" "Yes, I do!" Greene replies. However, Rodriguez then presses her, asking about the total number of recent arrests for illegal permit renting. "I don't have those specific figures," Greene responds sheepishly¹⁴¹ and at this point, gives way, gesturing that the NYPD might better know the precise number.

Hence, the purpose of Rodriguez's line of questioning is to highlight the hypocrisy of city administrators, since it is readily apparent that, while they are efficient in pursuing minor vending infractions, conversely, they do nothing to bring to account those who profit from the black market. The sergeant-at-arms then swears in Michael Clark from NYPD Legislative Affairs, who ruefully admits to not "having the data on enforcement violations on the street." This admission

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 49-50.

lays bare that while the NYPD are keen to harass vendors in their daily work, the city keeps absolutely no data on the illegal renting of permits.¹⁴²

Rodriguez's frustration is palpable: "Do you recognise there are people charging thousands for dollars [to rent] a permit every year?" In response, Lindsay Greene admits, "We have heard that, yes."¹⁴³ This raises laughter in the chamber, since the existence of the black market is apparent to everyone in New York. In reply, Rodriguez suggests that since none of the agencies have an answer, it should be obvious to everyone that the city turns a blind eye to illicit permit brokers.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, he states that he has repeatedly highlighted the issue with the DOT and NYPD, but ultimately gets "no action." To conclude, Rodriguez states that vendors are an "icon of our city" but feels that, as an administration, New York has failed these small businesspeople.

Similarly, council member Karen Koslowitz (District 29) considers it shameful that the current administration has not done any better than Rudy Giuliani's. Likewise, Helen Rosenthal (District 6) complains that the lack of administrative oversight demonstrates that vending enforcement is beyond dysfunctional, while moreover, the situation that the various agencies describe represents "some sort of ideal that certainly doesn't work in practice."¹⁴⁵ She believes furthermore that, as a result of the general abnegation of responsibility, the city agencies cannot meaningfully claim to protect the vendors at work, something that it is specifically within the

¹⁴² In 2022, Greene was appointed by Mayor Eric Adams to be CEO of the real estate company Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation (BNYDC).

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁴⁴ Council member Rodriguez, who was born in the Dominican Republic, here drew an analogy with US chauvinism aboard: "I believe that we have decided to not look at the situation. It's like [when] we go into Latin America and talk about corruption in other places [but this time] it's us. We are not doing enforcement." Ibid., p. 51-2.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

remit of Consumer Affairs to provide. Brad Lander (District 39) then follows up by saying that the city is only able to obstruct implementation due to a 50-year-old law designed to restrict competition. In Lander's view, this statute conveniently allows administrators to maintain an indifference towards the plight of the vendors, while continuing sit on their hands.

The committee then requests the testimony of Jim Caras, special advisor to the Manhattan Borough President, who again draws comparisons to the failures of previous administrations. As Caras opines: "In the 80s Mayor Koch threw out all the street regulations in Manhattan [while in the] 90s Mayor Giuliani closed almost all the streets with very little review. We see where these approaches got us."¹⁴⁶ Instead, he recommends a series of pilot programs to foster cooperation between the BIDs, community boards and vendors, allowing all parties to figure out new placements. Furthermore, he believes these negotiations should be followed by the incremental lifting of current restrictions. Caras thus concludes his testimony by stating that the current standoff, should no longer be considered "a zero-sum game between street vendors and fixed location businesses."¹⁴⁷

After the various agencies have given testimony, it is then the turn of the SVP members to speak. First to provide testimony is Maria Marin, a newly joined member, who reads her statement in Spanish but has a translator provided for her by the city. Originally from Mexico, Maria introduces herself as a working mother, tamale seller and cancer survivor. She states that if she had a permit, her life would be "totally different" and as such, it would allow her to concentrate on her job, while at the same time avoiding the police. She then turns to the members of the committee to make a direct appeal: "I know you have the power to make a change and the only thing that I am asking is [...] help us, the mobile vendors. We're not

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

different people [from] you. We are people who want to work, and we want [our] permits.”¹⁴⁸

Typical of the testimony given by smaller vendors, Maria’s plaintive yet forthright appeal is highly emotive. She emphasises that she is a hard-working mother who is prepared to economically contribute, yet in addition invokes her equality as human being, shaming those who would disrespect vendors. The tenor of Maria’s testimony is thus qualitatively different to the more technical and administrative arguments advanced so far, cutting across the formality of the proceedings, while visibly moving the attentive legislators.

On the same panel is Mohammed Awad, a long-serving SVP member who works around Hudson Yards as a halal vendor. He explains that sixteen years ago, when he first moved to New York from Egypt, he began by working as a vendor in Lower Manhattan. At that time, he was operating without a permit and as a result, had to deal with the underground permit market. “I paid almost \$25,000 every two years to use someone else’s permit,” Mohammed protests. “Do you think this is fair?”¹⁴⁹ This is a strong rhetorical strategy since none of the council members would ever condone illegal activity, yet in practice, this is exactly what city does whenever denying vendors the legal right to work. As the spokespeople for the various city agencies have just demonstrated, there is uniform silence among officials about the illegal market. Confirming his legitimacy as a vendor however, Mohammed reminds everyone that he pays business taxes and therefore, conforms to the definition of a small business as stipulated by the state comptroller. In so doing, he precisely points out an important double standard, whereby the city treats street vendors and brick-and-mortar retailers completely differently.¹⁵⁰

Mohamed then uses the remainder of his time to make a more comprehensive appeal,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 115-6.

¹⁵⁰ See Section 131 of the Economic Development Law: <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/economic/small-business-nys-2019.pdf>

describing a wider ecology of Egyptian vendors who work around Hudson Yards. He explains that this community supports nine families in total, before adding how, like other immigrant vendors, he aspires for his children to go to college. This appeal provides moral leverage since the expansion of permits would mitigate much of the in-work poverty that many vending families experience, thereby advancing their prospects. Mohamed thus concludes his testimony by invoking the American dream, emphasising that he too shares the same values as other immigrant New Yorkers.

As such, the national ethos is invoked on all sides during the hearing, since this civic ideal is clearly flexible enough to suffer multiple perspectival interpretations, invoked as it is by both the vendors and their opponents alike. Replete with entrepreneurial overtones, the 'dream' consequently serves as a guiding principle to help orient the debate, while more generally, allowing the vendors to query their exclusions. Accordingly, Mohamed decries how his "big dream" continues to remain unrealized since the current wait for a permit is estimated to be 28 years. "I am 37 years old right now," he declares, "So, maybe they are going to give it to me after I'm 60 years old. I am 15 years in this job and I'm not even on the waiting list." In this manner, Mohamed underlines the multi-generational wait for permits, stressing to the committee that they have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do the right thing.

Next to speak is Mohammed Attia, who not only provides testimony as the director of SVP, but also draws on his own experiences as a newly arrived vendor from Egypt. He says that from the outset, he "had to deal with the underground market and pay somebody lots of dollars [because of] an arbitrary law that was made back in [...] 1983."¹⁵¹ While more broadly, Attia contends that vendors are unsupported as small businesspeople and as such, NYC Small Business Services (SBS) has "nothing to offer [...] no classes, no programmes. Nothing." To

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 118.

this Attia adds, “instead of supporting these hard-working immigrants, the city agencies issue vendors on average 12,000 summonses a year.” By highlighting the criminalisation of vendors, Attia directly attacks New York’s claim to be a sanctuary city. He says that the designation is simply meaningless while undocumented vendors are daily subjected to racist enforcement. To underscore this inequity, he reminds the committee that back in 2017 it was a group supported by millionaires who blocked vending reform.¹⁵²

Returning to the question of the permit brokerage system, Carlos Menchaca asks SVP’s vendor members if the permits proposed under the new system are directly connected to an individual, rather than just the cart. Attia replies that nobody will be interested in buying illegal permits once fresh ones are issued under the vendor’s own name. At present, unused permits are recycled through the black market, yet as Attia states, once this loophole is closed any remaining permits will simply lapse back to the city before being reissued to a specific individual. From now on, he states “the real vendor will be on the permit [and] not someone who lives in Florida, Egypt or Greece.”¹⁵³ Direct ownership of a permit will accordingly be monumental, since it would net food vendors an extra \$25,000 income; or to put it another way, for most vendors it would be “a dream come true.”

Silent until now, council member Peter Koo (District 20, Flushing) suddenly becomes interested in the topic of the underground market yet seems perplexed that illegal activity is being conducted in plain sight. Attia therefore patiently explains to Koo how the permit broker is simply a middleman between the vendor and permit holder and as such, they are synonymous with the illegal market. Despite this explanation, however, Koo remains puzzled, so Attia educates him about how, under normal circumstances, the vendor will never actually get to

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 118-9

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 129-130.

meet the original permit holder. Koo then asks Attia if he knows of any permit holders who work their own carts? Attia replies that he knows quite few (“around 10 to 20 percent”), adding however, that the illegal brokers are not easy to catch, simply because there is no transactional paper-trail, no receipts and therefore, “no IRS expense claims.” This confuses Koo further, who fails to grasp that, this is not simply a question of straightforward illegality and accordingly, his attitude is redolent of many legislators, who until now have struggled to appreciate how existing regulations shape the market, while at the same time, presuming the vendors to be responsible for their own predicament.

Once the first panel of vendors has finished giving testimony it is then turn of the BID associations, community boards, retailers and restaurateurs.¹⁵⁴ By this stage, the BIDs have largely come to accept that that street vendors are an abiding part of the city’s economy, yet by lingering on technicalities, they hope to waylay proceedings; an admission perhaps, that they have lost the moral argument. Instead, the BIDs would prefer to focus on reasonableness, since they know that any direct attack on vending as a profession might appear to be anti-immigrant. So, while paying lip-service to the principles of the free market, the BIDs and their allies share an unalloyed resentment of vendors and as a result, their stance can only be described as prejudicial.

For example, when Gladys Orduna gives testimony, she claims that street vendors negatively impact her parents’ family restaurant. Prior to this however, there has already been some debate about whether storefronts and vendors compete directly. Orduna duly complains, therefore, that vendors in general represent unfair competition, because “rents are getting higher and storefronts are closing.”¹⁵⁵ Yet this argument is non-sequitur, since while it is true

¹⁵⁴ I will compress this portion of the testimony since there was a fair amount of repetition.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

that high commercial rents harm the profitability of restaurants, the exorbitant levels of rent inflation that small businesses suffer under are a direct result of the ever-widening rent-gap (see Neil Smith 1979).¹⁵⁶ The economic pressures experienced by New York restaurants therefore, have nothing to do with the vendors and consequently, Orduna's argument apparently rests on a false premise, demonstrating how the brick-and-mortars will often argue against their own best interests, punching down, rather than taking issue with big real estate.

Subsequently, during her remaining testimony, Orduna becomes quite flustered, since there is a strong implication that, by opposing vending reform, retailers are racially discriminating against the vendors themselves. Anticipating such an accusation, she therefore feels obligated to point out to her own credentials as an immigrant. This comes off as a clumsy attempt to offset that which seems more obvious; she disapproves of working-class immigrants wanting to pursue their own version of the American dream. Moreover, this suspicion is later proven, when she openly declares it to be unfair that her father's former employees should be allowed to directly compete with the family restaurant. "One of the guys that used to work for my father has three vending trucks now," she complains, "because [this guy] is also doing the black market and he is doing very good. I'm not against nobody here. I just want this to be fair."¹⁵⁷ Judging by the reaction in the chamber however, most consider this argument unseemly, since Orduna's version of 'fairness' appears to be a peculiarly partial version of the dream, privileging the right of owners to exploit immigrant workers, while in return, foreclosing on their ability to exit wage labour. This would appear to be borne out when, in her concluding remarks, Orduna invokes her own limited version of the dream, saying "I'm really sad to see, what was once the

¹⁵⁶ Smith, N., 'Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 45:4, 538-548, 1979.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.156.

American dream of a Mexican immigrant [...] my dad, go out of business.”¹⁵⁸

Later in the day however, SVP leader Eliana Jaramillo spots the incoherence of Orduna’s argument: “[We vendors] don’t have nobody to pay to do the job and they have the possibility to pay others,” she says.¹⁵⁹ Here Eliana repudiates the false narrative put forth by the BIDs about how mom-and-pop stores are being put out of business by unfair competition from the vendors. Instead, Eliana points to their real advantage, which is the ability of restaurants to hire and exploit low-wage immigrants in their kitchens, something that the vendors could never afford to do.

The BIDs and their allies however continue to lean on this discriminatory narrative throughout the hearing, with some speakers imagining fictional scenarios, whereby customers and tourists are put off coming into their establishments by the mere presence vendors on the sidewalk. Meanwhile, others complain that vendors negatively affect the “pedestrian experience” by supposedly upsetting traffic flows. Andrew Rigie from the Restaurant Trade Association is even upset by the vendors’ perceived mobility. “They can just move from location to location,”¹⁶⁰ he complains, even though in reality food permits are tied to specific spots. Yet, despite the dissembling, the BIDs and their allies are never able to openly state why the vendors should be denied market access and instead, they studiously avoid admitting what they really think: the presence of immigrant vendors negatively affects land values.

So, while the BIDs carefully avoid the specific type of broken windows rhetoric preferred by the mayor, they instead deploy the term “vibrancy” in a coded manner whenever discussing the vitality of New York real estate. For example, Robert J Benfatto, Chair of the New York City

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p.156.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 262.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 143.

BID association claims: “We believe that street vendors add a wonderful vibrancy to our neighbourhoods,” yet in the next breath, he promotes the negative view that vendors represent unfair competition for “tax-paying brick-and-mortar storefront businesses.”¹⁶¹ More inventively perhaps, Michelle Birnbaum, the co-chair of Community Board 8 (Upper East Side) is keen to suggest that vending is a backward practice that does not fit with gentrification; stating that Intro 1116 and its companion bills “are not bills for the 21st Century,” thereby offering the coded suggestion that vending is in fact an old-world practice not suited to a modern city like New York.

In response to these hostile testimonies, council member Carlos Menchaca attempts to unpack the various arguments about unfair competition, although he appears indifferent to the business case of the BIDs, bluntly stating: “I’m not a business, I’m a legislature.” Yet, attempting to clarify, Gladys Orduna explains that, from her standpoint, if another Mexican restaurant opens on her street, then they are not in direct competition with her, since they are obliged to pay the same expenses (e.g. wages, workers’ compensation, taxes, etc.). Meanwhile, she goes on to complain that vendors do not have the same overheads. At this point however, Benfatto intercedes, claiming: “It’s about a fair playing field, where you have your rent which is extremely high and labour costs, which for a full-service restaurant is 40% of gross sales.”¹⁶² So once again, the real objection becomes apparent: the BIDs and their allies deem it unfair that the vendors have chosen to exit the labour market and work for themselves.

The committee next hears from a variety of SVP-allied non-profits, legal advocates and researchers. Kathleen Dunn is first to offer testimony and begins by unequivocally stating that since the 80s the city has constructed overwrought laws that de facto criminalise street vending.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁶² Ibid., 157.

Moreover, she states that every single one of the 70 vendors she interviewed during her research viewed the current regulations as an “impassable” obstacle to their work. Likewise, she is keen to set the record straight, explaining how wealthy food truck owners exploit the permit market, since by and large, food trucks are typically franchises of fixed-location restaurants. As such, these larger businesses have opted to go mobile and therefore, should be regarded as distinct from immigrant vending carts. By comparison, she says, only a handful of SVP members can afford to do the same. In addition, Dunn claims that the BIDs perversely welcome these affluent food truck companies, who are for the most part “white and native-born,” since they see them as “legitimate entrepreneurs [...] facilitating upward mobility.”¹⁶³

Dunn contrasts this with women pushcart vendors who are the least recognised and most disadvantaged in the vending system, explaining that for these women, “the permit system plays a role in [their] exclusion.” In light of this, she characterises the illegal permit trade as being shaped by networks that are essentially a “boy’s club.” Moreover, as a result of the entry of gourmet food truck owners into the underground market, the going rate for permits has doubled, in turn, increasing barriers for women vendors. At present, there is currently no way for women vendors to access to that kind of capital and as a result, they are forced to work in the outer boroughs, where they are prone to “arrest, ticketing and street crime.”¹⁶⁴

Speaking on the same panel, SVP’s legal director Matt Shapiro reinforces the point that, this is not just an argument about the illegal market, but about access to that market in the first place. Like Dunn, he points out that the black market is unaffordable to most of SVP’s vendor members. In addition, Shapiro claims that the BIDs are making a specious argument about “competition,” while more generally, they do not care if a district is, for example, saturated with

¹⁶³ Ibid., 1972

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 173-3

pizza restaurants. Thus, in his opinion, the “unfair competition argument” is at best diversionary. Instead, Shapiro suggests that restaurant owners should direct their concern towards the storefront rental crisis, adding: “[Our] vendors would happily march to that hearing and support the brick-and-mortars and restaurants in the effort to provide relief.”¹⁶⁵

Following these expert testimonies, we next hear from Evelia Coyotzi, an SVP member from Central Mexico who sells red mole and Oaxacan tamales around Roosevelt Junction.¹⁶⁶ Before she became a vendor however, Evelia was working at McDonalds just two blocks away from the Twin Towers on 9/11 (“after the second tower fell my boss said we could go home”). From the outset, Evelia declares herself to be a member of SVP and subsequently, explains to the committee, that she is “here to defend” her fellow members.¹⁶⁷ Like most vendors, Evelia works extremely long hours, from noon until 12am most days, yet this hard work has paid off, allowing her son to go college and become an engineer.¹⁶⁸ Yet, as she explains to the council members, a few years ago she paid \$8,000 for a permit which turned out to be fake and as a result, she lost her money and now, lacking any permit, the police regularly stop her and throw away her produce.

Like many other vendors at the hearing, Evelia is upset by accusations from the BIDs, especially the assertion that unfair competition from the vendors harms restaurants. This is at odds with her general experience, whereby the storefronts, “see what I’m doing and [...] like what I do. There is no competition among us. It is totally the opposite: we attract people to

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 186.

¹⁶⁶ Evelia Coyotzi is profiled in this short documentary by the VICE food channel, Munchies: ‘The \$1 Tamale Queen of New York’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xB98UsKLoGk>

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 260.

where we're at."¹⁶⁹ Here Evelia makes the useful point that vendors increase customer footfall wherever they sell, often revitalising storefront trade.¹⁷⁰

Next up, the committee hears from vendor Barbara Morris, who works her husband's disabled veteran's licence, yet from the outset, she is keen to assert that she is not a member of SVP and consequently, is "not represented by anyone in this room."¹⁷¹ Morris continues by saying that she supports parts of the bill, yet as her testimony progresses, she makes confused points in several directions. This is common for non-member vendors, who are typically unable to determine the source of their discontent, since they are only able to partially identify the structures that oppress them. Instead, these non-aligned vendors tend to characterise the permit scheme as an essentially just system that is distorted by criminal corruption. This is perhaps a consequence of Morris' own US nativity and her ideological identifications with the state and law enforcement.

In her testimony, Morris makes many of the same complaints that SVP members have previously made. For instance, she knows that 90% of permits are illegally rented out and that most go to the big food cart franchises, such as Nathan's Hotdogs, the Halal Guys, Nuts for Nuts and Rafik Shawarma (i.e. food cart firms that are not aligned with SVP's mission, with at least one having been floated on Wall Street).¹⁷² To this extent, she believes that the dysfunction of the permit system emanates not from the current regulations, but from a "well-

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p.250.

¹⁷⁰ As the testimony from Los Angeles claimed, the presence of vendors was found to reinvigorate neglected streets, bringing new commerce and reviving the fortunes of local brick-and-mortars due to increased foot traffic, while overall, making neighbourhoods much safer.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁷² The Halal Guys is a chicken and gyro franchise, whose multiple carts dominate the corners of 53rd Street and 5th Ave. They have been featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and as such, their CEO founder was able to establish a restaurant chain off the back of his street cart brand.

organised syndicate.” Moreover, Morris goes on to make unhelpful remarks about how too many permits go to “unskilled” vendors, presumably meaning immigrants. As such, Morris’ testimony demonstrates how vendors who lack the political education of SVP’s vendor members are liable to blame others, since they only have a partial vantage point on the system.

On the same panel is Dan Rossi, a disabled veteran who lists various grudges he has with the current permit system. Rossi is equally demoralised, yet surprisingly argues against the issuance of new permits in what can only be considered a defence of veterans’ privileges. Likewise, Dondi McKeller, a United States Navy veteran and LGBT+ vendor, opposes the bill and despite being an SVP vendor leader in the past, introduces himself as chair of the Bronx Community Board, subsequently eschewing any solidarity with non-veteran vendors, while making a specialised yet peculiar appeal based on his African American heritage.

As such, he complains that Black veteran vendors are sometimes assaulted by unpermitted immigrant vendors, who he sees as “jockeying for location.”¹⁷³ Thus, by extension, he considers the reform of the permit system to be an insult to the service of native-born Black and disabled veterans. This testimony was puzzling on several counts, not least because McKeller had already previously served as the leader of the SVP Veteran’s Committee. Yet, from his current vantage point, he sees the proposed legislation as impinging upon affirmative action policies, which he now considers to unfairly assist immigrants. Moreover, in summary, he goes even further, to suggest that bills such as Intro 1116 are ushering in a new “Jim Crow.”¹⁷⁴

Despite couching his testimony in the language of progress however, McKeller’s appeal

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 255.

¹⁷⁴ Here McKeller uses his credentials as “a descendant of slaves” along with his military service to claim that Intro 1116 represents a reversal of Jim Crow. These are, however, the familiar talking points of the nativist American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) movement, that some have accused of attempting to separate Black Americans as a demographic from other immigrant people of colour.

is a nativist defence of qualified rights and moreover, broadly symptomatic of the way in which, veteran vendors previously won partial rights for themselves alone. This special pleading thus only serves to divide the community, further entrenching ethnic and racial hierarchies by neglecting to recognise the universal application of vending reform. Yet, by contrast, Kevin Johnson, a United States Army veteran and long-time member of SVP, makes an appeal for inclusion based on the very same credentials, deciding not to defend his privileges as a veteran, but demanding that vending rights be extended to all. This is an important appeal since the testimony of veterans carries extra weight with the committee.

Next, there is some light relief when SVP vendor member Adelaida speaks. She is a single mother and tamale seller from Sunset Park, who has been an SVP member for five years, while also helping establish the Women's Committee. However, before giving testimony, she halts proceedings and unexpectedly singles out council member Rafael Espinal, addressing him directly: "[You] promised that you were going to give us permits and [that's] the reason I'm here." Espinal is momentarily caught off guard, holding up his hands in innocence, while implying Adelaida must have mistaken him for someone else. Yet, she perseveres, wagging an accusatory finger at the embarrassed chair of the committee. "No, I remember it," she chides, "I offered you [your] favourite food, Gorditas ('Little Fatties')." Espinal, who so far has not come out in support of the bill, turns to the other council members looking for support. "I'm not Carlos Menchaca," he exclaims, "We look alike, with the beard, yes?" Yet Adelaida replies, "No Mr. Espinal, you went to Sunset Park, you [came] to where I worked."¹⁷⁵

Espinal subsequently tries to wriggle out of it, yet his embarrassment raises a laugh from everyone in attendance, since up until now, he has been able to affect an air of judicious impartiality, although his secret love of gorditas, now makes him look sympathetic to the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 276-7.

vendors. More seriously however, this speaks to the fact that New Yorkers love to avail themselves of the services of street vendors (since their food is delicious) and as such, even council members are not immune to it. Adelaida is therefore demanding recognition, saying to Espinal: *if you are going to enjoy my food, then you might at least back our vending reform bill.*

Hereafter, Adelaida switches to a more serious tack, explaining how a police officer from the 72nd Precinct harassed her, while she was with her son who is only 13 years old. She states that this indignity occurred while she was diagnosed with cancer, explaining that at the time, “I had to rent a permit and I paid \$15,000 [but] that all went in the garbage” because of her sickness. She continues, “I was able to survive. I am here and I want to ask you to give [my] permit back.”¹⁷⁶ After making this demand, she then accuses the BIDs of being deceitful in their presentations and lying when they say that vendors pay no taxes: “We pay double the taxes, we pay business taxes [and] we pay personal taxes.” Then adding, “We are not a burden on the city, it’s totally opposite! [Give] us the opportunity to get permits, so that way we won’t be harassed by the police and our products won’t be thrown away.”¹⁷⁷

Another unidentified Latino vendor explains how the police have also employed scare tactics against him, informing him about local robberies to intimidate him off the street and keep him from working: “I am afraid to go out, because when I do [...] the police stop me and tell me [about a] robbery [...] It’s a scary situation. We would like to work peacefully.”¹⁷⁸ Similarly, another vendor says that he always has to run and hide every time sanitation comes, since the DOS destroys his cart and produce without fail.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 277.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 279.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 274-5.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 282.

Because of this pervading sense of intimidation, some vendors are even too fearful to speak during the hearing and at one point, the Mandarin interpreter makes an intervention, explaining to the committee that a group of Chinese women vendors have just left. The translator says that unfortunately, a rumour started among the women that small vendors were not going to be considered for new permits. Luckily, however, he was able to convince one of them to stay by telling her that she alone now represented the whole Chinese community. This hence demonstrates the considerable courage that it takes for the vendors to give testimony in the first place, especially if they are from a smaller ethnic group. Speaking through the interpreter, the Chinese vendor pleads: “[D]on’t exclude them because it’s their only way of life [...] We as small vendors just want a chance at life.”¹⁸⁰

One of the more upsetting testimonies of the day comes from Ivorian vendor, Marie Rose Gova, who describes how she was arrested on two separate occasions. Marie Rose came to the US from Côte d'Ivoire some years ago, and while father had been an ambassador to France, she decided to move to the US to help one of her four children study medicine. Upon arriving in New York, she decided that she wanted to start vending and consequently, “went from vendor to vendor to learn [...] about how to get a permit.” Thereafter, she took classes at with the DCA at 42 Broadway and was eventually awarded a permit during the period when the city was still issuing them. Yet, despite having a valid permit, she has been serially harassed by the police. On the first occasion, she says, “They thought I was a criminal and they surrounded me. It was about ten of them and it was really scary.” Worse still, these armed officers detained her for another three hours. The second occasion was much worse, however, because this time she was arrested and taken to the precinct, before being given a humiliating body search.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Name misspelt in the transcript.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 284.

Yet, in conclusion, Marie Rose makes an important point: “[E]ven though I have a permit [...] I have to go through this all the time.” Marie Rose’s testimony therefore mirrors that of veteran vendor Kevin Johnson, emphasising how under the current system, all vendors are criminalised, whether licensed or unlicensed.

Beyond the issue of over-policing however, many of the vendors at the hearing speak about concerns for their children, highlighting the way in which in-work poverty disrupts family life. Most prominently, the issue of childcare is brought to the fore, when Bengali vendor and SVP member Nosira Begum describes how, despite having a Green Cart permit, the current system has impoverished her and her husband to the point that they can no longer keep their family together. As Nosira explains to the committee, her cart is poorly placed and consequently, unprofitable. Moreover, as a result of in-work poverty, the Begums have for many years had to live in a shelter, while more recently, welfare services intervened to deprive them of access to their children. “I haven’t seen them since 2016,” she laments, “It is hard as a mother not to be able to see my children regularly.”¹⁸² Nosira thus concludes her testimony by saying that if vending reform is successful, she would, as a result, be able to support her family. Thus, despite facing huge difficulties, along with the sadness of having her children fostered, Nosira’s testimony was perhaps the bravest of the day and she seemed very proud to attend the hearing as part of SVP.

In sympathy with the plight of women, SVP leader Kelebohile (‘Kele’) Nkhereanye reminds the committee that they need to give special consideration to women vendors who, more than any other class of vendor, would benefit the most from vending reform. Yet, Kele takes issue with the BIDs and their complaints about unfair competition, stating that all this talk of “unfairness” really obscures the fundamental asymmetry between small vendors and the

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 271.

brick-and-mortars; an imbalance that is highly gendered and which she thinks is reflected in much of the language deployed during the hearing. To address this power imbalance, Kele instead suggests that “some kind of language [...] needs to be implemented to be fair. We talk about gender-based violence, we talk about immigrants, women’s rights [but] we’re not listening, we’re not looking [and] we are not really addressing the need.”¹⁸³

These comments from Kele are timely, adding to the record that which has so far remained unspoken (i.e. how before now, much of the debate has presumed a certain type of vendor: a male vendor). As such, the unique vulnerabilities of women vendors are too often overlooked, since, as Kathleen Dunn has already testified, women vendors have almost no access to the male-dominated illegal market for permits. As a result, women vendors are far more likely to have adverse contact with the police and other agencies. Moreover, the gender-based violence that many of these women face while working in public space is mirrored by the domestic violence they have experienced at home. Hence, in Section 4.3, I will examine how, beyond the issue of permit reform, the distinct concerns of women vendors, need to be foregrounded if SVP is to seriously tackle the question of renewed base-building.

4.3 Interviews with the Organisers of the Women’s Committee

This section examines the work of the SVP Women’s Committee and features interviews with lead organiser Crystal Stella Becerril and principal organiser Lisa.¹⁸⁴ As such, the purpose of these interviews is to assess the base-building potential of the newly founded committee, whose activities were somewhat curtailed in early-2020 when Covid-19 prevented in-person

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 266-7.

¹⁸⁴ I have anonymised ‘Lisa’ as per her request.

meetings at the project. At the time, the committee was still in its formative phase. Yet, as both organisers confirm, the predominantly Latina women of the committee had already started to develop close friendships based around their shared experiences as both vendors and single mothers.

The committee was hence first established in the autumn of 2018 while the women's survey was still not yet complete. It was around this time however, that I first met vendor leader Kelebohile Nkhereanye ('Kele') who explained to me the importance of vending as a profession for women and moreover, why it was crucial for women at the project to form their own committee. As I was to discover, Kele is highly qualified among vendor members since she holds an MPA in sociology and women's studies, while also working as both a general merchandise and food vendor alongside other professions. In this capacity, Kele has long been an ambassador for women at SVP and it was under her guidance that the Women's Committee first came into being.

When we first met, Kele explained to me how vending had always been part of her life while growing up in Maseru, Lesotho. As such, her mother had taught her to grow and sell vegetables as a way to supplement her income. This was to prove an important lesson since over the years, Kele's income from vending has allowed her to become financially self-sufficient. As she told to me: "Vending allows women to be independent, because even if women do sex work for example, they are still reliant on men. Many people in New York don't know that you can just go to a wholesaler in Midtown, buy some stock and then sell it on the street." Hence, just as male vendors prefer vending work to formal employment, women vendors appreciate the professional and financial autonomy that vending affords.

The first meeting of Women's Committee was held in September 2018, whereby it took the form of an icebreaker and tea party that was attended by a small group of long-serving women vendor members. Yet at first, it was difficult to agree on a time that suited everyone

since, due to childcare needs, afternoon meetings were considered to be inconvenient. To move things along however, Kele then presented the aims of the Women's Committee at the next monthly general meeting, explaining to members why a separate space for women's empowerment was needed at SVP. Moreover, during the meeting, she emphasised how important it was for women members to experience aspects of their social life through the organisation. As such, the aspiration for the Women's Committee was to become a friendly trust-building space in which women vendors could share their more discrete concerns.

At the end of their presentation, the leadership then invited everyone to sign up for outreach, in order to recruit other women vendors interested in working on the committee. At first however, there were few takers due to confusion about the committee's purpose. One Latina vendors asked, "What do you mean by empowerment? How?" Kele replied that this was not yet certain, since the committee would need to identify issues relevant to women vendors before this question could be decided. Another woman stood up, commenting, "I always hear stories about serious gender-based, domestic violence." To this, Kele responded, "Yes. We definitely need to have open lines of communication around domestic violence." Yet, given the uncertainty displayed by members during meeting, it was obvious to everyone present, that there was still a great deal of work to be done before the purpose of the committee could be better defined and understood.

Due competing commitments, the Women's Committee lay fallow for almost a year, although, efforts were redoubled once the findings of the women's survey were finally published in early-2019 (see Section 3.6). Shortly thereafter, the project hired two new organisers who were given the task of getting the committee started in earnest. First to be hired was principal organiser Lisa, a qualified sociologist by training, who had previously lived and studied in Santiago de Chile. This was then followed by the appointment of Crystal Stella Becerril to the position of lead organiser, with the coordination of the Women's Committee as one of her

principal duties. As such, Stella self-describes as a first-generation working-class queer Xicana and the daughter of Mexican immigrants, both of whom were previously street vendors in Chicago. Furthermore, Stella gained her skills as an organiser through UFCW/AFL-CIO training schemes and therefore, already had experience working across a wide range of social justice movements (including Black Lives Matter, Justice for Ayotzinapa, Fight for \$15 and the historic Chicago Teachers Strike).

While working alongside Lisa and Stella, it became apparent that they both considered the consciousness-raising work of the Women's Committee to be a crucial part of base-building at SVP. However, due to the confidential nature of these workshops, the only practical way for me to gain a vantage point on the trust-building work of the committee was by interviewing its two organisers. It is hence this deeply personal one-on-one emotional work, conducted within the privacy of the committee, that has allowed SVP's women members to earn each other's trust, thereby establishing the required levels of camaraderie needed to develop strong bonds among them. Yet, despite the committee only having been in existence for a short time, as both organisers would confide, these deep connections are already providing a solid foundation upon which to build further class commitments.

Stella begins our interview by confirming that SVP's major campaigns are all "big picture stuff" that if successful, will fundamentally change the relationship that vendors have to earning a living in the city. She thus affirms the project's overall strategic orientation, adding that if SVP were to achieve vending reform it would be "huge, right?" Yet, she goes on to qualify this, stating that, from an organisational standpoint, catch-all issues such as the permit issue, are insufficient since, to date they have failed to sustain and grow membership levels over time. Thus, in her opinion, new analysis is required since "a lasting sense of ownership of the work" has yet to materialise among vendor members and as such, is unlikely to spontaneously do so.

Considering this, I then ask Stella whether the Women's Committee could play a role in

building active participation at the level of day-to-day organising. “Yes,” she replies confidently, since at the moment, beyond the major campaigns, there is “little else grounding or anchoring the organisation” and consequently, minor setbacks make it “easy for the membership to get demoralised.” Alternately, she suggests, the Women’s Committee could keep the members “not just participating but engaged,” thereby establishing a space for political education among the women, while granting them a greater appreciation of the social role of women’s labour.

Stella thus concedes, that without the anchor of genuine participation, the project’s claim to be a “membership-led” organisation is “mostly symbolic.” This was made apparent to Stella when it was first brought to her attention that participation levels needed serious renewal. So, while before now, there was a highly engaged core group of vendors (known as ‘the Power 100’) who could be relied upon to show up to rallies, press events and actions; in terms of the overall membership, there was not much of an expansion in numbers over time. As a result, the membership was in danger of becoming apathetic and complacent. Yet, this was not entirely the fault of the vendors, but a consequence of the long-time scales involved in fighting for reform, dependent as they are on the whims of transactional politicians.

Taking into consideration the demoralising effects of such long-term commitments, I subsequently ask Stella, if the newly formed Women’s Committee might fundamentally change the mix of advocacy and organising at SVP, since Latina vendors are a numerically significant demographic among the membership and have therefore, always been involved in the project at every level. Stella replies that, while it is still early days, political engagement is already being built among the women. To illustrate this, she then recounts how, just a week before the pandemic hit in March 2020, the members of the Women’s Committee attended Women’s Strike NYC, a large-scale event organised to coincide with International Women’s Day. Moreover, in preparation for the event, the committee invited the strike’s organiser, Ximena Garcia Bustamante to organise a workshop at SVP, wherein she showed the committee examples of

women-led campaigns from around the world, many of which are rooted in housing and rent struggles.

As such, Ximena's presentation provoked a lively discussion about the socially reproductive work of women, whereby the vendors keenly discussed the nature of women's labour inside and outside the home. As a result of this dialogue, the women then came appreciate their double burden, as both vendors and domestic caregivers, allowing them to recognise how, as vendors, they provide "both a service and a commodity for other working-class people who don't have the time to cook." By examining their labour(s), the women then came to see how vending enables other workers to go to work in the first place; an acknowledgement that laid the groundwork for further discussion about why "reproductive labour and food are the most essential commodities after housing."

The women were then able to precisely locate themselves "on the frontline in providing food to New York's residents, especially those who are earning poverty wages and living in areas where food is scarce." On this point, Stella is unequivocal: "Women vendors play an essential role in their communities." Hence, through this novel appreciation of the double "or even triple shift," the women vendors were finally able to achieve a perspective on the entirety of their work, which not only sustains their families (through "cooking, doing the laundry and taking care of the kids") but in addition, reproduces their own neighbourhoods and more broadly, the city itself.

As a result of this consciousness-raising, the women were then able to gain a vantage point on "the sum of their lives." Moreover, the fruit of this work was most evident on 9 March 2020, when Stella accompanied members of the Women's Committee to Women's Strike NYC (aka Paro de Mujeres) where they joined a gathering of 50,000 women in Washington Square Park for the day. Because SVP's allotted time at the rally was too short for speeches, the women instead decided to make signs to hold up on stage, so that people could connect them

with their work and as a result, the women crafted slogans that were a direct product of their earlier consciousness-raising session with Ximena. As Stella describes it: “The Women’s Committee were now able to situate everything around the question of social reproduction and the double shift.”

These signs were a great success, and after seeing the vendors on stage, around 500-600 people signed postcards petitioning Corey Johnson (Speaker of the NYCC) to urgently demand he bring forward the vote to Lift the Caps. “You know, people came up to us afterwards and asked more about social reproduction,” Stella says, “I was so psyched by how, at the Women’s Strike, the ten members of the Women’s Committee who participated, were not only able to be the face of vending work, but also the face of social reproduction.”

In the debrief afterwards, it was now clear that the women understood the political importance of their work and moreover, how the issue of women’s labour might be used to influence the other campaigns at SVP. Addressing this, I then asked Stella if the predominance of Latina vendors in the committee fits with SVP’s broad multiethnic appeal, given that the organisation aims to affect universal reform for all vendors. Here I make mention of Kathleen Dunn’s research into the “flexible Latina family” and the further suggestion that their ready teamwork might serve as a pre-existing basis for deep organising.

In response, Stella says that while Dunn’s analysis is valid, tapping these family-based resources for the purpose of organising is not straightforward, since Latina vendors are by necessity forced to build extended kinship networks in response to neoliberal incentives. “When social safety nets are withdrawn,” she explains, “people increasingly fall back on the family unit. This is especially true within the Latinx community” whereby the informal work of women becomes “all-encompassing.” Thus, to an extent, women vendors already help each other: “They take care of each other’s kids [and] often work together on the same corner, protecting each other and looking out for the cops.” However, in Stella’s view, these kinship arrangements

can also become extremely territorial, pitting one family group against another and as a result, inter-family disputes between vendors the only serve to intensify competition.

As Stella puts it, the Latina vending family is “not simply a traditional type of family” since in practice, it extends the notion of how “family” itself comes to be constituted. This is most apparent at SVP since many of the Latina vendors are single mothers and sole breadwinners (see Section 3.6). Under such circumstances, the women are obligated to broaden their definition of family to include other vendors, thereby creating extended kinship networks of friends, cousins and compatriots. Yet, despite the strengthening of these communitarian bonds, Stella warns that such affinities can undoubtedly increase competition among the vendors: “So, yes, while there are incredible forms of parity, it’s not uncommon to see intense forms of rivalry, because the women face such dire circumstances.”

This rivalry was something that Stella and the other organisers at SVP ran up against in Queens in 2020, when attempting to mediate among a group of pushcart vendors who were being harassed by the police in Corona Plaza. To mitigate this, SVP scheduled a liaison between the vendors, local politicians and police, but thought it wise to hold a consensus-building meeting with the vendors beforehand. Unfortunately, the initial meeting was derailed by one of the women vendors, who claimed that her rented veteran’s licence granted her the sole right to sell in Corona Plaza. Yet, while she was informed that this was an illegal use of a permit, she continued to declare that she had greater rights than everyone else in the room and promised that she and her husband (who “owns a construction firm”) were going to “take everyone else down” at the meeting.

Using this example, Stella explains how relative status, either real or perceived, combined with property, policing and geography, contributes to inter-vendor competition. In her opinion, such rivalry is clearly a by-product of the women’s undocumented status, whereby “women vendors flock to areas which they’ve heard are the safest. Meanwhile, vendors who’ve

been there the longest say, 'Look, there's not enough space for you here.'" In response to these dynamics, Stella hopes therefore, that through the work of the Women's Committee, the vendors might come to realise that "they aren't each other's competition but are instead each other's potential comrade." Yet, all things considered, Stella is hopeful, since the Women's Committee has already become an intimate "space of vulnerability," where the women are encouraged to let their guard down.

To this extent, Stella claims that SVP has already begun to lay the groundwork for wider organisational solidarity, explaining that in the few short months before the pandemic hit, the committee had already expanded from 8 to 16 women. Considering this growth, I then ask Stella, whether the committee might eventually elevate the women's social reproduction concerns to the level of campaigning issues at the project? To this she replies, if the women were to "get solid and committed to interrogating their experiences," then issues such as gender-based violence or being a single mother in a multigenerational household might eventually be "taken seriously" as vending issues.

To date, SVP has tended to concentrate on work-related issues among the vendors, with the only exception being immigration. "Beyond that," Stella says, "we don't really touch non-vending issues, because right now they don't universally apply to every single vendor." However, she thinks establishing a space in which women vendors can freely discuss the most overwhelming aspects of their lives, might eventually lead to a revaluation of the entire profession of vending as socially reproductive work. Again, Stella says: "If the Women's Committee got solid over these issues and said, 'We can only go vend if we are not being abused at home'; or, 'Look we can only go vend if someone is looking after our children'; or perhaps even, 'We can only go vend if we have enough time to make food for our family.' Then that would be a great start."

In line with this ambition, Stella believes that the Women's Committee is already

generating a fruitful political discussion about the women's unique contribution to the social reproduction of the city. However, getting the women to appreciate precisely how the city excludes them from their chosen work, while also relying on their labour for its own reproduction, has been hard work. "The city has perfected a very fine balance," Stella confides, "It both disenfranchises and marginalises these women vendors, while at the same time being utterly reliant upon them." Stella therefore hopes that the trust-based work of the committee might eventually become the primary process through which women at SVP find empowerment, since, in her view, the best way to firm up solidarity among the women, is by "getting them to commit to be there for each other and be a listening ear." Only once the women have these guarantees, might they then be able to spearhead a report and present their case to the general membership. Moreover, if they were able to accomplish this level of solidarity, then they could potentially say to the other members: "If we don't address domestic violence within our communities, then we are jeopardising our survival, since our survival as vendors depends on our ability to be safe from violence at home."

Given that SVP is attempting to diversify its appeal through the development of the Women's Committee, I subsequently ask Stella to elaborate on the issue of trust in relation to Elsa's arrest. More than any other, this episode exemplified the special vulnerabilities of women pushcart vendors, yet to the chagrin of many on the leadership board, Elsa never joined the organisation. Stella considers this to be a disappointment, since Elsa is exactly the type of vendor that the project hopes to reach. She therefore sees Elsa's reluctance as "unfortunately symptomatic," since while SVP was able to make use of Elsa's arrest to raise public awareness over the permit issue, as an organisation, "we failed to follow through and integrate her." As if to underline this, there was further disappointment when Elsa later asked for access to the Coronavirus Relief Fund. Yet, due to a lack of prior engagement, the vendor leaders told her that she did not qualify for further assistance. This obviously caused major upset since Elsa had

not really understood the terms of participation the first time around, leading to recriminations.

Here Stella makes it abundantly clear that a stronger appeal would be necessary for women like Elsa to join up long term, thereby avoiding the leadership board's distrust (which ran along the lines of: "Why did we just raise \$5,000 for this person, when there are fully participating members who also desperately need emergency money?"). So, while it made perfect sense for SVP to use the opportunity to boost the organisation's profile, it also fostered the expectation in Elsa that assistance was available as-and-when required. In turn, Stella contends that if SVP does not want to be perceived to be a service-based organisation, then it must develop a stronger emotional appeal. Developing this level of engagement is however extremely time-consuming and consequently, the whole episode raises "a broader political and ideological question about the purpose of SVP."

At the end of our interview, Stella returns to the idea of the Women's Committee becoming a trust-building space in which to develop a strong core group of vendors. In her opinion, the intensive emotional work performed by the women serves as a blueprint for how solidarity might be expanded across the whole membership. To illustrate this, Stella points out how, through their use of the recently established Vendor Power! WhatsApp group, women vendors have been able to maintain their commitments to one another during the pandemic, whereby in the absence of in-person meetings, it is mainly women who use the app to "check-in on each other." Moreover, while male vendors are certainly present in the group, they tend to take a backseat and it is "the women who emotionally hold things together."

In response to changes wrought by the pandemic, Stella therefore believes that SVP must go beyond just providing "immediate, emotional and soothing relief" and instead, the project needs to think about how this "emotional work might inform and shape the direction of the organisation." Thus, as the crisis deepens, Stella thinks that SVP must concentrate on more than just survival, in turn, making use of the bonds built by the Women's Committee to "shift

gears and own a bit more of the mutual aid work” that the project is currently engaged in. For Stella, this is an urgent task since the pandemic has already “exposed and amplified many of the social reproduction problems that women vendors were facing prior to the crisis.”

A week later, I spoke with principal organiser Lisa, asking her a similar series of questions, yet building on Stella’s insights and contributions. Agreeing on many of the same points, Lisa places an emphasis on the trust-building work of the Women’s Committee, which she considers to be crucial if SVP’s women vendors are to gain each other’s confidence. Moreover, Lisa tells me that, while the committee has only been engaged in its collective work for a very short time, “the women are already building off each other in terms of political education” and as such, they are working to “remove some of the self-blame that many of the women feel.”

As Lisa explains, most women vendors have faced some form of domestic violence in the past (“Sometimes in multiple relationships”) and as a result, self-stigmatisation among the women is extremely common. In many circumstances, the women are unable to leave their current relationships, primarily “because they are financially reliant on their partners,” and often they think the violence they experience is “just normal.” Meanwhile, self-stigmatisation is also an obstacle to sharing and acceptance, which in turn stands in the way of the trust-building work of the committee and therefore, just getting the women to the stage where they are comfortable discussing gender-based violence, “requires a lot more trust.” Moreover, these shared confidences are extremely fragile and can be easily disrupted whenever new members arrive in the group, since newcomers do not already have “the same level of commitment.” As a result, Lisa says that outsiders can easily shut down the space of vulnerability, once again making the sharing of intimacies difficult.

In response, I mention to Lisa how, as staff members at SVP, we often treat the monthly general meeting as an opportunity to introduce the vendors to one another in the hope that they

will strike up spontaneous friendships (i.e. by eating together, shaking hands and chanting “Vendor Power!”). Yet as Stella has already pointed out, building trust around issues such as domestic violence and childcare is emotional women’s work, that can only be carried out within the relative privacy of Women’s Committee. Lisa additionally agrees with this: “Yeah, I did see some budding friendships develop independently of the Women’s Committee, but they’re very surface-level friendly.” Hence, in her estimation, the work of the Women’s Committee needs to be continuous, since: “It takes a long time to build the appropriate level of trust.”

I subsequently ask Lisa if SVP’s current appeal to women vendors is sufficient, given that, by and large, the vendors build attachments by sharing common grievances. To this Lisa replies, that the Women’s Committee is “more social” when compared to other more business-like meetings held at SVP and as such, the “real work” of base-building at project has, above all, been achieved through the sociality of women in the committee. Consequently, in Lisa’s view, SVP could put more effort into social activities since this is how camaraderie was practically built among Latina vendors.¹⁸⁵

Next, I ask Lisa how she feels about the overall prospects of the Women’s Committee, since at present it is extremely difficult to build capacity within the lockdown. To this Lisa replies, that the committee is certainly a new avenue through which to secure deeper engagement. She would therefore like SVP “to prioritise the Women’s Committee” since to date, it has been an effective way to secure active participation, thereby creating a solid ground on which to stand further efforts. This seems significant in terms of wider participation, since as Lisa contends,

¹⁸⁵ This social aspect of SVP is something Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez has recently sought to develop and along these lines, in 2019 SVP organised a party for International Street Vendors Day. Accompanying the festivities was Mariachi music provided by Corazon de Mexico and La Academia de Mariachi Nuevo Amane. In addition, food was laid on by SVP’s members. As such, this was a distinctly cultural and social event, serving as a celebration of vendors by the vendors.

without a strong base “the campaigns aren't going to be successful.” Moreover, before the pandemic struck, it was readily apparent to Lisa that the committee had already begun the work of consciousness-raising and as a result, by the time of the Women’s Strike, the women vendors had already begun to “understand the political purpose of our participation in the event.”

Since political education is important in terms of engagement at SVP, I also ask Lisa about class consciousness, a topic we had already discussed in the office on many occasions. As such, Lisa had concerns about how SVP’s organising work is complicated by the vending hierarchy, composed as it is of complex chains of subcontracting, while sometimes obscuring who is employer and who is employee. Moreover, as Kathleen Dunn explained during the hearing, women vendors are typically locked out of the more entrepreneurial aspects of vending, and as a result “small businessperson” is perhaps not always best descriptor when labelling the vendors.

Here Lisa is quick to highlight the difficulty of such identifications, since it is rare for women vendors to refer to themselves as “an entrepreneur or small business owner.” More typically, they will say: “I’m an immigrant and I’m a single mother. I work hard every day and don’t get any respect. I’m harassed by the police, but I do this job is because it’s flexible hours, so I can take care of my kids after work.” So, while, for the purposes of advocacy, it is useful for SVP’s vendor members to present themselves as “New York’s smallest businesses,” Lisa believes that categorising all vendors as competitive micro-entrepreneurs is not the most productive framing, particularly if the ambition of the project is to build a strong grassroots movement around class-based affinities.

While there is some efficacy to the emphasising vending as a pathway to citizenship (and ultimately, a route into the middle-class) such an emphasis panders to the ideology of lawmakers (see Sections 1.2 & 1.3) and hence, runs contrary to SVP’s efforts to solidify the

vendors around their own class interests. Furthermore, as Lisa points out, many of the organisations that SVP collaborates with, emphatically describe themselves as “worker-led organisations” and therefore, view themselves as part of a broader working-class movement. “We ought to emulate that,” Lisa comments, “especially, if we want to build meaningful and durable coalitions with other groups who also prioritise their members as workers.”

Following up on the theme of class formation, I ask Lisa whether the sectional organisation of Latina vendors fits well with SVP’s distinct multiethnic approach. To this, Lisa replies, that she would never want to give the impression that SVP is anything less than multiethnic, pointing out that the Latina-centric profile of the Women’s Committee is mainly due to the high cost of translation services. As a result, organising at the project is primarily concentrated around language groups, which in turn means that, “Our ability to organise by language is what allows some members to participate more than others.” To this she adds, “this is mainly just a staffing and funding problem. And that’s unfortunate, because I do really like the idea of it being a multiethnic and multiracial organisation. That’s powerful to me!”

Financial limitations aside, we both agree that there are good strategic reasons for SVP to re-focus their efforts on the organisation of unlicensed mobile vendors, precisely because of their relative vulnerability and pre-existing potentials for solidarity. Building a solid core group of Latinas consequently makes a lot of sense, since as Lisa explains, street vendors are a highly heterogeneous group, whereby each sub-group has “different investments based on race, class, gender and ethnicity,” making overall group coherence is very difficult to achieve. Yet, despite the huge variety of dispositions present within SVP, Lisa thinks it is always worth trying to bridge the gap between the different sections of the membership and significantly, she nominates this “the fundamental task.” “This is not just a problem for SVP to overcome,” Lisa states, “but a problem that US unions face in general. The problem of bringing together people who speak different languages and then getting them to be willing to fight for one another.”

Along these lines, Lisa sees group cohesion as crucial if the vendors are going to fight for recognition as a class. Moreover, she states that in the wake of the pandemic, the need for solidarity among the vendors is more acute than ever since the city has altogether failed to acknowledge immigrant vendors as essential workers. As if to underline this, when Governor Cuomo announced the closure of indoor dining in early-2021, the socially reproductive aspect of vending was brought to the fore, since after all it was vendors who continued to feed the city. So, while those made unemployed by the pandemic would eventually receive federal assistance,¹⁸⁶ undocumented workers received no such compensation. To highlight these contradictions, SVP's members took swift action, setting up a series of food pantries in Queens and other adjacent boroughs and subsequently, they were able to provide thousands of free hot meals to low-income New Yorkers.¹⁸⁷ Hence, this mutual-aid work became a practical demonstration of New York's dependency on street vendors who, by providing free meals during the crisis, showed their ready-capacity to feed the very communities that the state was unable or unwilling to provide for.

At the end of our interview, Lisa is thus keen to emphasise how the reproductive labour of women vendors has been essential for maintaining and reproducing social relations in the city during the pandemic. Egregiously however, the city continues to avoid any recognition of the vendors as legitimate essential workers. As if to illustrate this, when the city reopened after the initial waves of the pandemic, the mayor developed a plan to give over sidewalk-space to storefront restaurants. Yet as Lisa points out, this is the very same street space that SVP has

¹⁸⁶ See the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) an economic stimulus package which included loans to small businesses that totalled \$2.2 trillion, passed 27 March 2021.

¹⁸⁷ In this endeavour, the vendors were financially supported by the offices of Senators Jessica Ramos and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, see Crowley, C., 'The Street Vendors Are Fighting Hunger,' *New York Magazine* (2021): <https://www.grubstreet.com/2021/01/nyc-street-vendors-are-fighting-against-hunger.html>

been fighting over for years. Thus, despite SVP's mutual-aid efforts, the city decided to take sidewalk space away from the vendors, thereby once again rewarding private pockets. In this respect, Lisa thinks that the city's actions only serve to underscore the entanglement of public space and the reproductive labour of women. Hence, it is among unlicensed mobile Latina vendors that the coincidence of these issues is felt most acutely and subsequently, it is appropriate that the outer boroughs is where the project's base-building efforts are currently concentrated.

4.4 Sudden Victory and its Consequences

On 28 January 2021, SVP received the historic news that the NYCC had passed Intro 1116, thereby raising the cap on permits. This was the first time that the number of permits had been increased since 1983 and as such, the victory can only be described as the culmination of SVP's seven-year long campaign to Lift the Caps. Council member Carlos Menchaca, a long-time supporter of SVP, welcomed the news, saying: "It's been almost half a century since the City Council has done anything positive for street vendors."¹⁸⁸ Once signed into law, the reform bill will thereafter ensure the issuance of 400 new permits annually for the next ten years. By design, the phased roll-out of new permits will undercut the existing black market, thereby sharply bringing down the price of a two-year permit from \$25,000 to \$200.

SVP's deputy director Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez welcomed the end of the underground market, adding that a phased-approach allows everyone involved "to transition without losing

¹⁸⁸ Crowley, C., 'New York's Street Vendors Just Scored a Major Victory,' *New York Mag*, 28 Jan 2021: <https://www.grubstreet.com/2021/01/nyc-street-vendors-are-fighting-against-hunger.html>

their business.”¹⁸⁹ This means that any vendor currently renting a permit can adjust to the new system without losing income or their spot. Moreover, the bill specifies that from 2032 onwards, absentee permit holders must be present on their cart in a supervisory capacity, thereby providing a deadline after which the illegal leasing of permits will be permanently ended. Significantly, Intro 1116 also requests the creation of a new vendor advisory committee that will allow vendors to have a direct say in the administration of street vending, something the project has long fought for.

As a prelude to the passing of the bill however, Mayor Bill de Blasio had already announced that the NYPD would no longer supervise the enforcement of vending regulations. From now on, the administration of street vending and the coordination of health and sanitation would instead be the responsibility of the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP).¹⁹⁰ Yet, it was widely suspected that this about-face from the mayor was a consequence of the George Floyd insurrection, which taken place the previous summer. In light of this, the mayor’s reversal can only be interpreted as a politically low-cost and compensatory gesture, although one which would not have been possible without persistent pressure from SVP. Hence, when the bill eventually did pass, it was duly celebrated by the project’s vendor members as the culmination of their combined political and economic demands. To this end, SVP director Mohamed Attia said, “This represents, finally, fairness and inclusion for street vendors [...] For decades they have been excluded from all support the city offers to small businesses.”¹⁹¹ Likewise, SVP member and popular Midtown vendor, M.D. Alam was quoted in

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Gonzalez, D., ‘\$20,000 for a Permit? New York May Finally Offer Vendors Some Relief,’ *New York Times*, 9 Jan 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/nyregion/street-vendors-permits-nyc.html>

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

the *New York Times* as saying, “This is freedom.”¹⁹²

Inevitably, the BIDs, real-estate boards, restaurant associations and even a retired police chief all voiced objections to the bill’s passing. Timing-wise however, the vendors were elated since to date, they had not been provided with any assistance during the pandemic, while completely excluded from the city’s small business recovery plan. Hence, despite this monumental victory, SVP’s work was not yet complete and while welcoming of the new legislation, Senator Jessica Ramos stated that she did not see why there needed to be any permit cap whatsoever.¹⁹³ As such, there were still further advances to be made, in line with the state-wide proposal to decriminalise vending altogether (Bill S1175).

Nonetheless, the passing of Intro 1116 was a major victory for SVP and somewhat of a turnaround, since as recently as 2019, the project had experienced a sizable setback when streets of Downtown Flushing were closed to vendors by council member Peter Koo.¹⁹⁴ So while Flushing is a district synonymous with Chinese vendors, SVP was unable to rally its members there, since at that time, outreach and organisational capacity in the outer boroughs was insufficient.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, when I arrived at the project, less than half of NYCC members supported the bill, yet in the intervening two-year period, SVP was able to overhaul its internal process, renew collective decision-making and extend base-building efforts. As a result, SVP

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Crowley, C., ‘New York’s Street Vendors Just Scored a Major Victory,’ *New York Mag*, 28 Jan 2021: <https://www.grubstreet.com/2021/01/nyc-intro-1116-vendor-permits-increased.html>

¹⁹⁴ Diana, C., ‘Amid Booming Growth, Downtown Flushing’s Street Food Scene Has Been Decimated,’ *New York Eater*, 23 Oct 2019: <https://ny.eater.com/2019/10/23/20915270/downtown-flushing-street-food-vendor-ban-peter-koo-bill>

¹⁹⁵ See also: Devlin, R.T., ‘No Place for Street Vendors: Global Capital and Local Exclusion in an East Asian Immigrant Enclave of New York City,’ WIEGO Resource Document No 17 July 2020: https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/RD_17_Devlin_on_Vending_in_Flushing_NY_for_web.pdf

was well-prepared when the pandemic struck in 2021, a period during which thousands of unemployed workers turned to vending after losing their jobs.¹⁹⁶

It was within this rapidly changing political space that SVP's prior organising strategies began to pay off, particularly in Queens, where the establishment of new chapters just before the outbreak of the pandemic, ensured that the project stood ready to organise among this new influx of first-time vendors. If the LA Street Vendor Campaign started from small beginnings by first organising Latinas around the collective experience of both state sanctioned and co-ethnic violence (see Hildago 2022); then SVP would in turn successfully replicate this strategy, since as organiser Lisa explains in Section 4.3, not only do Latina pushcart vendors regularly face police harassment at work, but once the Women's Committee was established, it also became readily apparent that most Latina vendors had experienced gendered violence at one time or another.

The women vendors therefore suffer unique exclusions, not only resulting from their ethnicity and class position, but moreover, they endure under more fundamental systems of oppression. However, as was the case in LA, once Latina vendors were able to raise their profile within the project, by becoming the "face of social reproduction" at Women's Strike NYC, soon thereafter they also became the backbone of organisational efforts around Corona Plaza; a location which in the past had often been a site of competition between vendors jostling for position.

Consequently, in the wake of the pandemic, once again Corona Plaza began "[boil] over with new vendors," leading to increased tensions between inexperienced first-time vendors and

¹⁹⁶ Heffernan, O., 'Hundreds Turn to Street Vending After Losing their Jobs. Now they face \$1000 fines,' *Documented*, 08 July 2021: <https://documentedny.com/2021/07/08/thousands-turned-to-street-vending-after-losing-their-jobs-now-they-face-1000-fines/>

nearby store owners. As vendor Veronica Fructoso would state: “After the pandemic, a lot of people were left without jobs,”¹⁹⁷ and soon the number of vendors working in the plaza swelled to 89. Most of these new vendors were from Latin or South America, yet many had never worked as vendors before, and as was soon apparent, the majority simply did not know their rights.

Fortunately, however, SVP had already redoubled their efforts in this key neighbourhood, innovating new outreach methods and applying creative techniques to the question of inter-vendor organising. The project thus stood ready to recruit these new vendors, based around the strong core group they had already established. With this head start, the project consequently formed the Street Vendor Association at Corona Plaza (Asociación de Vendedores Ambulantes de Corona Plaza) which in turn allowed them to organise locally among a broader ecology of first-time vendors, who were now discovering vending work to be “more stable and communal” than their prior jobs.

In turn, the organisation of the plaza then was subsequently “boosted” by a \$600,000 award given to the Queens Economic Development Corporation as a way to revitalize Roosevelt Junction,¹⁹⁸ and assist the Queens Borough President in tackling issues stemming from the increased trade around the market, while at the same time, coordinating “cultural programming.” SVP was hence able to assist in this effort, bringing a degree of order to the market, as well as developing a map to help with vendor placement. As long-time food vendor Rosa Casa states, the newly established association subsequently helped mediate between “both newer and more established vendors,” while allowing them to negotiate with concerned

¹⁹⁷ See Honan, K. & Durán, H. A., ‘Boiling Over With New Vendors, Corona Plaza Gets Organized,’ *The City*, 1 Aug 2022: <https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/8/1/23287867/new-vendors-corona-plaza-gets-organized>

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

local store front businesses.¹⁹⁹

As Rosario Troncoso, who serves as the president of the plaza's vendor association confirms, this offer of coordinated assistance to local vendors was "very important because I don't just fight for myself. I want to fight for everyone."²⁰⁰ Yet, the pan-Latin solidarity established in the plaza was only possible because of the pre-organising efforts of the SVP Women's Committee and the project's renewed focus on the outer boroughs, which was in essence, a strategy to take the project to meet vendors wherever they are currently at.

Consequently, by building such capacities, SVP is now beginning to enhance its public profile, and in March 2023 a group of vendors, the majority of whom were women, would act as ambassadors for the project, travelling to City Hall to protest the closed-door decision by the NYCC to return vending control to the Department of Sanitation, as part of Mayor Eric Adam's attempt to dilute and reverse SVP's recent victories. In this manner, SVP is now demonstrating that the most vulnerable of vendors can indeed take a lead when challenging the most powerful of city elites, thereby providing an inspiration for others.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ See Gonella C. 'A beacon of hope': 3 years after COVID-19 devastated Queens, Corona Plaza becomes bustling market,' *Gothamist*, 22 March 2023: <https://gothamist.com/news/a-beacon-of-hope-3-years-after-covid-19-devastated-queens-corona-plaza-becomes-bustling-market>

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.0 The Limits of Organising Around Lift the Caps

At the outset, I asked two questions: (i) does multiethnic organising enhance participation at SVP; and (ii) can such organising increase the collective power of vendor members? As explained in Chapter 3, SVP's members are drawn from a wide range of ethnic identifications, yet not all vendors are on an equal footing. The varied dispositions of each vendor group and the uneven boundaries between them, thus greatly determine the degree of market access each can achieve, and in this regard, the vending hierarchy might be considered a distributed heterogeneity, redolent of informal labour markets in general (Bromley 1979; Perry 2007).

Beyond this apparent diversity however, questions of class and subjectivity are still further complicated by the chains of informal subcontracting that make up the industry; a set of complex social relations which restrain the vendors from speaking out against those who oppress them, since their work chiefly relies on maintaining relative position within this intricate web of dependencies in order to merely subsist (for an expanded explanation, see Section 5.3). Subsequently, these gradations and distinctions between the vendors make multiethnic diversity at SVP both a strength to be celebrated and an organisational problem to be overcome.

To date, SVP's foremost campaign to Lift the Caps, has been a universal bread-and-butter appeal to all vendors commensurate with their principal occupational hurdle. The campaign on aggregate therefore serves as a *multiethnic* umbrella issue around which SVP mobilises at a *quantitative level* (i.e. by attempting to galvanise as many vendors as possible on

the broadest conceivable basis). Hence, relevant to this question, is the earlier quantitative/qualitative debate between Gordon and Fine as framed by Jenkins in his discussion of worker centre “power analysis” (see Section 1.3). Yet, by virtue of being a legislative demand, Lift the Caps remains an advocacy-based approach and as a result, the strength of its appeal has been as uneven as the distribution of vendors across the city, dispersed as they are by race, gender and ethnicity. Building collective power among vendors at SVP is thus considerably more difficult than simply advocating for permit reform and thereafter, mobilising around this supposedly wall-to-wall issue.

SVP’s principal campaign is accordingly an appeal which above all, addresses the occupational identity of the vendors, whose roles are already ethnically circumscribed by the vending hierarchy and as such, it is a one-sided work-related appeal. Yet, beyond advocacy and mobilisation, not only has Lift the Caps underperformed from an organising standpoint, more significantly, it has done little to tie in the most marginal of Latina pushcart vendors, who are altogether excluded from both the permit system and underground market. This vulnerable yet numerically substantial subsection of the vending community consequently has concerns of a different order, since permits and fines are not necessarily a priority for the women (see Dunn’s testimony in Section 4.2) and as a result, the permit issue is secondary to the overall issue of survival. As Stella states in Section 4.3, “a stronger appeal” was therefore necessary.

When taking into consideration Dunn’s assertion that the identity of vendors is co-constituted in multiple ways (see Section 1.7) and how, within this determination gender is a “key structuring force,” it soon becomes apparent precisely how the sectional organisation of the Women’s Committee was able to bring to the fore *qualitative* cultural- and ethnic-specific issues that, to a degree, define the women and their reasons for entering into the profession in the first place. The emotive issue of domestic violence, therefore, somewhat encompasses the motivations of Latina vendors and their mode of economic incorporation, while at the same time,

being advantageous when attempting to unify them around their common and defining themes.

It was hence the intersubjective work of the Women's Committee that subsequently elucidated the qualitative and socially reproductive dimensions of the women vendors' lives, which, while not initially considered to be directly work-related, were in fact determinative of their status. Hence, an analogy can be drawn here with the proletarian condition itself, since just as unemployment precedes employment (both conceptually and historically), the necessity of social reproduction also precedes the search for exchange-based subsistence (see Section 2.6). For the women, their prior history is thus the unambiguous pre-condition of their work and a key contributing factor when considering vending in relation their other all-encompassing roles as mothers, heads of women-only households, caregivers and sole breadwinners.

It is these subjective and qualitative dimensions that subsequently lie submerged beneath the, at times, contradictory "personifications of [the] economic categories" that the women involuntarily labour under. In this regard, the appeal of Lift the Caps only addresses one facet of the women's lives and hence, underestimates them as "embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests,"²⁰¹ while at the same time, overlooking their immediate priorities in terms of social reproduction.

Beneath such personifications however, the rationality of workers (see Section 2.5) is always to a degree, delimited from their more purely economic activity and as a result, workers will always have the capacity, if not the resources, to overturn and transform social relations by weaving strong bonds between themselves (see Section 2.3). Accordingly, it was only once the Women's Committee had cemented trust around the common experience of domestic violence,

²⁰¹ From Marx, K., *Capital Vol. 1: Preface to the First German Edition* (1967). Quote accessed here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm>

were they then able to interrogate the double shift and grow their appreciation of the pivotal role they play in the city's overall reproduction. It was this emotional-yet-collective trust-building, combined with political education, that subsequently unified the *quantitative* and *qualitative* dimensions of the women's lives and as such, this consciousness-raising effort is somewhat emblematic of the hybridity of worker centre organising.²⁰² Accordingly hereafter, I will explain how the identification of these discrete concerns helped move the organisation forward.

Undeterred by ethnic incongruities found within the vending hierarchy, SVP has from the outset, attempted to formalise vending around a single work-related issue: the lack of affordable permits. Above all, this universal concern, therefore, defines market access for the vendors, yet as previously explained, while permit scarcity remains an abiding concern, SVP's campaign to Lift the Caps has seemingly underperformed in terms of securing active participation over time, since in the eyes of many, this most general of issues has not comprehensively captured what motivates the vendors most. It was only when further compositional analysis was complete, however, that SVP's organisers were then able to make inroads in terms of engagement. Instrumental to this were the findings of *Vulnerable in Itself* (2019), a survey which brought to light the discrete social reproduction concerns of Latina vendors. The women's survey thus not only made apparent the work-related concerns of women vendors, but also unearthed a series of erstwhile social reproduction issues that prevented them from fully participating at SVP.

To eliminate such obstacles to participation, the project subsequently established outreach clinics in the outer boroughs, improving access to services, while also satisfying the need for adequate childcare provision during meetings. In addition, through the Women's Committee, the project also provided an intimate space in which Latina vendors could raise more personal and domestic concerns, thereby allowing them to discuss their shared

²⁰² As earlier described by McAlevey, see Section 1.3.

vulnerabilities, the disclosure of which solidified the women's commitment to one another.

In this manner, SVP would introduce changes to the process, designed to shift organisational focus from one big issue, towards what Jane McAlevey (2016) calls organising on a community terrain. Yet, while SVP has chosen to switch its efforts towards a more gender-specific and community-based approach, it would be remiss to imagine that the project is committing to an exclusively Latina-centric strategy. Hence, in this concluding chapter, I consider how the empowerment of Latina vendors has the potential to galvanise SVP's multiethnic membership in all its diversity.

Clearly to date, worker centres have understood the efficacy of organising workers through the dual aspects of ethnicity and community. Due to an emphasis on language-based services, however, worker centre campaigns have long relied on monoethnic organising as the most efficient way to establish meaningful group cohesion. Nevertheless, an over-reliance on this approach can leave worker centres under-networked and unable to scale-up (see Sections 1.2 & 1.3), thereby limiting their ability to affect decisive social change in industries that employ more than one ethnic group. Monoethnic organisation can subsequently, among other factors, limit the capacity of marginal groups to translate their needs into collective frames of action (Milkman et al. 2010; Osuji).

In response to these limitations, worker centre organisers such as Elizabeth Sunwoo of the Multi-ethnic Immigrant Organising Network (MIWON) have expressed frustration at the way in which organising around a single ethnicity inhibits the "brokerage capacity" of worker centres and as a consequence, lessens their ability to traverse "economies of scale." Similarly, Chinyere Osuji, a theorist of racial and ethnic boundaries, asserts that organising along a single ethnic line can make campaigns in multiethnic sectors difficult (Milkman et al. 2010; Osuji 91-2). This appears to be especially true for smaller and less-well represented groups, particularly when attempting to unionise in any sector in which that group is not representative. This therefore

puts monoethnic worker centres at a strategic disadvantage when attempting to organise within heterogenous informal labour contexts (and especially whenever attempting to legislate from the ground up [see Lesniewski & Canon 2016]).

In addition, monoethnic strategies have in the past, also contributed to the widespread yet erroneous perception that worker centres are synonymous with winning rights for immigrant workers alone (and Latinx workers in particular). In truth however, the spectrum of ethnicities served by worker centres is considerably more diverse and now includes many low-income native-born workers as informality becomes ever more generalised (Milkman et al. 2010; Osuji 94). As such, the tendency to organise along monoethnic lines is chiefly symptomatic of the racial and ethnic fragmentation of the US proletariat as a whole. This historical decomposition is hence the result of successive waves of immigration and racialised hiring practices (Maldonado 2009; Waldinger & Lichter 2003); a dynamic that has long prevented the US working class from becoming a “class-for-itself” (Davis 1986; Fantasia 1989). Dissatisfaction with this fragmentary approach is however, again voiced by Sunwoo who states, “capacity-wise all of us are limited to certain size [...] and geographic area” (Milkman et al. 2010; Osuji 92). While in 2010, this implied that further efforts towards multiethnic organisation and enhanced networking were required if worker centres wished to scale-up, this is effectively what has transpired over the last decade, where we have seen an increasing trend of institutional partnership and a fostering of networks between individual worker centres (see Section 1.4).

Early in worker centre development, Victor Narro, an expert on community law and low-wage organising explained, that “very few worker centres [...] have succeeded at large-scale economic intervention in labour markets through worker organising efforts,” something that he observed at the time, as resulting from a “focus on immigrant workers from one particular occupation [...] or one particular ethnic group” (Narro 2005, 467-9). Yet, Narro also considered MIWON exemplary, since they were “able to confront and take action on large-scale issues at a

much broader level” (520). In this regard, due its own multiethnic character, SVP has the ready capacity to overcome such foregoing limitations by drawing on internal differences found among the membership. Nevertheless, the identification of such affordances has only recently been made possible by further compositional analysis, whereby, as a result of the women’s survey, the project was able to report on the unique stresses experienced by Latina pushcart vendors (see Sections 3.6 and 3.7) thus giving organisers a route in.

Only after the interrogative work of the women themselves were more fundamental issues eventually identified and, as a result of their one-on-one conversations, SVP’s Latina vendors were finally able to break silence around common experiences such as domestic violence and the wider travails of single motherhood. Once divulged, these acknowledgments thereafter opened a deeper political conversation around the double shift, the social importance of women’s labour and gender-based violence at home and on the streets. Before now however, the women’s concerns were not considered entirely work-related, yet by granting them further perspective on the “sum of their lives,” SVP has since been able to better engage this marginal, yet numerically significant portion of its base around non-work issues.

While this pivot towards the capacities of Latina vendors might be seen as the privileging one ethnicity over others, it qualitatively differs from monoethnic organising which as a rule, tends to be advocacy-oriented (see Section 1.3). So, rather than simply relying on an amalgam of ethnicity and occupational affinities to hold the group together, the intensive work of the Women’s Committee clearly prioritised organising, since it is the women’s self-understanding of their own emotional labour which has allowed them to develop meaningful bonds around shared experiences. Moreover, when combined with political education, the women then came to appreciate how their common biographical experiences had fundamentally influenced their entry into vending as a profession. Thus, by encouraging the women to interrogate the sum of their prior experiences, SVP has been able to shift its analysis from the generality of permit scarcity

towards the specificity of the women's lived dispositions (see section 2.6).

Prior to the foundation of the Women's Committee however, SVP had mainly organised and mobilised around Lift the Caps and as such, this work-related package of reforms was originally conceived as the tide that would lift all boats. As a result, permit reform has long been considered universal enough in its appeal to sufficiently muster long-term engagement at the project, thereby cementing itself as the ultimate horizon of organisational activity ("Come for the legal services, stay for the campaigns" as Stella put it in our interview).

Nonetheless, while permit scarcity is an abiding concern for all vendors, SVP's principal campaign is primarily an advocacy-based legal effort. In practice, this has meant that, all too often, strategy, initiative and agency at the project has remained with expert professional staff. So, while the requirement of political participation at SVP is impressed upon all new members during recruitment (see Section 3.1), their active engagement has not always been guaranteed. As such, while new members are typically happy to sign-up and avail themselves of the project's free services, they often only participate on a shallow and transactional basis. As Jane McAlevey (2016) points out in her analysis of effective organising, this type of shallow engagement is typically the result of putting advocacy and mobilisation first. She recommends however, that in order to prioritise organising, grassroots campaigns should be purposefully designed with the express intention of growing the organisation and securing the engagement of members.

While the need for permits remains an evergreen concern for all vendors, Lift the Caps had over time observably underperformed in terms of encouraging member-led activity and as result, participation at the project faltered because of divergent temporalities within SVP's approach; causing vacillation, since in the short-term vendors are always keen to take advantage of the project's main benefits as-and-when required, yet over the long duration of the main campaign, the slowness of reform had undoubtedly cooled their tenacity.

To be clear, this does not mean that SVP was wrong to identify the permit issue as the principal concern of all vendors, nor does it imply that advocacy-based legislative efforts are not necessary. Quite the contrary. Yet, in terms of growing the organisation and sustaining participation, reform-based initiatives have performed less well than expected and as such, SVP's major campaign needed to be supplemented with a variety of smaller-scale activities which produce more durable forms of engagement.

Inconveniently for SVP, the reform of street vending relies heavily on the whims of transactional New York politicians and as a result, the tempo of Lift the Caps has been uneven. In this regard, enacting ambitious industry-wide reform is nowhere near as straight-forward as typical union activities such as strike-building. Even just convincing the NYCC to call the vote for Intro 1116 was therefore a monumental and somewhat tedious task. The disjunction between long- and short-term temporalities within SVP's approach was hence most conspicuous during outreach, whereby many vendors were vocally disheartened by the long culmination period of Lift the Caps. Clearly, monotony had set in, with a good deal of vendors taking the view that the fight for vending reform would be a multi-generational struggle. As one Arabic-speaking vendor working near Zuccotti Park explained to me: "My father died waiting 30 years for a permit. I'm still waiting. Inshallah, my son will get one."

Although immediate relief from punitive fines is perennially attractive to all vendors, the prospect of lengthy civic activism has only limited appeal and subsequently, without smaller interim victories, SVP was in danger of becoming a service-led organisation with the benefits of membership accessed only as-and-when required. Somewhat confirming this view, when SVP rallied at City Hall ahead of the hearing for Intro 1116, while a healthy number of vendor members did attend, it took considerable effort to energise the existing base, let alone bring new vendors into the fight. Accordingly, as organiser Stella previously stated (see Section 4.3), legislative advocacy efforts do not automatically engender active participation (no matter how

valid or universally applicable) and consequently, a stronger appeal was necessary.

Despite this inertia, the identification of organising potentials found among Latina pushcart vendors, prompted the organisation to develop a series of community-based approaches explicitly aimed at revitalising core participation. Key to tapping this latent potential was the establishment of the Women's Committee which, combined with the founding of new chapters in outlying districts, allowed SVP to lay the groundwork for a stronger, yet more targeted appeal. Moreover, by opening dialogue around women's work and domestic violence, SVP's organisers were then able to seed political consciousness among the women, thereby allowing them to gain a vantage point on their common condition.

As a result, the trust-building work of the Women's Committee ultimately served as the cement of participation (or as Stella put it, moved the women beyond mere participation and "got them really engaged"). Likewise, the revitalisation of decision-making structures within SVP's process empowered ordinary members to develop new initiatives, thereby strengthening internal democracy, which was essential if vendor members were to set their own tempo. In addition, as previously mentioned in Section 4.4, the development of these capacities came at just the right time, building organisational readiness ahead of the rolling social reproduction crisis that was the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.1 Efforts to Move Beyond Inertia

The passing of Intro 1116 was clearly a remarkable success, yet when I first arrived at SVP in 2019, victory was not assured. Back then, only a minority of legislators supported the bill, creating a political impasse that cooled the determination of members and non-members alike. Compounding this, the mayor had unaccountably vetoed the previous bill, leading to a sense of powerlessness among many in the vending community. Thus, for a great deal of

vendors, the resulting deadlock seemed a fait accompli, making recruitment and retention even more difficult. Given these inclement conditions, it was apparent to everyone at SVP, that the project would have to make considerable changes to its process if it wanted to foster the high levels of engagement that any breakthrough would require.

While most vendors I met during outreach were glad to give me their contact details, they were trepidatious about the chances reform, often explaining that participation at SVP was not worth their time. This was not simply an excuse or laziness, but a genuine concern, since most vendors are desperately time-poor and as a result, any time off they do get, they want to spend with their families. So, while many of them were already on the waiting list for a vending permit, it remained difficult to encourage them to come to meetings based on the project's existing appeal. It was thus clear to SVP's organisers that, despite the fact most vendors would gladly accept any alleviative change in their situation, the main campaign was not serving well as a recruitment draw and as a result, it remained difficult to bring newcomers into the fray and grow the organisation.

From an organisational standpoint, it was easy enough to find vendors who wanted to have their fines cancelled and once they came into the office, they needed little convincing to sign up and fight for vending reform. It was somewhat more difficult, however, to guarantee their active participation and as a result, the project's database contained many lapsed members with expired contact details. This was a considerable problem, since on occasion, shallow engagement had led staff to chide members over non-attendance, something that no one appreciated. It was therefore not hard to conclude that despite permit scarcity remaining the most universal concern for all vendors, this most general of issues did not function as a comprehensive organising principle and subsequently, to fix this, changes to the process would be required.

While subdued about the prospect of vending reform, most vendors were just trying to

stay afloat and, in this regard, the promise of a distant victory was insufficiently enticing. Fatigued and without any interim victories in sight, many questioned the project's focus on "one big win." For this reason, it was suggested that SVP needed to develop a series of smaller, short-term campaigns in order to keep the members engaged and participation lively. Hence, one of the first questions that Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez put to staff when appointed as co-director in 2019 was: "What is SVP's ambition beyond permit reform?" This was a valid and necessary question about the long-term orientation of the organisation, yet at the time very few at the project had much of an idea about where things were headed once reform was won, and formal recognition achieved.

Consequently, while Lift the Caps had been the main priority for many years, a certain amount of tunnel-vision had set in. Attempting reverse this trend however, SVP's Campaign Committee were asked to come up with series of smaller short-term projects. These various initiatives were then presented to the membership at a special general meeting, whereby the ordinary members were encouraged to actively discuss the committee's proposals (see Section 4.0). By adding this extra layer of deliberation, SVP was thereafter able to enhance the democratic participation of ordinary members, while in addition, giving them a greater stake in the work of the project.

Armed with fresh ideas and new priorities, SVP then began to move forward with the Women's Committee and as a result, the women were then able to identify a series of unmet needs that so far had remained unspoken. It was these submerged concerns that gave organisers a route in, allowing them to raise consciousness among the women on a more sectional basis. Yet, complimentary to this, was the founding of new chapters in the outer boroughs, which in turn improved outreach among unlicensed mobile Latina vendors; a development that later allowed the project draw on community resources and carry-out mutual-aid in these districts, when the pandemic hit in March 2020.

With assistance from the offices of Senators Jessica Ramos and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, SVP subsequently provided free hot-meals to low-income Queens residents.²⁰³ Such food-relief efforts not only provided the city's poor with hot fresh meals during the pandemic, but also demonstrated how vendors were able to continue feeding the city's immigrant working class, excluded as they were from the official pandemic relief programme. When indoor dining was subsequently suspended in December 2020, street food then became the only option for many of those still working, including nurses and other essential workers²⁰⁴ In response however, SVP once again drew attention to the socially reproductive work of immigrant vendors on which the city heavily relies.

Indeed, throughout the year, new opportunities arose that allowed SVP to intervene in city politics. For instance, in their attempt to bring forward the vote on Intro 1116, SVP's members picketed numerous politicians, including Speaker Corey Johnson's apartment.²⁰⁵ At the time, Johnson was widely tipped to be the next mayor, yet withdrew from the race after what had been an uncomfortable summer for many New York politicians, following the citywide protests and riots that came in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Somewhat ruefully, when bill was eventually passed, Johnson would concede that: "No one has a monopoly on public space."²⁰⁶ In addition, a further impediment to the bill's progress was removed when council member Rafael Espinal, whose promotional events SVP had also picketed, stepped down. He thereby vacated his seat on the Consumer Affairs Committee and the subsequent

²⁰³ Short-video about SVP's mutual-aid efforts in Queens, 'Team AOC + the Street Vendor Project,' Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 17 November 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKRkWitD5xl&>

²⁰⁴ 'COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Street Vendors in New York City, USA,' WIEGO, Jan 2021: https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_FactSheet_NYC_SVP_web.pdf

²⁰⁵ Gonzalez, D., '\$20,000 for a Permit? New York May Finally Offer Vendors Some Relief' *New York Times*, 29 Jan 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/nyregion/street-vendors-permits-nyc.html>

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

opening allowed Diana Ayala (District 8) to become the new chair, thereby clearing the way for a fresh vote on Intro 1116.

Beyond electoral politics, however, the explosive popular insurgency and social justice mobilisations that ran throughout 2019-20 (including New York's Fuck the Police (FTP) protests, the Women's Strike, anti-ICE patrols and the George Floyd Rebellion), all combined to shake the certainties of New York politicians. This uprising in the middle of a pandemic consequently sharpened the minds of legislators, who then turned their attention towards decriminalisation; looking as they were to make concessions on issues of race, policing and incarceration (not least due to the fact that the 88th Police Precinct in Brooklyn had been overrun during the riots).²⁰⁷ Seizing on this, Mayor de Blasio would consequently offer concessions over vending reform, seeing this as a politically low-cost response to the insurgency.²⁰⁸ Hence, it was during this fast-moving episode that SVP was able to take advantage of its expanded network of alliances, allowing the project to seek common cause with those who were not enmeshed in the business-as-usual transactional politics of the NYCC.

5.2 Findings

As previously described in Section 5.0, monoethnic organising has been an effective technique for tying-in worker centre members of the same ethnicity and while in the past, it was certainly true that monoethnic organising might have limited worker centre capacity whenever

²⁰⁷ On 20 May 2020 the 88th NYPD precinct in Brooklyn was reportedly overrun by protestors, while other precincts came under siege, during the nationwide riots that began in Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd.

²⁰⁸ Crowley, C., 'Bill de Blasio Says NYPD Won't Be Involved in Street Vendor Enforcement Anymore,' *New York Mag*, 08 June 2020: <https://www.grubstreet.com/2020/06/street-vendor-enforcement-police.html>

attempting to organise in multiethnic sectors (Milkman *et al.* 2010; Narro 2005), over the last decade, a significant portion of the worker centre movement has made serious efforts to transcend ethnic and racial boundaries (see Section 1.4). Hence, in this section I will examine how, within SVP's multiethnic approach, the project was able to raise levels of engagement by concentrating on the needs of one exemplary subsection of the membership, with the aim of inspiring others.

Until recently, SVP's success rested on its capacity to transform individual grievances into a collective frame of action: Lift the caps, a credible package of legislative reform beneficial to all members. As already established, the development of collective power for any worker centre means growing the capacity to permanently alter the power relationship between the membership and the institutions that dominate them. At SVP, the capacity to develop such power consequently rests on the project's the ability to recruit and retain participant members over time. As such, this activity depends on key two factors: (i) the strength of the project's appeal; and (ii) the durability of ties between vendor members.

Lively participation has therefore always been fundamental to group cohesion at the project, yet building active political engagement has not always been straight forward. As it stands, New York's vendors are geographically distributed over a large area and sometimes difficult to reach. In addition, vending can be a transient and seasonal occupation for many and thus, maintaining contact with the vendors is hard work. Moreover, because of the long duration of the campaign to Lift the Caps, the distant promise of an affordable permit was not doing enough to keep the majority of vendor members more than superficially engaged. Hence, when I arrived at SVP in 2019, organisational growth had somewhat stalled, in turn, leading to the aforementioned reappraisal of the internal process.

In response to this inertia, a consensus developed at SVP that an increase in the number of small-scale campaigns and projects was required in order to enhance participation.

For this reason, it was surmised that if SVP was able to tackle a greater range of more achievable issues, then any subsequent gains would keep morale buoyant. Moreover, if the tempo of organisational activity could be maintained, SVP would have a greater chance of wresting agency from New York's transactional liberal politicians, upon whom much had previously depended. By addressing a broader array of specific concerns, however, SVP was then able to craft a more attractive and binding appeal, that was now predominantly based around the vendors' own intersubjectivity. With these enhancements in mind, new lines of inquiry were then developed among the membership, so that their relationship to the work of the project might be reconfigured.

As a result, SVP was able to increase the array of sub-issues that the organisation was capable of addressing, implementing three key enhancements, each of which favoured organising: (i) engaging the whole membership in deliberative decision-making; (ii) developing the conversational space of the Women's Committee to discuss social reproduction issues; and (iii) conducting more sustained outreach in the outer boroughs. Significantly, it was these latter two measures that did most to meet the needs of Latina pushcart vendors, a sizeable yet underserved section of vending community that SVP would need to activate in order to renew base-building. It was hence the development of these two final initiatives that subsequently allowed the project to tap into the ethnic- and gender-specific potentials found among Latina vendors (as Kathleen Dunn's research had previously highlighted, see Section 1.7).

In addition, by giving the vendors greater deliberative involvement, the project was able to increase democratic participation, thereby giving members a stake in the strategic orientation of the project along with ownership of its initiatives. Yet, while this was time-consuming work, the inclusion of ordinary members in direct decision-making eradicated some of the doubt and distrust that was occasionally present between the staff and membership, thereby allowing for a greater degree of accountability (as per the "high touch" model promoted by Jane McAlevey

[2016] in Section 1.3). Moreover, as a result of this greater involvement, the enthusiasm of the ordinary members was palpable. “This is how it should be done,” one vendor remarked to me.

Furthermore, the emotional work of the Women’s Committee disclosed a series of discrete, yet interwoven concerns among unlicensed Latina vendors and as a consequence, the women were able to cement strong bonds of solidarity around issues that were previously considered to be stigmatising. Moreover, by working through these issues collectively, the women were able to lay bare gender asymmetries at work and home, giving organisers a route in. Making use of this opportunity, the Women’s Committee organisers were then able to seed political consciousness around the double-shift and the implications of the women’s socially reproductive labour. Taken alongside the establishment of new chapters in the outer boroughs, these enhancements have granted SVP the capacity to better reach Latina vendors: a group that before now had been “working in the shadows” outside of the permit system altogether.

Yet rather than signalling any major change in strategic direction, these improvements to the process were designed to support SVP’s principal campaign, while at the same time developing the capacities of a highly engaged and deliberative base, capable of identifying its own priorities and planning action on that basis. Francesca Polletta states that this type of participatory democracy strengthens grass-roots movements and organisations, particularly “[among] people with little experience of routine politics” (Polletta 2002, 209).²⁰⁹ Hence, the changes made at SVP altered the mix of advocacy, mobilisation and organising, since to date, legal advocacy and campaigning work typically took precedence over the organisation of

²⁰⁹ Polletta calls deliberative participatory politics: *prefigurative*, deriving the term from Wini Breines’ seminal study of the New Left (*Community and Organisation in the New Left 1962-68*, Rutgers University Press [1982]). As such, Breines states that prefigurative politics espouse the broad values of freedom, equality and community in advance of nominal strategic goals. Accordingly, such politics are the product of groups “whose internal structure is characterised by a minimal division of labour, decentralised authority, and egalitarian ethos and whose decision-making is direct and consensus oriented” (Polletta 2002, 6).

members.

When I arrived at the project in 2019, SVP's principal recruitment incentive was the offer of legal assistance, serving as the main draw for newcomers. By design, this enticement provided staff with an opening, whereby they could explain to new members what political participation at SVP entailed. It can therefore be said that SVP has always aimed to involve its members in the political life of the project (see Section 3.1). Yet because vendors are extremely time poor, however, working anything up to a 14-hour day plus extra housework for women, deeper participation often felt like an additional burden.²¹⁰

There were accordingly significant obstacles to full participation, although in part, this was generated by the ethnic distribution of vendors across the city; a spatial distribution that was known to be heavily gendered. Moreover, mobile women vendors were altogether excluded from the permit market, legal or otherwise, and as a result, SVP's appeal has not always been quite as universal as one might expect. Because these various constraints, many of the vendor members were therefore simply 'participants in principle' whose engagement was not assured, and despite the universal need for affordable permits, it was extremely common during outreach for vendors to voice their frustrations about the slowness of reform; an attitude that was most pronounced among non-members, who would often disparage the possibility of reform occurring during their lifetime.

Originally, SVP had developed its recruitment strategy around unfair ticketing, which itself is a consequence of artificial permit scarcity. As such, this most general of issues has negatively affected licensed and unlicensed vendors alike. So, while Lift the Caps might automatically be assumed to be a form of *multiethnic* appeal, one addressing the principal

²¹⁰ Tirtho Dutta pointed out to me that many of the Bangladeshi vendor members are elderly and cannot reach the office without assistance due the confusing subway system and their inability to read signs in English.

occupational stumbling block besetting all vendors, it has been observed by McAlevey (2016) that campaigning efforts which prioritise only advocacy and mobilisation, often underperform from a base-building standpoint, since the task of organising is regularly subordinated to goals of the strategic campaign. These efforts, as a result, often fail to attract outsiders; a view which is congruent with that of lead organiser Stella Becerril who points out that deeper engagement has not automatically flowed from SVP's main legislative appeal, no matter how universal the need among vendors (see Section 4.3).

Hence, while in practice, the vendors are typically happy to avail themselves of the benefits of SVP's free services, they often keep their engagement shallow, thereby replicating the free-rider problem that so frequently besets workplace unions. Thus, beyond a core group of highly engaged members (the so-called 'Power 100') many of SVP's vendor members would only attend meetings to the minimum requirement, perhaps only mobilising occasionally, whenever a 'big push' was required. Despite artificial permit scarcity being a universal and valid concern, however, the widely experienced misery of the existing permit system nonetheless failed to sustain organisational growth over time and subsequently, engagement was often passive, fitful and transactional, in stark contrast to the deliberative participation that both Polletta and McAlevey espouse (Polletta 2002; McAlevey 2016).

Yet, SVP has a strategic disadvantage when attempting to develop short-term campaigns and projects, since unlike unions and workers centres situated in more conventional industries, the project's vendor members cannot easily suspend their labour (i.e. the principal form of leverage available to most low-wage workers is denied to them). This ultimately means that there is far less opportunity to engage the membership using traditional forms of worker empowerment (e.g. strike building or picketing employers); a disadvantage which directly results from the informal and subsistence-based character of vending as a profession, constituted as it is by chains of subcontracting, whereby there is typically no direct employer (and sometimes

only a permit holder who lives in a distant country).

Furthermore, these chains are often familial or kinship-based, whereby one vendor is typically training a friend or relative on the cart, further blurring distinctions between employer and employee. The refusal of work is therefore an impossibility for most vendors (see Section 5.3 for a description of the complex social relationships found within informal labour markets) and as Mohammed Attia previously pointed out, vendors beginning out in the trade often see their employer on the cart as an ally and benefactor.

These structuring factors subsequently limit the variety of targets that SVP can easily identify, thereby constraining the number of smaller campaigns that it is possible to develop. As a result, new campaigning opportunities only come on-line very occasionally. Yet, to compensate for this, SVP has been able to substitute other small-scale activities, such as direct action against buildings and the picketing of politician's offices. These immediate tactics are, however, rarely cumulative and moreover, difficult to sustain over time since they never reach the standard of being full projects or campaigning issues. In response to these shortcomings, the project hence needed to diversify its appeal, and did so by conducting an inquiry into the complex issues faced by women vendors. This is not least significant, since according to Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO 2020) the majority of vendors in the outer boroughs are now women.²¹¹

By developing a more specialised appeal among Latina vendors around non-work-related issues, however, SVP's organisers were then able to cultivate deeper participation. Here the lessons learned from the LA Street Vendor Campaign, VAMOS Unidos and RHFV would provide SVP with a replicable road map to empower Latina vendors with the hope of inspiring

²¹¹ Fact sheet accessible here: <https://www.wiego.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-and-informal-economy-street-vendors-new-york-city-usa>

others. In this regard, the women's survey might be seen as a compositional analysis, highlighting a unique disparity among Latina vendors; a gap that consequently had strong organising potential. The commissioning of *Vulnerable in Itself* (2019) was therefore an important first step towards unearthing ethnic- and gender-specific issues among the women, the identification of which, from an organisational standpoint, facilitated the structuring of community into class (see McAlevey 2016).

While the women's survey identified many of these social reproduction concerns in a preliminary manner, the members themselves did not yet understand them to be vending-related. Thus, when the Women's Committee was first proposed, there was some hesitance among the membership about why SVP should organise women vendors on a sectional and social basis. This reticence was somewhat apposite, however, since before now, there had been a general consensus that the principal strength of the organisation was its dedication to multiethnic organising and as a result, the prioritisation of more qualitative sectional concerns had been somewhat unfamiliar to the vendors.

Yet, beneath the permit issue, the women's survey was able to identify a key feature among Latina vendors which blunted the efficacy of Lift the Caps as an organisational keystone. As Kathleen Dunn mentioned during the hearing, the majority of women vending in the outer boroughs were found to be altogether excluded from the illegal permit market since, the underground market is predominantly a "boy's club" and accordingly, renting a permit is a risky criminal activity for women vendors (see Section 4.2). In terms of priorities, this asymmetry therefore put mobile women vendors at some distance from the fight for permits, since above all, they were more concerned with the issue of daily survival and as a consequence, the reproductive well-being of their families. Furthermore, childcare concerns tethered the women to their home neighbourhoods, making attendance at the project difficult.

The resulting matrix of issues that emerged from the report, subsequently gave SVP the

impetus to establish new chapters in the outer boroughs, thereby allowing the project to better connect with mobile pushcart vendors in these outlying districts. This more embedded form of outreach also addressed the childcare deficit, which before now had placed serious time constraints on Latina vendors, who are mainly single mothers and sole breadwinners. SVP was thereafter able to conduct regular meetings in situ and quickly respond to local emergencies on the ground as they arose (as described in the stand-off between women vendors in Corona Plaza, see Section 4.3). Moreover, by also meeting childcare needs, SVP was then able to unify the women's productive and reproductive concerns (i.e. the twin aspects of women vendors' lives) and as a result, these combined measures improved inclusion and participation for Latina vendors at the project overall.

Through this more sustained approach, SVP organisers were then able to seed political education among the women. Before this could happen, however, trust had to be developed among the women on a one-to-one basis and only thereafter, were members of the Women's Committee able to foster close personal relationships with the ensuing possibility that these newly formed friendships might serve as the cement of solidarity. Through their collective and interrogative work, the women then began to lay the groundwork for political education, whereby consciousness-raising could be easily integrated into their organisational activities (including their attendance at Women's Strike NYC).

As Janice Fine has pointed out, women's committees and projects within worker centres have "strong consciousness-raising, political education and confidence-building components" (Cobble 2007, 216; Fine). Moreover, this type of holistic organising among women at SVP has further enhanced the project's ability to network with other women-led workers' organisations. Similarly, their participation at Women's Strike NYC subsequently allowed SVP's vendor members to connect with a broader citywide discussion around gender and social reproduction, thereby serving as a rallying point for a variety of intersectional and coalitional causes. In this

sense, the organisation of the Latina vendors has opened a new front on which SVP might fight.

As previously mentioned by organisers Lisa and Stella, however, it is apparent that more work needs to be done within the Women's Committee before these social reproduction concerns can be brought before the general membership. Nevertheless, the recent sectional pivot towards mobile Latina vendors working in the outer boroughs has already done much to enhance organisational readiness ahead of what has been perhaps SVP's most challenging crisis: the Covid-19 pandemic, whereby the subsequent outbreak threw social relations in New York into turmoil and as a result, food security became a widespread concern. During the ensuing crisis, the safe preparation and distribution of food thus became of paramount importance in poorer districts such as Queens, the pandemic's so-called "Ground Zero."²¹²

While the city was slow to assist undocumented workers, SVP's members were well-placed to provide hot meals for the poor, sick and unemployed in these districts. SVP's shift towards organising in the outer boroughs was therefore prescient and as such, the Latina vendors carried the organisation through what has been a very gendered crisis. As WEGIO was to report, during the pandemic: 94% of vendors felt a contraction in income, with one-third of members expressing a difficulty paying rent (either at home or for their garages). As a consequence, the majority of vendors reported an "increase in unpaid household labour," with women vendors bearing most of the burden.²¹³

Since much of the immigrant workforce in New York was ineligible for unemployment benefits, SVP thereafter began to militate for the rights of essential workers, excluded as they

²¹² Holpuch, A., 'Corona in Corona: Deadly toll in a New York neighbourhood tells a story of race, poverty and inequality,' *The Guardian*, 15 June 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/15/coronavirus-corona-queens-ny-virus-shook-neighborhood>

²¹³ WEIGO fact sheet accessible here: <https://www.wiego.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-and-informal-economy-street-vendors-new-york-city-usa>

are from any federal pandemic relief programme²¹⁴ and hence, bring attention to this, SVP's members would soon thereafter take part in a mass hunger strike alongside Make the Road (MRNY) and other NYC-based worker centres, petitioning then-Governor Cuomo to include undocumented workers in the planned multibillion-dollar emergency wage provision.²¹⁵

It was consequently through this combination of measures (i.e. the democratisation of the internal process; the solidification of affiliations among women; an increase in the spread of available issues; and the ramification of the project's external network) that SVP became both more flexible and accountable, demonstrating organisational readiness and the ability to quickly shift focus in the middle of a rapidly evolving crisis. This capacity to switch between different priorities was to prove particularly useful since the pandemic created a series of unrelenting work-related and social reproduction crises for immigrant workers. By opening up the organisation to face a wider set of concerns, however, SVP has since been able to adapt and take advantage of emergent political conditions in New York during what has been a crucial and defining period.

So rather than simply focusing on the universal appeal of Lift the Caps, SVP has thus been able to draw on the heterogeneity of experiences found among the membership, thereby discovering a series of important sub-issues that the project had previously overlooked. Yet, to meet the complexity of these needs, SVP had to reshape its internal process, through the development of novel deliberative forums and consciousness-raising workshops. It was within these newly established discursive spaces that SVP's vendor members were thereafter able to

²¹⁴ Press, A. N., 'Andrew Cuomo Is Still Blocking Hundreds of Thousands of New York Workers From Receiving COVID-19 Relief,' *Jacobin*, 30 March 2021: <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/03/new-york-covid-relief-budget-tax-rich-undocumented-workers>

²¹⁵ This immigrant coalition would protest under the slogan "Tax the Rich, Feed the People," with the intention of breaking the city's historic predisposition towards austerity budgets.

collectively weave the steadfast ties of participation, in effect, becoming “each other’s reason to show up.”

Hence, while on the surface, it might appear that SVP has refocused its efforts increasingly on Latina vendors, the development of strong ties among the women has been a boon for organising at the project and as such, this approach is already starting to shore up multiethnic participation, while at the same time updating the occupational profile of the membership. This is therefore an important evolution that more broadly reflects the feminisation of occupational dynamics under neoliberalism (see Sections 1.5 and 1.7) whereby vending in general has become widely stigmatised as mere “women’s work” (Agadjanian 2002; Boserup 2007).²¹⁶ In contradictory fashion, however, a residual gendered division of labour would still remain embedded within the vending hierarchy itself, an outmoded artefact of the city’s past priorities. By assisting women vendors in the development of their own solidarity, SVP has thus been able to demonstrate that those on the lowest rungs of the vending ladder can lead the way, while in turn, showing other ethnic groups at the project their class potential.

5.3 Organising Informality Across Differences and Boundaries

As earlier described, through intensive trust-building efforts, the Latina members of SVP Women’s Committee were able to build strong ties between each other, thereby generating the necessary engagement levels required to win over vendors from other ethnic backgrounds. Beginning from a distinct set of social reproduction issues first identified by the women’s survey,

²¹⁶ For a description of how shifting occupational gender dynamics have led to both a de-gendering and re-gendering of the street vending, see Agadjanian, V., ‘Men Doing “Women’s Work: Masculinity and Gender Relations Among Street Vendors in Maputo Mozambique.”’ *Journal of Men’s Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 2002, pp. 329-342, 2002.

the discursive space of the Women's Committee subsequently provided a safe and supportive environment in which these vendors could interrogate their defining experiences. Moreover, the elucidation of these concerns gave organisers a route in, allowing them to seed political consciousness among the women, thereby affording them a vantage point on "the sum of their lives" (see Section 4.3). As a result, the women now have a fuller appreciation of the essential role they play in the reproduction of the city, enhancing their own sense of dignity, while better equipping them to participate in decision-making at the project.

Through their burgeoning appreciation of the double shift, the women were then able to connect together the different aspects of women's labour, allowing them to see their work, both at home and in the street, as two parts of a whole. This insight was a revelation to most, since it touched on many of the motivating factors that had pushed them into vending in the first place. Moreover, through their emotional work, the women were then able to remove the stigma of self-blame that many of them carried and in its place, foster a deep sense of commitment to one another. These ties were subsequently far more resilient than any that staff at the project could hope to engineer, in turn, allowing the women to become each other's reason to participate.

As Piven and Cloward (1977) are keen to remind us, poor people must first build up their self-confidence whenever seeking to challenge the status quo. This means overcoming "the shame bred culture which blames them for their plight." Only once the stigma of self-blame is removed can they then, "break the bonds of conformity enforced by work, by family, by community, by every strand of institutional life [including] fears induced by police, by militia [and] by company guards" (7). So, while it is typical for low-income people to blame themselves for their own predicament,²¹⁷ under the right circumstances these negative feelings of self-doubt can be transformed into positive feelings of "collective defiance" (8). By forming the Women's

²¹⁷ In Piven & Cloward's words, "they blame God, or they blame themselves" (1977, 14).

Committee and giving their quotidian concerns weight, SVP has thus been able to transform the women's personal sense of shame into a source of collective agency; an act of "transvaluation" that has allowed them join in common bond (12).

The renewed process at SVP consequently fits well with Jane McAlevey's "whole worker" approach, as outlined in *No Short Cuts: Organising for Power in the New Gilded Age* (2016). Herein McAlevey attempts to address the seemingly near-terminal decline of union membership in the US: a crisis partly brought about by boardroom unionism conducted behind closed doors; a phenomenon that has contributed to the view that workers are simply one-sided nodes to be mobilised as-and-when required. McAlevey reminds us, however, that beneath occupational categories and professional personifications, workers are in fact multifaceted and therefore, as a consequence are "embedded in a range of social relationships" (19). The problem, she goes on to claim, is that while contemporary unions understand that community is important, they have forgotten the strength of the original CIO method,²¹⁸ wherein the organic connection between workers and their communities was seen as uniquely strategic.

Similarly, McAlevey's whole worker approach attempts to "synergise" workplace- and community-organising while continuing to speak the language of class power.²¹⁹ She therefore entreats would-be organisers to begin their organising work from "outside in," starting from the very communities in which workers live (McAlevey 2005). By beginning from the space of social reproduction, the holistic method, as a result, carries with it the benefit of recognising the impact of external economic forces on the lives of workers (cf. Burawoy, Section 2.5). Moreover, as a

²¹⁸ The original CIO-method of organising that McAlevey refers to involves the identification of organic leadership; engaging a participatory super-majority of workers; utilising affordances both inside; and outside the workplace; and taking real rather than symbolic action.

²¹⁹ McAlevey, J., 'It Takes a Community: Building Unions from the Outside.' *New Labor Forum* 12(1) 23-32, Spring 2003.

community-rooted approach, the whole worker method has the capacity to address wider systemic injustice, thereby enabling organisers to speak more openly about the dynamics that many labour organisations are reluctant to talk about: namely, issues of race and gender.

As described in Section 1.3, McAlevey sees worker centres as hybrid (or “mixed”) organisations within which legal advocacy, mobilisation and organising remain complimentary elements. McAlevey maintains, however, that for grassroots organising to be effective, both advocacy and mobilisation must be subordinated to the main task: i.e. the organisation of worker power for the benefit of the class. As she emphasises in *No Short Cuts* (2016), grassroots campaigns that lean too heavily on advocacy and mobilisation are usually only successful in attracting those who are already committed to the cause (i.e. those who do not need convincing) and thus, in her estimation, organisations that fail to appropriately prioritise these functions can only ever wield “pretend power” and not the “actual power” that comes from the active participation and deliberation of members. This means that any campaign that wishes to be successful, needs to bring outsiders into the fight, since this emphasis on organisational growth, “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people [...] never previously involved” (10).

Hence, for growth to occur, campaigning goals need to be subordinated to the task of organising, rather than vice versa, so that campaigning itself becomes “a mechanism for bringing new people into the change process and keeping them involved” (10). To this extent, McAlevey suggests that labour organisations should try to see their members as more than “just workers,” instead appreciating them as members of a material community with already existing, yet strategically useful social ties.²²⁰ This more multifaceted approach subsequently allows

²²⁰ To emphasise this, McAlevey quotes Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches* (1981): “American urban politics has been governed by boundaries and rules that stress ethnicity, race and territoriality, rather than class, and that emphasize

organisers to break down the artificial divide between work and its outside and as a result, empowers workers to transgress the racial, ethnic and gendered boundaries that occupational hierarchies enforce.

When put into a global context, McAlevey's "outside in" approach seems prescient, since throughout the post-War period, informality has grown exponentially and as a direct result, circulation struggles around the social wage have become increasingly more common (see in Section 2.6). Thus, in his discussion of informal labour markets in low- and middle-income countries (LICs & MICs), Aaron Benanav describes how the "autonomous" growth of the urban proletariat has advanced along two parallel trajectories, i.e. wage-earning proletarianisation and wageless informality.²²¹ As a result, not only has the global urban workforce dramatically increased, but this expansion has also been accompanied by a parallel enlargement of informal employment outside of the traditional centres of production.

Meanwhile, confirming this assessment, a recent joint report by the ILO and WIEGO (2019) confirms that at present 60% of the world's population are now employed in the informal economy; with 90% in the developing economies; 67% in emerging economies; and 18% in the developed economies.²²² For Benanav however, the growth of surplus populations is not simply the product of rural to urban migration, but is instead the result of the mass dispossession of the children of the already-existing urban proletariat, deprived as they are of both land and

the distribution of goods and services, while excluding questions of production or workplace relations. *The centrepiece of these rules has been the radical separation in people's consciousness, speech and activity of the politics of work from the politics of community.*"

²²¹ According to the IMF (2021) informal work currently makes up 35% of GDP in LICs and MICs and 15% in advanced economies: <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/07/28/na-072821-five-things-to-know-about-the-informal-economy>

²²² Bonnet, F., Vanek, J., & Chen, M., 'Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Brief.' ILO/WEIGO report, Jan 2019: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_711798.pdf

employment.

This generalised expropriation can thus be seen as the underlying mainspring of an “intergenerational reproduction of informality [now] taking place on an expanding scale” (Benanav 2018, 2). Informality is, as a result, an ever-enlarging category that “subsumes those who are employed without a contract” such as day laborers, the self-employed and those who “work as unpaid family labour in micro-enterprises” (4); a classification that well describes the situation of New York’s vendors, who finding “no one to employ them, [must] sell goods and services directly on the market” (5).

To date, however, US labour elites have been hesitant to address this profound disarticulation among the working class, thereby leaving room for the development of new models of organisation that explicitly address the gap. Yet, organising within informal labour markets is notoriously difficult; an endeavour made more complicated by the degraded conditions and decomposition of the workforce therein. Moreover, in terms of subjectivity, informal workers are highly resistant to convenient professional classification (for example, SVP’s vendors are simultaneously considered to be ‘street workers’ and ‘micro-entrepreneurs,’ while also treated as ‘criminals’ and ‘vagrants’ by local state agencies). This confusion is typical of informal labour markets, altogether calling into question the dual schema of ‘formal and informal labour’ as a sufficient category of sociological analysis.

In Ray Bromley’s (1979) study of casual work in the developing world, he argues that the categories of formal/informal labour are “arbitrary, subjective, inflexible, and/or narrowly defined for specific purpose” (Bromley 1979, 1034). Instead, he would prefer to view the proletariat as a continuum, in turn asserting that “[no] single policy prescription can be applied to the whole of the informal sector” (1034). Hence, for Bromley, the heterogeneity of casualised labour markets consequently renders obsolete the distinction between waged and unwaged proletarians, particularly in instances where race, gender and ethnicity greatly determine their

entry into informality. To further complicate matters, Bromley & Wilson (2018) point out that entrepreneurial “exit” from formal wage-work is typically voluntary,²²³ while at the other end, involuntary “exclusion” from formal labour markets is much more likely to be enforced by wage scarcity (4). This is a doubly important distinction, since it is typically women workers who seek out informal employment when no alternative exists (de la Rocha & Latapí 2009; Perry 2007).

In accordance with Bromley’s appraisal, Jan Breman drew similar conclusions while studying India’s emergent casualised labour markets during the late-70s. In his essay ‘A Dualistic Labour System?’ (1976) Breman hence questions the utility of the formal/informal schema,²²⁴ which in his estimation “loses sight of the unity and totality of the system” (Breman 1976, 1939). Rather than dividing the urban system into two distinct segments, however, Breman instead prefers to emphasise the fragmentary nature of the labour market as a whole. This appears to be judicious since, all too often, sociology lumps together different sections of the urban poor into “one political social unit” and thereafter, assumes that they “can be mobilised politically on the basis of their commonality” (Breman 1976, 1939).

Resonating with Fanon (see Section 2.6), Breman subsequently goes on to explain how, beneath the top-tier of organised labour elites (i.e. the visible appearance of the working class at the level of representation), there remains a reservoir of revolutionary potential among those who are the victims of “urbanisation without industrialisation” (Breman 1976, 1941). Breman hence nominates this portion of the working class the “sub-proletariat,” within which women typically work, and for whom worktime competes with time given over for the care and socialisation of children. Notably, this urban sub-proletariat is principally made up of those

²²³ Exit is more common when the economy is expanding and exclusion more common when the economy contracts.

²²⁴ This can be read as the divide between formalised labour elites and the wageless portion of the proletariat (see Section 2.6).

“condemned to self-employment, such as the ambulant craftsmen [...] houseworkers, street vendors and a long list of others” (1940).

Yet, despite the degradations of their work however, Breman goes on to claim that these informal and often itinerant workers have a unique insight into their own circumstances and as a result, their appreciation of the “situation and the social determinants which cause it, is frequently quite accurate.” For Breman this acuity is however tempered by its obverse: the consensus among such indigent workers that “they are unlikely to find a way out” (1940). Consequently, he is reluctant to overgeneralise or prescribe any rigid class-based terminology to the situation, and while he does propose a rough schema for the working class (i.e. the labour elites, sub-proletariat, lumpen- and the *déclassé*), he maintains that the overall situation for urban workers is far more complex than his rudimentary categorisation allows for. Such caution seems reasonable since, as Breman demonstrates, even members same household often “function in different modes of production [...] thwarting attempts to classify by lifestyle” (1941). Moreover, absolute categorisation is further baffled by the way in which workers regularly shift from work to unemployment in line with the expansion and contraction of the labour market itself; a capriciousness that consequently limits the worth of empirical data, altogether.²²⁵

In conclusion, Breman opines that, within any situation where labour demand is scarce, unionised labour elites have tended side with their own interests rather than the interests of the class-as-a-whole. For this reason, he remains sceptical about the potential for intersectional unity among workers against the common adversary and instead, sees the fragmentation of the labour market as “indicative of a search for security within limited group linkages,” which as a

²²⁵ “Some members of the sub-proletariat lead such a precarious existence that they are liable to sink into the lumpen proletariat if crises occur that are of such magnitude that they are incapable of absorbing them: chronic illness or disablement, loss of the principal or sole breadwinner, old age without any form of security, etc.” (Bromley 1976, 1491).

result, enforces “the necessity to fence off one’s own domain and simultaneously penetrate into other areas of work.” Such individual responses cause sectional rivalry among the proletariat, however, which in turn “detracts from the common feeling of belonging to the same social class” and hence, it can be said that “the disintegration of vertical ties” among workers “does not automatically mean a strengthening of horizontal solidarity” (1941-2).

Due to the increase in intra-proletarian competition resulting from casualisation, therefore, “feelings of vulnerability” prevent the precarious sub-proletariat from discussing the social order with outsiders; reliant as they are on kinship networks and chains of subcontracting for subsistence. As we saw in the hearing for Intro 1116 (see Section 4.2), many vendors experience such vulnerability, making them extremely hesitant to speak out against their common condition. In this regard, it was only once SVP provided a safe discursive space for Latina vendors were they able to “let their guard down” and speak freely. The intensive emotional work conducted among the women of the committee was thus a necessary pre-condition for the consciousness-raising workshops and political education that followed.

Commenting on the difficulty of conscious-raising and class formation within US labour contexts, Rick Fantasia (1989) points out that American sociology is broadly unable to record the level of class consciousness among workers due to its inability to pick apart contradictory lines of thought. Moreover, Fantasia goes on to claim that insurgent rank-and-file activity in the US bears a consciousness that is “impervious to the standards of sociological survey” (Fantasia 1989, 11). Yet as he reminds us, the under-theorisation of class is not the principal problem since, it is only by constituting itself in struggle does the “class-in-itself” become a “class-for-itself.”

Following Marx, Fantasia goes on to claim that the poles of proletarian objectivity and subjectivity are conjoined and consequently, the problem of class formation is not dependant on workers’ ability to theorise class, but rather “the extent to which their processes of internal

organisation and their activity as workers represent revolutionary consciousness” (9). Thus, in conclusion, he maintains that if spirit and world are dialectically interwoven through praxis (see Sections 1.2 & 2.2), it is only through deliberative self-directed activity that workers in struggle can liberate their “social being” while simultaneously liberating their “subjectivity.” As Fantasia states, “[w]hen conceived as cultural expression, class consciousness seems less a matter of disembodied mental attitudes than a broader set of practices” (14).

Due to the balkanisation of the US working class, however, holistic organising techniques, such as those recommended by McAleveey, are necessary to overcome the ethnic boundaries and occupational silos created by casual and informal labour markets; a task made more difficult while unionisation remains around 10%. Yet, while there has been a modest uptick in stoppages to production as a result of the pandemic, the prospects for the mainstream labour movement remain bleak. However, there are reasons for optimism according to labour historian Gabriel Winant (2021) since, beyond the sphere of production, a more “diffuse phenomenon” is taking place, i.e. the so-called “Great Resignation.”²²⁶ Accordingly, during the crisis, millions of customer-facing service workers would voluntarily exit the labour market, leaving over 10.9 million vacancies unfilled at the end of July 2021. Moreover, the resulting high demand for labour provided many remaining workers with a good deal of effective leverage over their employers, leading some commentators to characterise this mass refusal of labour as a “general strike,” loosely analogous with the one Du Bois had earlier described (see Section 2.4).²²⁷

For the most part, this wave of mass resignation was an atomised response from

²²⁶ Winant, G., ‘Strike Wave’, *The New Left Review*, 25 November 2021:

<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/strike-wave>

²²⁷ Lichtenstein, N., ‘Are we witnessing a “General Strike” in our own time?’ *Washington Post*, 18 November 2021:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/11/18/are-we-witnessing-general-strike-our-own-time/>

individual workers who, having received essential protections during the pandemic, avoided returning to work, while taking their skills elsewhere. Remaining second-tier workers in health, technology and retail were consequently afforded a rare breathing space, motivated as they were by the “conjunctural combination of accumulated outrage at the workplace brutalities of the pandemic, plus increased working-class confidence and labour market leverage due to the emergency expansions of the social safety net” (Winant 2021).

Within these unique circumstances, however, Winant sees a present opportunity for “once marginal activists” to gain ground within grassroots unionisation efforts.²²⁸ Consequently, while it is true that rank-and-file efforts within these sectors have sometimes been assisted by mainstream unions (such as the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union [RWDSU]), these drives have largely been directed by autonomous workers and hence, the question still remains: why have low-wage workers been relatively successful in achieving their aims, while large-scale workplaces remain unorganised?

To historically contextualise this, Winant explains how the large-scale industrial layoffs experienced during the late-70s and early-80s forced many to permanently accept less pay or exit from the labour market altogether (see Section 1.5). With their expectations lowered, workers were automatically “thrown back onto the family, the illicit and informal economy or the state for their survival.” Moreover, it was women in particular who “fled into fast-expanding low-wage service economy jobs to compensate for the vanished family wage” (Winant 2021; Cooper 2017). This mass expulsion from production, as a result, had the overall effect of transferring the cost of social reproduction onto households. Accompanying these pressures, meanwhile, was the wholesale revival of Poor Law practices, including a barrage of legislative measures

²²⁸ This a prediction that has seemingly been borne out by upstart Amazon Labour Union’s (ALU) surprise victory at Amazon’s Staten Island facility in March 2022, occurring in conjunction with the recent wave of shop-by-shop gains made by Starbucks workers nationwide.

designed to criminalise poverty and incarcerate the unemployed. Racialised policing thus remains unabated, while prison budgets continue to “metastasize,” heaping punishment upon those who seek informal work within the sphere of social reproduction.²²⁹

Such barbarity certainly favours employers who since the late-70s have threatened capital flight whenever facing worker militancy. As a result, “criminalised unemployment” has provided them with an ample stick with which to threaten workers, especially “if walking out of the factory gates for the last time means walking into the jaws of the jailor” (Winant 2021). Furnished with these coercive powers, employers in manufacturing and production have subsequently been able to command extraordinary social power (i.e. the ability, “to push workers toward the unliveable minimum wage, throw them back into abusive relationships, and toss their children into cells” [Winant 2021]). The same, however, is not true for corporations in the customer-facing industries, where due to the “social importance” of service work, businesses cannot easily relocate; an obdurate limit that thereby renders toothless the threat of capital flight.

This limitation in the service sector has subsequently “induced employers to decompose the employment relation itself in order to hold down labour costs” (Winant 2021). Meanwhile, the drive towards permanent job insecurity has only served to intensify contestation around the social wage (and here Winant draws a useful comparison to teachers struggling over mandated class sizes, nurses over staffing levels and Uber-drivers over the legal definition of employment).

In light of this, SVP’s struggle for affordable permits might thus be characterised as

²²⁹ The NYPD budget in 2022 currently stands at \$5.44bn. ‘Report to the Committees on Finance and Public Safety on the Fiscal 2022 Executive Budget for the NYPD’, NYCC, 11 May 2021: <https://council.nyc.gov/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2021/05/NYPD.pdf>

precisely this type of social contestation; one that walks a tightrope between the necessity of the vendors' socially reproductive work and the degraded conditions in which that work is conducted. As a result, it is within these "struggles about class" (see Przeworski 1977) that the most militant elements of a disaggregated US proletariat are attempting to re-compose themselves. Hence, for SVP and other worker centres, any discussion of class formation cannot simply be restricted to the question of occupational categories, since class analysis is never merely about the proximity of workers to the system of production, so long as "some quantity of [...] socially available labour power does not find productive employment" (Przeworski 1977, 344).

To this extent, McAlevey's whole worker approach to grassroots organising, which takes account of both work and community relations, ought to be considered indispensable, since class formation can only be determined in struggle by "the class that suffers most under capitalist relations" (Przeworski 1977, 346). In this regard, the impact of work on social reproduction, and vice versa, is clearly observable in miniature within New York's ethnically stratified and highly gendered vending hierarchy, wherein SVP first had to organise Latina pushcart vendors along cultural lines within in their own communities, before being able to build solid pan-ethnic associations with other vendors in key districts.

Yet, by establishing a committee exclusively for women, SVP has provided some of its most vulnerable members with a space in which to dialogically interrogate who they are as subjects and hence, consonant with the Freirean injunction to "eject" prior introjects, they were then able to displace many of the personifications under which they previously had laboured (i.e. as immigrants, informal streetworkers, women of colour and single mothers). Consequently, only once the committee was established, was it then possible for the women to conduct the work of self-recognition, which itself was a prelude to the work of organising and class self-activity. Moreover, the intensive pre-organising work of the committee allowed the women to

first build confidence, before redefining themselves as exemplary class protagonists and leaders capable of inspiring others.

5.4 Further Research

Undoubtedly, the passing of Intro 1116 will mean the setting of new goals and objectives at SVP. Clearly, the reform of the permit system and its administration will profoundly transform the industry and more than likely, considerably change the composition of street vending. Yet, these recent legislative gains, however, need to be enforced by SVP's members, which is only possible if the project continues to build and maintain participation while also growing the organisation. Despite the passing of the bill and the planned transfer of vending enforcement to the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP), SVP is already complaining that the NYPD continues to harass vendors at pre-pandemic levels²³⁰ and more recently, Mayor Eric Adams has attempted to reverse vending reform by signing enforcement over to the Department of Sanitation.²³¹ For any future study, it would therefore be constructive to evaluate how SVP copes during this period of legislative transition, since it remains to be seen if the project's members have sufficient collective power to see through intended reforms.²³²

Hence, beyond permit reform, SVP still has further objectives to accomplish, including

²³⁰ Parra, D., 'NYC Street Vendor Enforcement Back at Pre-Pandemic Levels, Despite Shift Away From NYPD,' *City Limits*, 03 March 2022: <https://citylimits.org/2022/03/03/nyc-street-vendor-enforcement-back-at-pre-pandemic-levels-despite-shift-away-from-nypd/>

²³¹ Gonen, Y. & Chu, H., 'Street Vendor Oversight Shift to Department of Sanitation Gets Trash Talk From Council,' *The City*, 28 March 2023: <https://www.thecity.nyc/2023/3/28/23659371/council-street-vendor-oversight-sanitation>

²³² See also: Chan, W., "Egregious acts of violence": why is Eric Adams cracking down on subway buskers and mango sellers?' *The Guardian*, 1 July 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jul/01/new-york-street-vendors-arrests-mayor-eric-adams-nypd>

the effort to decriminalise vending state-wide, through the so-called ‘decrim’ bill S6817A.

Considering these shifting priorities, it would be worth conducting a follow-up inquiry into which strategies remain effective and which fall by the wayside, particularly since decriminalisation efforts have a somewhat prefigurative quality. Initially, the state-level bill was introduced to apply pressure on NYCC council members from above. Yet, beyond political expediency, the state bill also raises the possibility of abolishing the permit system altogether, consequently lining up with a number of other decriminalisation efforts that have begun to gain traction in New York; most notably when the district attorney’s office dismissed thousands of back-dated cases against sex workers (announcing that from now on it would stop prosecuting these informal workers).²³³

Similarly in February 2021, the highly discriminatory and racist 1976 law against Loitering for the Purpose of Prostitution (i.e. the so-called ‘Walking While Trans’ law) was repealed by outgoing Governor Cuomo.²³⁴ The growing legitimacy of decriminalisation campaigns, led by advocacy groups such as DecrimNY has subsequently provided SVP with further impetus, since like many other categories of informal worker, vendors also require safe access to public space for their survival. In terms of future research, it would therefore be useful to consider whether a broader orientation towards abolition and decriminalisation changes SVP’s campaigning emphasis now that the principal goal of vending reform has nominally been achieved.

Moreover, while the Women’s Committee is only in its early stages, it would also be useful to examine whether these predominantly Latina vendor members are able to transform their seemingly sectional social reproduction concerns into campaigning issues that the general

²³³ See the Stop Violence in the Sex Trades Act (A.8230/S.6419): a package of bills drawn up to decriminalize and decarcerate the sex trade in New York: <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2019/s6419>

²³⁴ Also known as Senate Bill (A00654/S02253) seeking to repeal section 240.37 of the penal law relating to loitering for the purpose of engaging in a prostitution offense: <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2019/S2253>

membership can get behind. As discussed in Section 4.3, the organisers of the Women's Committee have already suggested how a further survey might help the Latina vendors reframe their concerns as work-related vending issues. A further inquiry designed by the women themselves, would therefore likely help them make their case.

At present, the efforts of the Women's Committee are primarily focused on building core group cohesion, yet it would also be worth following their progress, to see if Latinas at the project can provide exemplary leadership, and whether their participation might be precedent setting. If successful in establishing a strong core group, then the consciousness-raising work of Latina vendors at SVP might then be extended and replicated among other language groups, especially since there are a number of other smaller ethnic groups that also suffer unique exclusions. Hence, a further inquiry might be of value, particularly among those who suffer similar levels of poverty.

Lastly, with help of organisers at SVP, I was able to identify an ideological tension between the perception of vendors as both street workers and entrepreneurs. In this regard, there is room for further investigation into how these perceptions play out, since the vendors, when performing non-citizen citizenship, are expected to perform multiple and sometimes contradictory roles, which in turn can disrupt their own self-understanding and consequently, the self-pedagogy of the group as a whole (see Hamerquist's reading of Gramsci's dual consciousness in Section 2.4). As such, there needs to be further inquiry into how the switching of social roles either helps or hinders solidarity efforts at the project going forward.

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