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Late Twentieth-Century Mexico* by Sandra C. Mendiola García
(review)

Gray F. Kidd

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***Street Democracy: Vendors, Violence, and Public Space in Late Twentieth-Century Mexico.* By Sandra C. Mendiola García. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017, p.294, \$30.00 (paperback).**

Denizens of Latin American public markets and fairs have long been overlooked by scholars, given the former's supposed aloofness from the tumult of labor struggles, dirty wars, and experiments in civic activism. Imprisoned in the isolation chamber of Marx's "lumpenproletariat," street vendors and marketers, as a consequence of their wagelessness and supposed lack of a class identity, are presumed to be too peripheral to be agents of change. To help resolve this enduring historiographical problem, Sandra C. Mendiola García forces us to rethink our categories of "work" and "workers," which have severely restricted who gets to carry out "productive, reproductive, and political labor" (13). Once we decenter wage earners and the union hall, new and sometimes surprising loci of labor and political insurgency come into view.

In *Street Democracy*, Mendiola García shifts our focus to a ubiquitous, yet far too commonly ignored, population in Puebla, Mexico: *vendedores ambulantes*, vendors of foodstuffs and knickknacks in the streets and public markets. In the early 1970s, Puebla's street vendors struck a tactical, if unusual, alliance with local university students who organized under the auspices of the independent Popular Union of Street Vendors (Unión Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes, UPVA). The emergence of UPVA, the author argues, was an expression of deep dissatisfaction with the clientelistic practices of Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), which sought to regulate all union activity. Perhaps more fundamentally, UPVA can be traced back to dual political openings that facilitated a merging of politicized students and vendors. On the national level, Mendiola García credits the momentary democratic "opening" controlled by Luís Echeverría Álvarez. On the regional level, however, the collapse of Puebla's *avilacamachista* political and economic elite positioned street vendors to become the "ideological and political heirs" of the university student movement (56).

Mendiola García contends that under the tutelage of progressive-minded *universitarios* and teachers (an intriguing dynamic that opens numerous corridors for future research), Poblano vendors elected their own officials, a marked contrast with free-dealing representatives (*charros*) of formal unions associated with the PRI. They also asserted themselves as citizens and workers by challenging elite claims to public space. Indeed, in one of the most stimulating chapters, the author shows how UPVA rank and file not only staged street corner protests and joined official parades but also put on improvised plays. They even starred in a low-budget film (*Los Vendedores Ambulantes*, 1973) that won a prize at the International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen (102). Although the point

would benefit from additional sharpening, *Street Democracy* implies that we have much to learn about the different kinds of labor undertaken in the informal economy, whose heterogeneity cannot be understood through the nonspecific category of “work.” Given their links to theater, film, and art, it would be illuminating to explore how Puebla’s street vendors expressed their claims to citizenship and the city in decidedly *cultural* terms and as *cultural* producers.

While vendors and their allies made important gains through the UPVA, Mendiola García reminds us that they cannot be extricated from the driving rhythms of state sanctioned violence. In the 1970s and again during the neoliberal turn in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, state actors waged a “Dirty War” not only on intellectuals, guerrilla leaders, students, and (formal) labor organizers, but also on the informal sector (121). She contends that during this time, UPVA was closely monitored by state security organs and meetings were infiltrated by paid informants. At the same time, members were arrested, interrogated, and tortured. In one case, although the connection remains tenuous, UPVA members blamed state actors for the 1977 disappearance of a toddler as a way to undermine the street vendors’ movement. Mendiola García’s aim of enlarging the scope of Mexico’s “Dirty War” is fair, even laudable, but an important question remains unanswered. How should we situate these historically specific “dirty wars” in far-reaching and indeed quotidian paroxysms of violence that have long characterized the informal sector and especially public markets?

Street Democracy is a comprehensively researched book that draws on an array of primary sources, including archival documents and oral histories. It also includes 12 black and white photographs, presumably taken by Poblano municipal functionaries. While the author perplexingly claims that these images were not intended to register vendors’ presence (199), they will serve as important jumping-off points for future research because they raise questions of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity. Some readers may find it disappointing that these issues do not occupy a larger space in the work. Indeed, this reader was surprised that one unionized informant’s passing remarks about a requisite molting of “peasant” (read: rural and indigenous) origins were not followed by additional commentary and analysis (85).

Street Democracy will be an important wayfinding book for scholars of several thematic fields, including postrevolutionary Mexico, the global 1970s and 1980s, and public markets and informal economies. From the vantage point of scholarship on the Global South, the work links Puebla to an even broader constellation of protagonists whose ingenuity in the face of neoliberal era disarticulations reflect important similarities.

Gray F. Kidd

Department of History
Duke University