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Urban markets and diversity: towards a research agenda

Daniel Hiebert, Jan Rath and Steven Vertovec

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In this paper we advocate the study of local street markets to explore fundamental issues about the relationship between economy and society. This relationship evolves over time and we believe that it has been recast in an age of increasing cultural diversity and neo-liberal state regulatory structures. In street markets we can see how diversity and the nature of economic transactions become mutually constitutive. We argue that cultural diversity propels local markets, while everyday interactions in markets influence intercultural relationships. These complex processes are affected by the spatiality of markets and the regulatory environments within which they operate. We conclude by framing a research programme on street markets and discuss a number of methodological complications that would need to be addressed in this endeavour.

Keywords: street markets; cultural diversity; urban anthropology; urban sociology; social geography

The Dappermarkt is a long, broad avenue lined with stalls in the middle of a working-class area in eastern Amsterdam. These are some observations made on a walk on a sunny Saturday morning through the Dappermarkt. The wares for sale are absolutely mundane: no crafts, decorative arts, organic foodstuffs or tourist items, but cheap clothes (blouses for as little as €3, jackets from €5), clothes, socks and underwear, batteries, watches, vegetables, fish, flowers. There is no seeming order of items: after a succession of clothing stalls one finds a cheese stand, then some fashion accessories, then a couple more clothing stalls, a butcher, some boots, and so on. For certain specific, 'traditional' Dutch foods – certain cheeses or brined herring, for instance – the sellers and buyers are exclusively Dutch whites. For practically everything else, there is no apparent correlation between the ethnic or national background of the sellers or buyers and the commodities on sale. Sellers of clothes and textiles, which seem to dominate the market, are a wide mix of Dutch, Hindustani (Indian Surinamese) or Pakistani, Turkish or Arab, Chinese or Vietnamese, Russian or other Eastern Europeans. The throng of shoppers is yet more diverse than the sellers, indeed many times so. A cross-cutting demographic, however, is that the crowd is over-represented by senior citizens and families.

The occasional, loud sales pitches of a few sellers temporarily break the quiet murmur of the crowd. Otherwise, an air of pleasant calm is created by the slow pace of the browsing shoppers, the behaviour of children pacified by eating treats at the

sides of their parents, the polite inquiries of shoppers and cheerful responses of stallholders, people excusing themselves as they meander through the crowd with bikes loaded with flowers and bags, acquaintances greeting one another, and small mixed-gender groups giggling at some shared joke. It is an absolutely routine set of activities at the market – albeit one comprised of one of the most diverse populations imaginable.

This vignette of the Dappermarkt in Amsterdam provides a convenient way to think about the age-old question of the relationship between *economy* and *society*, an issue that has generated many theories and thousands of empirical studies over generations of academic scholarship. We explore the economy/society dynamic by focusing on everyday street markets as our site of analysis. We have selected street markets both because they are so prevalent, and because they are a microcosm of a set of processes that we wish to understand. Street markets are places of many kinds of intersections. Obviously these are places where sellers meet consumers, but in this process other types of intersections occur.

These encounters are frequently between people with different identities, a point emphasized in the Dappermarkt vignette. Why is this the case? In an age of technological complexity and high entry barriers for many occupations and forms of entrepreneurship, a wide range of people can participate in street markets, as sellers and buyers. Buyers and, more importantly, entrepreneurs in these markets need not have full command of the local language, tertiary education, or formal training. At the same time, competition between sellers means that profit margins are thin. This combination of low entry barriers and profits means that marginalized populations can participate in street markets to an extent rarely possible in the more formal economy. As a result, these markets are often the most diverse parts of cities, where people who might lead largely separate lives come face to face and interact.

This is where our interest in ‘diversity’ is focused. We recognize that there is currently an array of meanings attached to this term in both academic and public discourse (see Vertovec 2012). As migration studies scholars, we are concerned with aspects of social differentiation stemming from international migration. We are not addressing modes of difference surrounding age, sexuality and disability, which are topics included in much diversity discourse. In this article we use ‘diversity’ in a summary sense to refer specifically to configurations of co-present ethnicities, cultures, languages and religions and, when referring below to ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007), the ways that these configurations overlap with or entail multi-dimensional complexities with respect to other variables such as gender, class, legal status and human capital.

While there have been scores of studies on particular street markets, we pose a set of much more general, conceptual questions in this paper: what are the impacts of diversity on the nature and operation of street markets; and what are the implications of street markets for diversity? Do street markets play a role in the process whereby people learn to coexist across their differences, or does participation in markets have no influence on inter-group relationships beyond brief moments of interaction, or even a negative influence? How do everyday encounters in markets contribute to (or undermine) this learning process? When people from different backgrounds *get along*

in markets, is this indicative of larger social processes of civility or are these encounters specific and somehow exceptional?

Thinking about this issue from the opposite direction, how does increasing diversity contribute to the opportunity structures that underlie street markets and the economy more generally? Certainly, diversity expands the range of products available to consumers. In this sense, diversity also brings new types of highly specialized entrepreneurs and, with them, jobs. That is, street markets can be seen as the point where diversity becomes part of the fabric of the economy and sets new tastes in motion.

We are also interested in two ancillary issues that influence the relationship between diversity and markets: the role of *place* and *regulatory structures*. Street markets arise in specific places and regulatory regimes and they inevitably reflect the qualities of these places and regimes.

Why do we advocate more intense academic inquiry into markets and diversity now? As we argue throughout this paper, a careful look at markets can provide significant insights into several kinds of dynamics surrounding diversity, an issue that has assumed a central position in contemporary scholarship:

- Without a doubt, and for multiple reasons, over the past ten years there has been more and more attention on various forms of ‘diversity’, not just in academia but also increasingly in public policy and corporate practice. Across the social sciences we are witnessing the rise of a multidisciplinary field of diversity studies. But scholars have poured considerable energy into certain aspects of diversity (e.g. discrimination and anti-discrimination, changing cultural landscapes in cities), but much less into others (e.g. the links between diversity and the economy).
- To a degree, we can account for this intensified interest in ‘diversity’ as a consequence of relatively recent changes in anti-discrimination legislation and identity politics. However, it is also concomitant with changing social, cultural and demographic configurations around the world, due in significant ways to the growing complexity of global migration patterns (Vertovec 2007).
- In many Western contexts, the recent development of diversity policies has ironically occurred at the same time as a rise in nativist populist movements, especially across Europe, that have even seen anti-immigration parties participate in some governing coalitions, and the so-called ‘crisis of multiculturalism’, entailing public debates over the degree to which states should safeguard cultural difference or pursue measures to promote common values and social ‘integration’ (Rath 2011; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010).
- Markets also enable us to interrogate an important debate surrounding the development of urban economies. According to Florida (2002) and others, the urban economy in advanced societies today revolves around industries with high levels of cognitive and cultural labour. The success of these creative economies and, consequently, the prosperity of these cities and the socio-economic well-being of their residents are contingent – among other things – on the presence of a diverse population. In this logic, diversity stimulates innovation and contributes to the liveability of cities, which in turn helps attract

high-skilled workers and businesses. It is interesting to explore how urban street markets relate to this new logic (see also Aytar and Rath 2012).

- The current economic/financial crisis has revealed a pressing need to think beyond the traditional understanding of the formal economy and explore new avenues of economic development and job creation. Street markets can be seen, in this light, as places where micro-businesses come into existence and jobs are generated during periods of stubborn unemployment.
- Despite numerous calls for and attempts to promote a ‘clean’ bureaucratic culture and ‘decent’ forms of regulation, informalization abounds. Informal practices can be found in all sorts of places, such as in the fields of policing, caregiving, immigration control, environmental pollution and – last but not least – in the economy. The expansion of the informal economy in relation to the proliferation of diversity is a line of research that deserves further exploration (Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1999).
- Finally, for some years now scholars have been seeking ways to overcome ‘Eurocentrism’ or similar biases in perspective and understanding. Encouraging an interest in global topics – like markets and diversity, we propose – provides one way of understanding human phenomena and processes not seemingly associated solely with either ‘the West’, ‘the East’ or ‘the South’. That is, markets exist everywhere, and the nature and degree of diversity is becoming more complex (almost) everywhere. But the relationship between diversity and markets is highly place-specific. Therefore we cannot understand this relationship without investigating markets across many societies, including those in both the more and less developed countries.

The goal of this paper is to help define and provide a sense of coherence to a field of scholarship, by situating it conceptually and offering a set of research directions. We contend that people in their everyday encounters in street markets develop methods of intercultural engagement and learn a repertoire of intercultural skills, and that diversity helps propel markets. We argue that these processes have consequences for both the economy (the ways that markets operate) and society (the ongoing development of social civility and even, more broadly, social cohesion).

Demarcating markets and diversity

Before examining these issues in depth, we briefly discuss a number of key concepts, starting with the *market*. Markets exist in all shapes and sizes. One may refer to very concrete situations such as a farmers’ market, or a night market (i.e. open markets with stalls and their concomitant ethnoscapas, aromascapes, soundscapes and so forth), where stallholders sell their wares directly to consumers, versus others that are more abstract, such as the global market or the energy market whereby the market comprises economic exchanges that are not conducted by people in face-to-face situations. Following a Weberian logic, all types of markets are institutions where more or less voluntary, monetary and non-monetary economic exchanges take place. Various forms of involuntary exchange – piracy, conquest, robbery and theft – as well as those activities that constitute production per se fall beyond this definition (Engelen

2001). A wide range of social, cultural, political and other factors interfere in the functioning of markets, varying from formal laws and regulations to informal – ‘moral’ – prescriptions. These factors help illustrate that the nature of markets are not simply given, but are products of human action.

In the remainder of this paper, we focus on markets in their most concrete form, namely urban street markets. While we focus on open street markets, we are sensitive to the fact that there are numerous other kinds of markets that show interesting ‘family resemblances’. They are outside the scope of our interest at this time, as they are either highly formally regulated or highly informal, while we are interested in places that are in between these polarities. We can, for example, think of ambulatory street sellers; impromptu or flea markets, such as car boot sales or places where goods are sold from blankets on the ground; shopping malls and regular shopping streets where goods are sold from shops that are part of permanent buildings; ethnically themed shopping strips or even neighbourhoods such as Chinatowns (Aytar and Rath 2012); permanent highly regulated markets, such as the Camden Market of London, or the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, which are enclosed by large buildings and where market structures have become firmly established; and ‘high-end’ markets, such as the diamond market of Amsterdam or, at the extreme, the stock market of any city. Although we will not address these markets per se, we will draw upon the existing academic literature about them (for a discussion of the different kinds of consumer markets and marketplaces, see Plattner 1989). We also believe that the social processes discussed in this paper apply, in many cases, to these other types of markets, but to discuss each type would exhaust the scope of a journal article.

Street markets are non-permanent structures (i.e. stalls) where entrepreneurs do not own the spaces and/or structures that they sell from. They are often, but not always, built in the morning and removed later that day, sometimes on a daily basis, at other times on a semi-weekly or weekly basis. Street markets are typically ‘ordinary’ places where ‘ordinary’ products are sold, such as food, clothing, flowers, shoelaces or inexpensive watches. The exchanges usually take place in flexible ways, which could involve bartering, and typically constitute a cash economy. Typically, street markets are characterized by a relatively high level of informality. The longevity of particular shopping outlets tends to be limited and the turnover of entrepreneurs is therefore high. Yet, these open markets continue to be popular, even when mega malls are located nearby (Pardy 2005) and when virtually every product is also available through the Internet. The low entry barriers for vendors and market-goers to attend open street markets, as well as the style of market exchange, means that they appeal to and include many segments of the population and therefore are often associated with various forms of diversity.

Both markets and diversities are *spatially* specific. Place matters, obviously, although not for every product or every market in the same way. While urban street markets may be connected to wider geographical areas, they operate on the lowest level of spatiality: they are placed in urban neighbourhoods. These urban places are not neutral. Products may be considered more ‘authentic’ or ‘cool’ if associated with a particular place.

Different social and economic opportunities exist at different levels of spatiality or at different scalar levels. Each level affects the other in some way. Street markets are

local, but more often are also connected to other spaces by: (1) vendors who come from different parts of the world and maintain transnational relations with people from their place of origin, and/or with others from their diaspora; (2) consumers (ditto); (3) the products that rightly or wrongly are associated with particular spaces; and (4) the regulatory structure. Seen in such a way, street markets constitute interesting localized places for direct, local encounters with an otherwise global economy. Local residents may meet with an ‘immigrant, ethnic other’ coming from a different place in the world (and vice versa), and they may taste, test and purchase products with distant origins. The dynamics of these markets are consequently related to larger social, cultural, political and economic processes and structures.

We are particularly interested in spatiality as a factor that structures market exchange and interaction between people (Seligman 2000). These exchanges and interactions obviously do not take place in an institutional vacuum, but are governed by many forms of *regulation*. The regulation of economic exchanges is not reserved to advanced welfare states, but is a key characteristic of any economy. There are a plethora of regulatory instruments varying from taxes, zoning, health and security laws, migrant labour laws, and so on, but also subsidies, support schemes, mediation and so forth. Regulation, in fact, comprises any ‘interference’ in market exchanges. It is therefore important to keep several things in mind (Engelen 2001; Kloosterman and Rath 2010). First, regulation entails more than just state regulation. A wide array of individuals and institutions play a role in regulation, including local, national or international governmental agents, business associations, unions, voluntary associations, non-profit organizations, as well as individuals and their social networks. Second, regulation entails more than just do’s and don’ts. That is, there are legislative do’s and don’ts, but also a multitude of incentives and disincentives, and measures of a more persuasive nature. Third, regulation can be imposed (by the state, by regulatory institutions, or by groups or individuals), or may arise out of everyday voluntary action. Fourth, and related to the previous points, regulation can be more formal or more informal. In the ‘white’ economy, in the ‘grey’ (where legislation per se seems non-existent or is conveniently put aside), and also in the ‘black’ economy (where criminal transactions prevail) economic exchanges are still regulated in one way or another. In sum, regulation never exists alone, but always in complex packages that define what is ‘required’, ‘acceptable’ or ‘preferable’ in a market and what is not.

Finally, the interactions between entrepreneurs and consumers in the street market are *public*. Consumers witness transactions and learn the habits/habitus of the market. In a sense this involves a kind of public theatre, often with exaggerated gestures. Information about prices is communicated in public and codes of behaviour are transmitted from seller to seller, consumer to consumer. This does not happen as transparently in one-on-one street sales, for example, where buyers and sellers interact privately. At the other end of the spectrum, when markets become large and more permanent, buyers and sellers become detached and interact in more programmed ways, and sellers are less concerned about their reputation and place in the local social order (Shepherd 2008).

The intellectual context

Scholars have long been interested in local markets, from a variety of perspectives. Our engagement with this body of work has provided a number of insights, but has also revealed the relatively limited efforts to situate the study of markets within larger conceptual debates. In this section we outline the most prominent concerns in the literature that have developed around local markets and their relationship with society (see Pottie-Sherman 2011).

First, markets are by definition *spaces of contact* that bring people from diverse backgrounds together (e.g. Pardy 2005, on multiple cultures in the Footscray shopping street in Melbourne; Busch 2010, on Polish food vendors in Germany; Liu 2010, on Chinese wholesalers in Ghana).

Second, markets shape the *sociability of exchange*. There is no consensus in the relevant literature on how this unfolds. On the positive side, markets can be places where dominant and subordinate groups can operate as equals; they can also be sites of camaraderie between buyers and sellers where, for example, stories about products become part of the exchange process when consumers begin to appreciate 'authenticity'; and people from different backgrounds 'rub along' in markets and learn tolerance (Watson 2009). Others are more sceptical about the impact of everyday interaction in markets on these kinds of relationships. Smith (1965), for example, argues that people practise 'mutual avoidance' in markets and Maisel (1974) concludes that the quest for profit trumps sociability and the latter only arises when it is compatible with the former. Pardy (2005) encapsulates both sides of this debate when she ponders whether a street market in Melbourne is a site where 'a spectacle of peaceful co-existence exclude[s] a seething and resentful introversion' (119), but later posits that 'this apparent non-celebration of otherness is, nonetheless, an engagement with it' (126). In her terms, street markets may be places of 'indifference to difference' or 'openness to otherness' (or, perhaps, both of these processes may be occurring).

Third, and along the same lines, markets can contribute to stereotypes and *facilitate the cultural subordination of minority groups*. Kipling's shocking description of markets in China provides an early example of this type of orientalizing process (Lysack 2005). Frequently, products circulating in markets can best be described as 'authentic fakes' (Alraouf 2010) that are based upon, and reinforce, stereotypes.

Fourth, researchers have investigated the *impact of regulatory systems on markets*. At the scale of nation states, the accession of Poland to the EU, for example, undermined the opportunity for Russian entrepreneurs to sell cheap products across the border in Poland (Marcinszak and Van der Velde 2008). More locally, planning regulations control many aspects of markets. Recently, there are examples of planners recognizing the potential for markets to enhance the economic viability of distressed neighbourhoods, although their interventions may inadvertently destabilize markets by trying to sanitize and coordinate them (Dines 2007).

Fifth, markets may be places of *economic incorporation for marginalized groups*. Around the world, struggling populations survive by selling cheap goods in markets. This of course includes newcomers, such as unauthorized migrants (L'Hote and Gasta 2007), and groups that face barriers in the regular labour market, such as Pacific

Islanders in Auckland (De Bruin and Dupuis 2000), or Vietnamese migrants to Soviet-era East Germany who face enormous difficulty gaining access to standard forms of employment (Hüwelmeier 2013). In a sense, in some cases markets provide mechanisms for a kind of limited socio-economic inclusion (Watson 2009).

Finally, scholars have addressed the *temporality and spatiality of markets*. On the former, attention has been given to the specialized form of night markets and the ambiances that they create (Pottie-Sherman and Hiebert 2013). On the latter, researchers draw our attention to the interplay between planning bureaucracies and markets (Dines 2007).

The literature, as sampled above, is inconclusive on the relationship between markets and diversity. Interaction across differences in marketplaces may promote understanding and even a sense of commonality and shared identity based on the collective use of space. But in other instances, market interactions can enable dominant cultures to merely consume the products of subordinate groups, reinforce pre-existing animosities, contribute to the circulation of stereotypes, and intensify tension. And, of course, a mix of these positive and negative processes may occur in any given market. It may be possible to theorize the circumstances that lead to these different outcomes, or the balance between these outcomes, but this has not yet been done.

Continuity and change in markets and diversity

Concerning the relationship between markets and diversity, the issues explored in this paper beg an obvious, nevertheless fundamental, set of questions. What is historically ‘old’ and globally generic to the nature of this relationship? What is arguably ‘new’ to the relationship, historically and on a global scale? What practices, activities and physical or spatial aspects have stayed the same, what has changed, and how have the differential composition and effects of diversity across these times related to the continuity or change of those practices and activities? These kinds of questions need to be addressed prior to establishing a research agenda on the dynamics of contemporary markets and diversity.

What is historically ‘old’ and globally generic to the relationship between markets and diversity?

This first question concerns the fundamentals of market activity: *buying and selling*. At all times, one could say that the basic exchange relationship of buying and selling remains the same through time and across places. A range of accompanying actions surround buying and selling, including: sales-pitching or ‘hawking’ wares, gathering information about competing products and services, decision-making, agreeing a price, paying, evaluating purchases and managing reputations. Many fleeting or non-economic exchange activities generically take place in markets as well: gathering of news, gossip, flirtation, joking, musical or theatrical entertainment, religious preaching and various practices of healing.

The ‘*rules of engagement*’ between participants in markets entail a set of social practices that bear directly on diversity dynamics, and are open to empirical

observation and comparative research. Many types of behaviour and social practice in the market are learned and routinized. Indeed, what may appear as generic encounters of buying and selling in markets may, in fact, be locally and culturally ‘scripted’ or entail a locally embedded ‘command of an idiom, a command that is exercised from moment to moment with little calculation or forethought’ (Goffman 1959, 74). Such interpersonal modes of interaction in markets are learned by newcomers, situationally adjusted, and reproduced by repeated exercise. The *discursive practices* for market interactions have often comprised modes of interaction that are highly routinized such that both sellers and regular buyers know what to do and expect. Moreover, such discursive practices often entail important linguistic competences – the ability to change languages, code-switch or use pidgin languages that are purposefully constructed for market trade among people of different backgrounds. In these ways common discursive practices, or rules of engagement, can be bridging devices for crossing types of differences and/or hierarchies of power. This may be inadvertent or non-conscious, or conversely amount to purposefully selective acts of ‘tactical cosmopolitanism’ (Landau and Freemantle 2010).

Social diversity of some kind is routinely present in urban markets: while buyers tend to be ‘local’, many sellers may come from outside the locality. Within various societies, many commodities have traditionally been ‘captured’ by particular groups (in terms of ethnicity and/or social status), a point first articulated by Max Weber in his concept of ‘social closure’; accordingly, the markets themselves can be seen as nodes of long-distant, sometimes group-specific, trade networks. Further, diversity is usually present by way of the sheer variety of commodities on sale and their sometimes remote origins.

What is arguably ‘new’ to the relationship between markets and diversity?

In keeping with arguments made elsewhere in this article, at least four answers to this question arise.

First, *markets have changed*. This is evident especially with regard to the items bought and sold in markets, across the world. As one consequence of globalization, these shifts have meant that a wider range of commodities from afar have reached local markets worldwide. Along with such ‘commodity-reach’, local tastes and patterns of consumption have changed.

Second, the *nature of diversity has changed* worldwide at the same time. Changing patterns of global migration have meant that a proliferation of immigrants in small group numbers but from more varied points of origin, through more varied migration trajectories, and with more varied legal statuses, have arrived in a more varied set of destinations (in many places resulting in a new presence of people from previously unknown origins). Such patterns have resulted in profound transformations of local configurations of diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, gender, age, legal status, human capital and more (Vertovec 2007; Hiebert 2012). Local socio-economic orders have been transformed as well. At the same time, in many places around the world, public opinion polls such as Eurobarometer and the World Values Survey show shifting – and contradictory – attitudes towards diversity: large segments of national

populations the world over simultaneously espouse the views that ‘diversity enriches society’ and ‘there are too many immigrants’. Hence, either way, there seems to be much more heightened public and political attention, again worldwide, to issues surrounding diversity.

Third, there have been key *changes in the spatiality of markets*. As the pace and complexity of migration have increased, the social geography of cities has been reconfigured. This is most evident in the largest metropolitan centres of the Global North but is also the case in the mega-cities of the Global South. In the case of cities in more developed countries, we are accustomed to think of newcomers first settling in distressed inner-city neighbourhoods. But the twin processes of gentrification and mass migration have profoundly shifted the social geography of migrant settlement, which is now a mainly suburban phenomenon (in essence, conforming to long-standing patterns evident in the Global South).

Traditional inner-city street markets ‘on the wrong side of the tracks’ continue to exist but are now under pressure from gentrification. Many in fact undergo a process of ‘upgrading’ to serve a more affluent consumer base when gentrification takes hold. At the same time immigrant settlement has expanded to suburbs, and the clientele for street markets specializing in ordinary goods has also shifted outwards. Amsterdam’s Dappermarkt, located several kilometres from the core of the city, exemplifies this trend. Street markets have also proliferated in even more distant areas of European cities, where newcomers congregate in social housing on the periphery of mass transportation networks.

The nature of street markets is closely associated with their setting and especially their consumer base. Therefore we should expect that street markets in highly diverse suburbs differ from those of the inner city (Öz and Eder 2012).

Fourth, *regulation has changed*. Over the past few decades, neo-liberal approaches to national economies have entailed a general relaxation of state intervention in private trade. The collapse of communism has witnessed a boom in the growth of markets in former Eastern bloc countries. In more recent years, the local effects of the global economic crisis have wrought forms of re-regulation (especially austerity measures, as in Greece and several other European countries) and arguably spurred a growth in the informal sector – which has also had impacts on markets as sites of trade and employment.

Beyond these major forms of change taking place at the global and national scales, activities and practices in markets have been variously conditioned by matters highly particular to a locality, such as spatial layout, ‘regulations’ (in the senses outlined earlier in this paper), social characteristics of customers (not least class) and the dominance or distribution of specific ethnic, regional or other groups and their relation to various goods and services. Investigating such contextual factors is a primary exercise in any research on markets and diversity (e.g. Seligman 2000; Pardy 2005).

In our particular moment in time, street markets exemplify the tension between the neo-liberal commitment to erode the regulatory capacity of the state versus the desire to control migration and also the desire on the part of local authorities to maintain order in urban space (Aytar and Rath 2012).

Conceptual and political complications

There is an underlying tension between the fields of diversity and market studies. Generally, scholars who focus on diversity issues tend to appreciate a strong state that is expected to promote social integration through primary institutions such as the public education system. State bureaucracies also attempt to advance the cause of inclusion in their hiring practices, by ensuring that their personnel more accurately represent the diversity of the wider society. Governments in many countries have also enacted legislation to prevent hate speech and discrimination in the housing and labour markets. Whether reactive or proactive, these policies are important practical tools. They are also symbolic, signifying a preferred outcome of intercultural/religious engagement and mutual respect between different groups.

Non-government organizations (NGOs) also play a recognized role in the enhancement of intercultural communication, in myriad ways. For example, interfaith groups have emerged in many cities across the world and some have been instrumental in diffusing tension between members of different religions. Non-profit media have also taken up this challenge. In many countries, NGOs specialize in immigrant incorporation, providing essential welcoming services such as orientation, language training for adults, housing, and help in preparing for the labour market. These services typically include individuals from different groups and are, whether by design or happenstance, tools for intercultural encounter. If governments and NGOs feel motivated to establish policies and practices to bridge cultural difference, this tells us something: these institutions must believe that cultural interaction will not happen ‘naturally’ in other spheres of society, or will happen insufficiently to maintain social cohesion.

In other words, scholars – and others more generally – have largely ignored the role of the private sector in the process of intercultural engagement, assigning this grand purpose to the state (and ancillary institutions; Rath and Swagerman 2011). We are sceptical of such a view, although we hasten to add that our stance does not reflect a rejection of the welfare state or an apologetic for neo-liberalism. We take a more basic position and emphasize that many of the intercultural dynamics involved in diverse societies occur in sites of work or exchange. These sites may be regulated by labour codes, commercial law and so on, but their role as places where diverse people meet is generally outside the scope of integration policy or the politics of multiculturalism.

Methodological complications

Before we outline more specific research issues, it is instructive to note several important methodological challenges to studying the relationship between markets and diversity. The first is somewhat ironic given what we have written thus far: where do we demarcate the boundary between society and the market? If we begin with the realization that markets are places of intersection, how much do we need to know about society generally to understand what happens in markets? Put another way, how do we legitimately limit studies of markets from becoming infinite (i.e. studying the supply chains underlying markets; city politics that form the basis from which market regulations are derived; the changing configurations of diversity in

society; market fragmentation and changing consumption patterns; and a host of wider issues, all of which matter)?

Second, how can we capture in traditional written texts the three-dimensional properties of markets and the complex social interactions within them? The challenge of providing a more comprehensive account of markets necessitates, first and foremost, combinatorial methodologies – but also a ‘publications plus’ strategy that will include extensive audio recordings and visual images. Websites are the obvious choice to facilitate multimedia documentation of markets, and these need to be built along with more standard academic publications.

Third, markets are often polyglot places and researchers cannot learn all the relevant languages. To some degree this issue can be addressed by bringing local residents into the research process, for example as research assistants, but some of the nuances of market behaviour and interaction will surely be lost in this process.

Fourth, markets, like so many other social processes, are layered in complex ways that include overt behaviour conforming to formal regulations, and covert behaviour that may not. Ethnographic methods are required to understand the interweaving of these forms of behaviour but even with nuanced, sustained study, it is unlikely that researchers will understand the full complexity of markets.

Fifth, this is particularly true of regulations governing markets. Some of these will be formalized, in some cases as legal texts. But markets also incorporate far more subtle forms of regulation that are related to underlying cultural processes that may be opaque to researchers, even those who invest considerable time in fieldwork.

Finally, we acknowledge at the outset of this research agenda one of the most difficult challenges: that of causality. If people interact routinely in markets across markers of difference, and they ‘get along’ more generally in society despite potential grievances and animosities, how can we know whether interactions in markets contributed to this outcome? This is of course an instance of a general problem of attribution in any social science project, but it represents a formidable challenge given our key research question. The challenge of identifying causality is compounded by another factor: we believe that the direction of causality in the relationship between markets and diversity is constantly shifting – that what appears at one moment to be a straightforward situation of an independent (say diversity) and dependent (say markets) variable, a moment later seems to be the opposite relationship.

Towards a conclusion: street markets and the relationship between economy and society – a research agenda

In this paper we have argued that street markets offer an ideal setting to explore the relationship between economy and society, especially when we consider the ways that these markets reflect, but also shape, the nature and meaning of social and cultural diversity.

Diversity *shapes* markets. While a basic set of actions around buying and selling are fundamental to market exchange, the repertoire of specific behaviours and social practices – or, as we have put it, ‘rules of engagement’ – between buyers and sellers (as well as between buyers and between sellers) reflects contextual factors such as the modes of social difference among the actors. Various actors in the market adopt

behavioural mannerisms to communicate common intentions (here, economic exchange) between people from different backgrounds, whether ethnic, linguistic, class-based, gendered, age-related, or other. Further, diversity affects the market materially, since the stylistic and culinary tastes of clientele are incorporated in items on sale. Social distinctions also impact market activities through the influx or growth in the number of socio-economically marginalized people that might lead to an expansion of precarious or informal work in the urban market. In essence, street markets exemplify the global process of space-time compression, juxtaposing people with backgrounds from distant places and distinct cultures together in the same place.

But at the same time *markets shape diversity*. We can think of this process through three dimensions (see Vertovec [forthcoming](#)): configurations, representations and encounters. Markets help *configure* social life. They reflect the basic sociocultural and socio-economic diversity of local areas. They bring together people into a public arena who might otherwise remain apart. This happens in settings that are both relatively controlled through 'rules of engagement' and also highly adaptive and dynamic. Markets also come to *represent* the nature of diversity in societies. Different cultural groups come to be *imagined* through association with their commercial districts. We think that we 'know' something about Chinese people by our experience of Chinatowns, for example. That is, commercial districts and street markets become loci of the process of distinguishing between 'us' and 'them'. It is also worth noting that many ethnic stereotypes have arisen from perceived behaviour in markets (e.g. the putative stinginess of certain groups, or that certain groups are disproportionately inclined to engage in dishonesty or petty theft). Street markets also entail *encounters* between people, frequently across lines of social and cultural difference. Again, these encounters may be highly scripted, especially when there are linguistic challenges between entrepreneurs and consumers, or improvisational, in some cases leading to lengthy conversations. For some people, street markets are the primary means by which they encounter people from other backgrounds.

These bidirectional mutual, simultaneous influences of configurations, representations and encounters suggest a number of potentially fruitful research questions, although this list will hardly exhaust the possibilities in this field of research. One of the foremost of these questions relates to the effects of economic engagement: does positive, or at least routine, engagement across modes of difference 'carry over' to positively impact on attitudes towards, and interactions with, the same categories of others outside of the market? This question is obviously akin to that posed in contact theory, here transposed specifically to the setting of urban markets. As already noted, the scant social science literature that has asked this question seems divided on whether there is much effect, either positively or negatively.

A related issue: in bringing people together by creating a spatial concentration of diversity (i.e. what Elijah Anderson (2011) calls a 'cosmopolitan canopy'), do street markets foster cosmopolitan identities (Pardy 2005)?

Another important question is more starkly economic: do street markets provide a vehicle for social mobility for individuals and groups that might otherwise remain marginalized? Conversely, are the competitive pressures within street markets so intense that they offer limited scope for economic advancement; if so, are sellers and workers in street markets participating in a kind of economic cul-de-sac?

If markets promote a kind of economic integration, does it follow that they have an impact on local interethnic perceptions and relations? That is, does a successful market, which highlights heritage goods of particular groups, generate respect for those groups? If street markets may promote mutual respect, they may also work in reverse, exacerbating animosities. This leads to questions about things that are present and absent from markets. On the former issue, under what circumstances are hostilities replicated in the market? When do they promote the *exclusion* of particular groups? This of course leads to the latter issue: which groups are not present in markets, and is their absence socially significant?

The spatiality of street markets suggests a range of questions at different scales. Is there a relationship between the location of street markets and their local effects? For example, does it matter whether markets are proximate to areas of ethnic minority residential concentration? Do the social effects of street markets in inner-city areas differ from those in suburbs? At a larger scale, we anticipate quite different relationships between street markets and society in cities of the Global South versus Global North. Is this a valid conjecture? Similarly, do street markets operate differently, and yield different sociocultural outcomes, in neo-liberal societies as opposed to states that have maintained a greater degree of income redistribution and, presumably, market regulation?

Throughout this article we have noted the complex nature of regulation in street markets, which is based on a combination of formal rules and a host of informal practices and tacit agreements. On the more formal side of the spectrum, how do planning agencies, business associations and other relevant actors 'see' the relationship between street markets and local societies? Are these agencies aware of the intercultural dynamics associated with markets or are they oblivious to them? Do they attempt to intervene in this respect, or to capitalize on the intercultural qualities of street markets (e.g. by celebrating the multicultural character of markets in tourist brochures)? If so, what are the consequences? On the informal side, what is the relationship between 'rules of engagement' in these markets and the changing landscapes of super-diversity of global cities?

This list of key research issues illustrates the potential for street markets to provide insights into the society/economy nexus. We believe that this will arise most productively through a research programme that is at the same time conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, such a research programme must transcend disciplinary constraints, exploring connections between the insights of anthropologists, cultural theorists, economists, geographers, linguists, sociologists and of course the field of urban studies. Empirically, there is a need for sophisticated, innovative and flexible methods and a wide variety of finely grained case studies. These methods must enable researchers to appreciate both the formal structures of social/economic relations in markets and also the complex informal codes that infuse these relations. They must also strike a balance between comparability and place specificity. Throughout this research, the primary goal should be to see the wider *meaning* in the *mundane*.

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