

Occupying Bangkok- Mobile Vendors and Democratic Attitudes

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Abstract

Occupying Bangkok- Mobile Vendors and Democratic Attitudes

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This thesis analyzes the status, activity, and relations of mobile vendors in the abstract and reproduced spaces of Bangkok. The flotation of people from Northeast Thailand is located within Bangkok and the process of the development of modern Thai political economy, a process that has been heavily influenced by neo-liberalism. In the capitalist city mobile vendors and others who do not part take in the formal economy are marginalized socially, economically, and spatially leaving a conceptual void in terms of their political identity. Drawing from Purcell's ideas concerning radical democracy and the urban environment that is its' natural site of emergence, I explain the political agency of this particular group. The paper offers two arguments, first, that the abstract and physical borderlines that mark vendors off from the formal economy and its conceived city are spaces where vendors, in seeking to meet their own needs, become a nascent line of democratic action. And second, mobile vendors' role in creating Bangkok as an urban habitat emphasizing the use value of the city informalizes and delegitimizes the Bangkok Municipal Authority in its goal to prioritize the exchange valued city. In their occupation of the city vendors exhibit, and inspire democratic attitudes in their patrons through the relationships that take place in the contested, diverse, and dense Bangkok environment.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1	Introduction	5-13
Chapter 2	Urban Theories	14-34
Chapter 3	Empirical Literature Review	35-65
Chapter 4	Mobility, Space, and Democratic Attitudes	66-93
Chapter 5	Urban Nature: Informality and Inhabitation	94-115
	Conclusion	116-124
	Works Cited	125-136
	Works Cited/ Thai Sources	137-138
	Appendix/Annotated List of Main Sources	139-147

Introduction

In this study I follow theoretical critiques of political economy advanced by Purcell (*Recapturing Democracy* and *The Down- Deep Delight of Democracy*) in situating the mobile vendors of Bangkok as an intentional and unintentional movement with democratic potential. Purcell fleshes out the urban political body-comprised of individuals, groups, and their desires-and estimates its potential in becoming democratic through efforts and negotiations to use and inhabit contested urban spaces. Over the past 25 years issues concerning immigration to the cities and the importance of urban space in the battle for political and economic power have increased in their abstract and concrete significance. Purcell sees in the urban a forum, an environment for agonistic and cooperative encounters between groups that allows them to express and achieve their desires. The movements that grow out of these encounters- encounters that multiply in frequency because of their setting- are often antithetical to neoliberal ideology. This paper will offer two arguments, first, that the abstract and physical borderlines that come to be in the course of these agonistic encounters are spaces where Bangkok mobile vendors, in seeking to meet their own needs, become a nascent line of democratic action. And second, that mobile vendors' role in creating Bangkok as an urban habitat informalizes and delegitimizes the Bangkok Municipal Authority in its goal to prioritize the exchange valued city. I analyze the status, activity, and relations of mobile vendors in the abstract and reproduced spaces of Bangkok and assess them in terms of their existing and potential capability as a democratic node. They are revealed as an energetic

movement with the ability to redefine politics through their sway in influencing the lived urban experience.

The production of space in Bangkok as dictated through capital's hegemony has limitations. These limitations offer opportunities for alternatives, for a diversity of visions. It is however, economic necessity that pushes mobile vendors to occupy and transform space in Bangkok. Thus, the vendors' occupation does not embody the intentionality of igniting political change in the same way as did the activists who "encroached" Wall Street in 2011 or as the protestors in Hong Kong 2014 have. Yet they do occupy in a similar way. *Occupy* [’s] primary definition is *to fill or take up a space or time*, but the more politically charged definition is *to take control of a place, (especially a country) by military conquest* (Oxfordictionaries.com.). Since the student and worker protests of the 60's the word begins to suggest an activism in groups that have been marginalized by hegemonies. This activism manifested in the taking over of strategic administrative, commercial and public areas as occurred during the period of student unrest at U.S. college campuses and in Paris 1968. The protester's bodies become technology through which their desires are broadcast to wider society. So when considering the *occupation* of Bangkok I wish to evoke not just the similar range of interests between the Wall Street invaders and Bangkok vendors such as issues of *bpaak tong*¹ -economic survival-social class and wealth gaps, the difficulties in competing with corporations for the ears of politicians and the right to live in the city, but also the way

¹ Literal Thai translation is *mouth stomach*. It is an idiom that means *the process of making a living* (translation: mine).

their bodily *presence* in the urban centers contests, questions and offers alternative ways of thinking about how we may live together.

One unintended consequence resulting from neoliberalism's reproduction of the city as its own center is the creation of a space that through the density and diversity of its inhabitants becomes fertile ground for democratic lines of action. I argue that mobile vendors are one of these lines because of the simmering tension of their status of being outside of capital's urban vision of modernity and the reality of their numbers and essential relationships. The spectacle² of Bangkok with its futuristic architecture towering over neighborhoods of slums is the stage for this critique. A brief review of its political status and some of the conflicts that have occurred there helps to clarify the circumstances that I want to describe.

Bangkok is by far the largest city in Thailand and it can be said that it is the country's political and economic heart. *World, global, and mega*³ cities are central to the process of capital's investment, movement, and agency and no less important, they are central to the production of social relations. Cities have been in existence for thousands of years but with the beginning of industrialization we start to see greater numbers of people come to inhabit them in more locations, and in a wider expanse of the world.⁴ The logistical

² I recall Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and his critique of power, production of symbols and modern society.

³ Roy ("21st Century" 820) defines "world cities" as the great cities of the North such as Paris and New York, an idea that recalls the role of *Metropole* as the top of the hierarchical chain of colonialism. In contrast "mega cities" are the "poverty stricken planet of slums" located in the South. Sassen's global city adds a further distinction emphasizing the international flows of capital and processes that result from globalization ("The Global" 27). Bangkok resembles both the mega and global city.

⁴ New York Times 2013-06-15 *China's Great Uprooting: Moving 250 Million Into Cities*

requirements of industrial production, labor, centers of administration, sites to receive and process commodities, transportation, and consumers means that the modern city is an offspring of this process. But the city cannot be constrained within a single narrow role. While capitalism's intent in the production of the city is for it to be the focal point of business, the density and the social and economic opportunities outside of its formal systems means that it is also the center for the production of social relations. These relations have a life of their own, a life whose potential exists at least partially *because* it is driven by the inhabitants themselves, not by an ideology. That is, in the creation of cities capitalism "is stirring up a powerful force it cannot fully control" (Lefebvre 61).

Over the last 40 years Bangkok has been the site of the expression of this force a number of times. In 1973 and 1976 there were student led uprisings that spread throughout the city which led in the former, to a turn toward more democratic freedoms, and in the latter-in the wake of Communist Vietnam's victory in 1975- a reactionary return to a military dictatorship. In 1992 the Assembly of the Poor brought 500,000 people into the city while the government took measures to prevent additional protestors coming from the countryside to enter the city and take part in these demonstrations. Finally, during the violently suppressed 2010 protests, red shirts⁵ took over important commercial areas in the city demanding new elections. While it is clear that rural hinterlands are the cradles of these protests, for Thailand, Bangkok has been the main stage for activities that seek to subvert existing economic power structures and instill democracy.

⁵ *Red Shirts* are a democratic movement, the majority of whom support the deposed, self-exiled ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Mobile vending and its' resulting reproduced spaces also subvert state control but for reasons that will be elaborated on in the body of the paper the vendors are not as inviting a target for state suppression as have been the political protestors. They act in one sense as an important logistical network that makes living in the city endurable, this is especially true for low-wage workers. But their economic illegibility⁶ and illegitimacy is a clear sign of state failure in reaching its goals of modernity, and their mobile semi-illegal status contradicts the state's abstract production of the city as being competently and coherently ordered. That is, they contradict the Thai state's abstraction of the city as an efficient tool of and model for the capitalist project.

In reality, spatial imperfections occur in tandem with capitalist abstractions of the city. Scholars have described them variously as margins, edges, cracks, and fractures (Harms *Saigon's Edge*, Roy *The 21st Century Metropolis* 82, Tsing *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*). These are the places where vendors make a living-*tam ma ha gin*⁷. These fissures are also places where a social simmering might take place. The self-immolation of a fruit seller who despaired as a result of harassment by city officials ignited the Arab Spring. Last summer (2013) the execution of an illegal Chinese kebab seller triggered a large and angry response on the social media site *Weibo*⁸. Eric Harms describes the changes around Saigon as its outskirts vibrate between symbolisms of being rural and urban. It becomes a volatile, mutable place where people living in spatial insecurity

⁶ Scott uses the term *legibility* to describe that about which the “state can gain accurate information” and use for its own purposes such as taxation i.e. rice padi fields that were close to feudal centers of administration. He cites the economic activities of highland tribes as an example of a process that was *illegible* to the state. I contend that mobile vendor activities more closely resemble the latter over the former (Scott “The Art of Not Being Governed” 77)

⁷ Dictionary Source thai2english

⁸ (Jacobs *New York Times* 25 September 2013)

alternatively are exploited or are able to exploit their situation by the ways they chose to move between the two spaces. Urban marginal spaces are sites of struggles where inhabitants with lessor power must creatively negotiate a variety of economic and social obstacles in order to survive.

Bangkok is another of the many worldwide urban stages where these struggles are taking place. Issues of immigration, opportunity, and informality clash and sully capitalistic state ideology as informed by its need for order and top down regulation. These problems converge in the lives of vendors. Their role as persona non grata in the eyes of the state but as a ubiquitous presence in the eyes of Bangkok inhabitants imbues them with the quality of being a social catalyst. Vendors challenge the Thai political economy and reinterpret capitalism's vision of the modern, clean, and orderly city as a site of urban life that is socially reproduced and responsive to the desires of its inhabitants.

Thailand's movement toward democracy, whether through formally recognized means or actions on the streets is problematized by its monarchic tradition. In theory the Kingdom's constitutional monarchy limits the monarch's political influence to primarily that of a figurehead chief of state. But in reality the Royalty has a deep impact in the way the system works and how Thai subjects imagine themselves. It is important to understand this dynamic as a background to the exceptional⁹ case of the Thai political system.

⁹ There is an ongoing scholarly debate as to the "Thai exception". Unlike its S.E Asian neighbors it has never been formally colonized or conquered and has maintained a longstanding monarchy yet in ways global forces have clearly manifested their influence on Thai politics and economy.

In Thailand the idea of individuals and groups with shared interests being able to direct political conversation through the power of a political body rising up from the masses meets with an opposition that is embedded philosophically through its traditional hierarchical culture. The 1932 revolution establishing a Constitutional Monarchy that puts no one above the law notwithstanding, rights and righteousness i.e. legitimacy, is seen as flowing down and bestowed through the benevolence *-pramahaagranaatikun*¹⁰ and power, prestige and influence *-baarmee*¹¹ of the Monarchy¹². The current monarch, King Bhumipol, is an overarching figure in Thai politics. Drawing upon the cultural capital of the Chakri dynasty's 230 year history, the love of the Thai people, and a network of close relationships with the military, bureaucratic class and business interests, the Monarchy is interconnected and allied with essential Thai institutions of power (Handley *The King Never Smiles*)¹³. More than a figurehead, the King is considered the Father of the Nation¹⁴. So in Thailand, the idea of power arising from, residing in, and being expressed by the masses is something that is resisted *spiritually* and through the political economic system. This tension and contradiction has manifested in mass demonstrations, over 20 political coups, and a torturous process of revision and reform of various constitutions that has been going on for over 80 years. And Bangkok, the

¹⁰ This is a specific benevolence that comes from the divine essence of the Thai King.

¹¹ Baarmee also implies virtue, sacrifice, patience and goodness as understood in Thai Buddhism (guru.sanook; thai2english).

¹² Thongjai Winichagul explains the difficulty in establishing democracy in Thailand as being a result of the contradiction between *democracy* as power that resides in the people, and the adoption of a *Thai* democracy (advanced by King Vajiravudh [1910-25]), as being *embodied* within the Thai King. If one accepts the latter, democratic movement is unnecessary. If one does not accept it, it is the same as denying the spiritual status of the King.

¹³ Dr. Piang Din Rak Thai refers to this as the "Royal Network".

¹⁴ The King's birthday, December 5, is celebrated as Father's day.

destination for both immigrants pushed out from the countryside and capital attracted by economic opportunity, has been the site of these contests.

When I first noticed the vendors it was not obvious to me that they were engaged in a contest other than the conventional type of economic competition that one would see in any market place. My earliest impressions revolved around the hardships involved as sellers and customers performed transactions while pedestrians wriggled by them on the narrow sidewalks bordering the loud streets. I became familiar with vending through my interests in the food being sold, the shared inhabitation of the streets and through conversations with the men and women selling their goods. In fact the entrepreneurial spirit and the energy they put into their selling schemes dovetails nicely with the neoliberal narrative. But there is a paradox and an ambiguous nature to what they do. There is something stirring about the whole scene. It is an atmosphere buzzing with the economic possibilities of flying under the radar of authority *and* the political possibilities paired with the process of individuals directing their own paths in an urban environment. When vendors step out onto the streets to *tam ma ha gin* they enter a series of antagonistic negotiations with those who control spaces and with the Thai national and neoliberal ideologies that direct state policies. These are negotiations in which the dominant parties often view their subordinates as anomalous and anachronous, problems that alternatively need help or require eradication, or at least be controlled. This paper is provocative because it looks at vendors in terms of their agency and especially how they reproduce that agency in ways that contradict, challenge, and shake up our habits of thinking about the urban. My question is, what is it about the informality of mobile

vending that offers potential in sparking urban democracy as Purcell understands it. The answers I offer form the substance of my thesis.

This chapter has introduced the vendors, their political and economic environment and the fundamental arguments that I will make. Chapter 3 is an extensive review of the empirical literature explaining how the mobile vending scene fits culturally, historically, and economically into Bangkok's informal urban economy. Chapter 4 will offer analysis of Thai productions of space in terms of vendor's mobility, culture and the neo-liberal abstraction of Bangkok. Chapter 5 focuses on the inhabitation and web of shared urban relations between vendors, inhabitants, and formal and informal levels of administration. The following chapter locates Bangkok's mobile vendors within Purcell's theories on urban democracy and Roy's theories of urban informality.

Chapter 2

Urban Theories

Purcell is one of the Marxist theorists who have analyzed the political economy of capital and how people, as subjects, participants, and objects in this system are affected. His work is infused with the ideas of Lefebvre. Lefebvre's critiques emphasize along with the core factors of labor and capital, the issue of *space*, its production and its meaning. While free flow of capital and personal property rights that enable maximization of the exchange value of space are guiding principles of neoliberalism, democratic movement as imagined by Purcell is a project that "more than anything comes to understand itself as a struggle by people to shake off the control of capital and the state in order to manage their affairs for themselves" (*Down- Deep* 5). To uncover the role that mobile vendors are playing in this struggle I locate them within some processes that are key to contemporary world political economy-democracy, neoliberalism, immigration and urbanization. I rely on Purcell's, and to a lesser extent Roy's, theoretical work for which these affairs are central. I turn first to democracy and neoliberalism.

Fukuyama's widely critiqued *The End of History?* is a description of the triumph of liberal democracy over other political economies. The thesis of triumph and finality to political struggle follows the structure of communist theories of social evolution, instead of communism being the natural result of the progression a liberal democracy occurs as penultimate expression of human society¹⁵. This work reflects on the fact that even as

¹⁵ Leading Marxist thinkers after Stalinism (Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri, et al have emphasized we must *not* "expect to achieve a final society without conflict" (*Deep Down* 76).

democracy has taken on the guise of many “faces”, after the fall of the Communist Bloc it is liberal democracy that has come to be the dominant form of government.

Liberal democracy may or may not be the end story of the evolution of political economy but through its alignment with neoliberalism the understood connection between democracy and markets have become ever more closely linked. The two ideologies overlap in their valorization of “... open markets, individual economic agency, and property rights” (*City Regions* 2007). Neoliberalism (NL), allies itself with democratic principles in an economic sense, a capitalist endeavor. Social structures and cultural systems except in the utility of identifying target groups in the market are things outside of its concern. Within this ideology democratic ideals and freedom tend to fade toward the background-regular people are construed in their capacity as labor and its potential in relation to capital. For example, the financial development of Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan was closely associated with central planning policies that invited the large-scale investment by domestic and multi-national corporations that was preferred by these governments. During the early period of their rapid growth these were highly authoritarian regimes perhaps considered democratic only through default since they were outside the communist camp.

In spite of the recurring setbacks symbolized by the military dictatorships that have held power through most of Thailand’s modern history its political economy has the look of an emerging liberal democracy. The bureaucratic/middle class that started to emerge after

the Bowring Treaty¹⁶ grew in influence. It was from this movement that the European educated students, who engineered the revolution in 1932 that led to the Constitutional Monarchy, came from. After the revolution the bureaucrats evolved as a distinct class with significant political power competing for benefits along with the military, the Chinese-Thai business class, and the royal network. This period marked the beginning of an era of primitive capital accumulation which Raquiza calls “state capitalism” (58). Over the ensuing years and up until today this “bureaucratic polity” (53) maintains a great deal of influence politically and economically, being an conduit for benefits to the other main factions through a variety of means such as state enterprises, public-private enterprises, rent seeking and corruption, and state concessions. This polity enabled the establishment of Thailand’s strong industrial and export sector. These sectors, which set Thailand apart from its ASEAN neighbors, is deeply connected with other liberal democracies including those in the EU, the United States, and especially Japan. FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) is seen as a crucial component to economic growth. Even as martial law is imposed the military leadership seeks to maintain and strengthen ties with these trading partners all of whom stress the importance of free markets and liberal governments. They cite their promise for a speedy return to a democratic system of government while enduring the criticism that the high-ranking representatives of these countries enunciate in regard to the 2014 coup d’etat and its’ attendant war on civil rights¹⁷. The important role of the industrial, export, and tourist sectors along with the

¹⁶ The treaty opened the empire to free trade and granted extraterritorial rights to Great Britain. The threat of colonial power and especially the Opium Wars in China made the Royalty of Siam believe opening the country up was the best alternative to dealing with these political challenges. A movement away from the feudal system toward a market system was more profitable for the Royalty and offered political and economic space for a bureaucratic middle class to evolve.

¹⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/world/asia/us-envoy-urges-thailand-to-lift-martial-law.html?_r=0

economic and political clout of the growing middle class when considered as a whole gives Thailand the look of an emerging liberal democracy. Its current status can be described as a liberal democracy in waiting with partially liberal markets (Curran). The existence of these liberal democratic norms places Thailand within the sphere of countries that are strongly influenced by neoliberalism. This is especially clear in the way the most visible of its neoliberal projects, the urban project of Bangkok itself, is conceived.

In the context of this study neoliberalism is defined as the dominant political factor in the creation of Bangkok's modern mobile vendors and the authoritative voice in dictating how their urban environment is imagined, perceived, and lived in. Neoliberalism, "not as a concrete policy, but as an ideology, a form of governmentality...[posits that] society functions better under market logic than any other logic" (Recapturing 13- 14). This offers the rationale and reasoning for opening markets and streamlining the ability of capital to cross geographical and political/policy borders so that it may to actively seek these markets. Neoliberal influenced governments not only limit impediments on the movement of capital so it may efficiently seek markets, they actively "transform policy to better meet the needs of capital" (15) and actively participate in the creation of cities whose physical structure and style of administration beckon this capital to come and abide. The economic force that has spread around the world with the power of this logic has transformed the Thai countryside by pushing villagers towards the Mega-city, and has created Bangkok as a place where vendors precariously reside as their subsistence strategies are subordinated to neoliberalism's much larger project. The urban landscape

<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/02/13/world/asia/ap-as-thailand-eu-rights-criticism.html>

of Bangkok informed by notions of local competitiveness and regionalization in order to foster its' participation in the global economy is a system that marginalizes players, notably including the vendors, who are not formally recognized as part of this system.

So as neoliberalism is quite at home inside liberal democratic political systems and liberal democracy has become so dominant there is a sense that NL has “hijacked” democracy¹⁸ leaving behind a stripped down version that is remiss in recognizing the importance of the diverse interests of people and strong on seeking ways for the privileged capital of large corporate interests, including urban spatial capital, to offer the highest possible return. NL’s drive toward outsourcing and deregulation means that, “democratically elected governments are less able to able to manage the economy”: citizens have less control over how economies are structured, and corporations have more control (*Recapturing* 24). Within this type of political economy the idea of labor is detached from people and capital from democratic rule. As an antidote to the domination of capital Purcell supports a radical democracy. The main difference between this type of democracy and others that are more familiar to us is that instead of the role of central arbiter in organizing the democratic process being played by the state, “the state is entirely transformed or eliminated as people assume direct power” (39). This is an exciting possibility where it is the state and capital partnership that fades into the background and the individual starts to take more control over what is happening. What is stressed is the need for a democracy not for the *many*, but for *everyone*. Another useful

¹⁸ Herzfeld has written of the NL’s “hijacking of history” and its role in leading the conversation in urban renewal projects in Italy and Thailand. He says “The globally dominant economic ideology we usually know as neoliberalism opposes the interests of local people and favors those of speculators and bureaucrats.” (2010: 3).

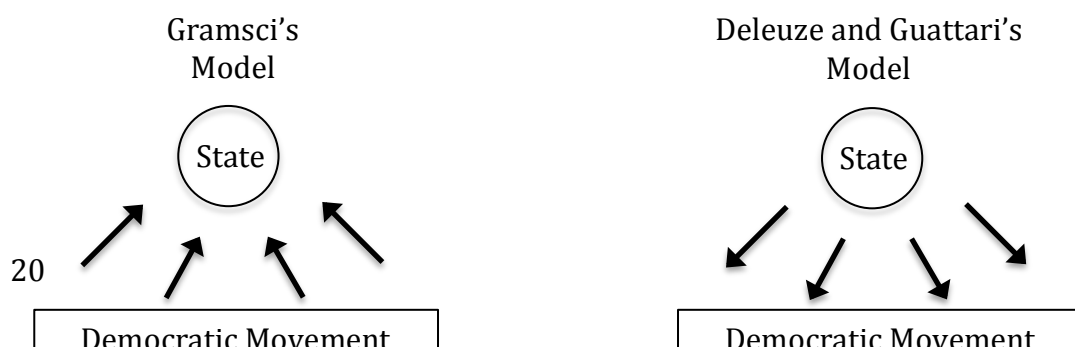
pronoun would be for *each one*, as this stresses the personal and the individual and challenges the idea of markets as a proxy for the desires of people, countering the aggregate with the intimate¹⁹. To bring about this revolutionary type of system, Purcell develops not “ a fully formed set of principles...but a set of *democratic attitudes* designed to foster movements in bringing about a radical democratization of the cities “ (3). This addresses the different types of challenges presented by particular situations and emphasizes the flexibility needed to counter them. These *attitudes* are “an emotional and mental stance toward the world, a stance that implies a sense of some particular values...[and] a confrontational approach that positions a movement in opposition to dominant neoliberal values” (3). These occur through a dialogue between “reflection and practice” which acknowledges the unique ways democratic movements take place depending on existing political, cultural, and economic statuses of their respective settings. What happened on Wall Street was different from what happened in the Arab Spring and from what has happened in Hong Kong but they all inform theory through the results they achieve and the methods they employ. There is a conversation between theory and experience and what emerges is more a set of attitudes than a battle plan.

But the empirical practices that Purcell offers are examples of thoughtful conscious collective action. For example, his study of the movement for the Duwamish River cleanup in Seattle was comprised of a broad set of community coalitions including scientific experts (152). There were at least 10 separate citizen groups that successfully organized to bring to task parties responsible for the pollution. Even the Occupy

¹⁹ I am thinking here of Martin Buber’s work *I And Thou* (1937).

Movement of 2011 though not extensively organized was very clear in its message of dissatisfaction with the economic inequality the current system has produced. They were explicitly a movement through the intentional selection of specific, prominent, and symbolic urban sites to carry out their protests. While not centrally managed, the individual groups that participated were consciously constructed, self-aware movements representing a stance against neoliberalism and for democratization. And Purcell points out that democratic attitudes such as these are best generated and refined by means of a dialogue between theoretical reflection and concrete practice (3).

What I would like to add to this conversation is that it is not *only* through concrete practice and conscious construction that democratic attitudes are created and demonstrated. Bangkok mobile vendors' democratic attitudes are visceral more than conscious, and more politically unintentional than concrete. While the formal Thai political economy turns its back on the vendors, the vendors turn their backs as well. When plotted against the neoliberal blueprint of economic activity what they practice may well be called an *anarchic capitalism* (Curran). Instead of following regulations and interacting with formal authority they look to exploit the democratic potential of their essential social relations and the particular opportunities presented by their urban environment. Purcell plots two different theories of democratic activism that have similar egalitarian goals but employ differing strategies.



While the Occupy Movements encompassed a wide swath of groups and desires if I may draw a broad picture of what I see they were doing I would say that their movement resembles both of the above models. Their confrontational democratic attitude or stance impels them to directly and explicitly challenge hegemony such as represented in Gramsci's diagram. But at the same time they tend to reject the system as opposed to desiring to take control of it, reforming it and improving it, resembling Deleuze and Gattari's model. In contrast mobile vendors do not seek to directly confront authority. In order to achieve the basic subsistence that they regard as financial success (Nirathron "Fighting Poverty" 76) they instead prefer to avoid it blending in to the environment or when necessary fleeing from this authority. Their democratic attitudes are expressed through turning their backs on and as much as possible ignoring the dictates of the neoliberal city and the agents who indecisively enforce them. They do not *graap wai*-bow down and pay homage-to the system or generally even seek to interact with it. They just turn away from it. In this sense they fit Deleuze and Gattari's model. But it is not a political movement in the traditional sense as it is not really a conscious movement. Even as vendors are acutely aware of their marginal status in the system the challenge they offer to the state is implicit and a priori. Their role as political agents who erode the abstract and reproduced legitimacy of neoliberal hegemony is unintentional and rather than focusing on the state their democratic attitudes are expressed through their individual agency.

So it really is not possible to seamlessly map Purcell's vision of democratic activism onto Bangkok and the street vendors. Thailand's subjects, I purposefully use this word over

citizens because of the continuing outsized political influence of the Thai royal network including the military, are not afforded the protection of their civil and human rights in the same way as most Europeans, Americans or even citizens of Hong Kong are²⁰. The current military dictatorship enforces a martial law which includes a ban on any type of political meetings or activism, including the three fingered salute representing *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, as borrowed from the French Revolution in The Hunger Games movies. There is a reason why that as the Occupy Movement spread around the world it did not appear in Thailand-even during the episodic periods when the country is ruled by democratically elected governments freedom of expression is routinely repressed²¹. The Thai political system operates with a lack of transparency, a curtain that hides potential threats of violence or retribution²². Another reason there has been relatively little political movement is that the lower classes have gained economic benefit from the past 40 years of industrialization-standards of living have risen. This is not to say that Thailand has not had explicit democratic movements that directly address inequity and anti-democratic practices. These unequivocal movements such as the 1973 and 1976 student protests and the 2010 Red Shirt occupation of important commercial centers of Bangkok are watershed events in Thailand's process of becoming democratic. But having a democratic attitude does not necessarily mean participating in a march, meeting or referendum. I think we should think of the mobile vendors as a democratic movement even if they are not organized, even if they do not look like it. They have a different way

²⁰ Dr. Piang Din speaks extensively on this at <http://freethaicitizens.org/>

²¹ The omnipresent Thai Criminal Code 112, Lese Majeste, is one example of this.

²² Human Rights Watch 2014 pgs. 393-398

of doing things from the Arab and European activists so to imagine them in this way I must *remap*, must *reworld* Purcell's ideas in the Southeast Asian context.

This reworlding (Soja 1996) involves a shifting of theoretical centers, an academic theme that especially in the fields of Geography, Urban Studies, and Migration studies has been growing in importance over the last 20 years. Ananya Roy has stressed this motif in her work on the Indian urban system pointing out that as the Global South grows in economic and political importance scholars appropriately see that the area “can be [come] a site for productive and provocative theoretical framework for all cities” (Roy *The 21st Century Metropolis* 820). During the colonial period power flowed from the West to the East and South and was assigned through negotiation of political and commercial arrangements to elite groups who safeguarded these interests. South and Southeast Asian Area Studies have followed this directional flow as the main centers of study are located in the West²³, and Western oriented anthropological, historical, and sociological methodology has dominated research. Now, by tapping into contemporary singular aspects of the nature of the South and its *Mega-Cities*, urban theorists see an opportunity for *reworlding* or “dislocating the center” of theory (Lowe 11, *The 21st Century Metropolis* 820, Winichakul 7)²⁴. So while past academic endeavors may have flowed within this kind of theoretical latitudinal relationship we now see a decentering, one where the South in the “North-South” dynamic gains theoretical importance. Southeast Asian Studies have already been fruitful in delivering and contextualizing innovative ways to theorize

²³ Cornell, University of Michigan, University of Washington, University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Kyoto University Japan are some of the prominent centers.

²⁴ This idea is also approached by Chayan Vaddhanaputi (Lowe, *Interview* 72)

processes of nation and community building²⁵. This paper appraises Bangkok mobile vendors' capacity for instigating and building democratic urban environments looking to enrich the Euro-centric theory that I am relying on to analyze it.

Looking at how vendors occupy Bangkok expands the body of practice that informs theory about democratic attitudes by allowing us to see what movements look like in a setting much different from the Western setting. In the discourse about democracy in Thailand part of the narrative of the opposition to it is whether poor people are ready or qualified to participate in such a system. Some of the justifications raised by the elites for the 2014 coup d'état was the corruption of the elected government, its harmful populist policies such as the rice support scheme, and the readiness of poor people to sell their votes. The new draft of the constitution, being written by a council appointed by the military dictatorship, includes an article that requires at least a bachelors degree in order to qualify to run for national office. This helps in the process of insulating power structures from the poor. The willingness and frequency of the elitist based power structure to overthrow elected governments²⁶ shows the difficulty of maintaining a basic democratic system based on the principle of one person, one vote. Thailand, like the countries in modern liberal democratic Europe has inflicted a comparatively, at least to some of its Southeast Asian neighbors, low amount of overt government sponsored violence on its people. But unlike in Europe freedom of speech and other forms of expression that are the sisters to democracy are highly suppressed. At times it is

²⁵ Among others, *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson, *Geo-Body of a State* by Thongjai Winichigul, and *The Art of Not Being Governed* by James Scott all come to mind.

²⁶ This has happened four times in the last 10 years including the constitutional overthrow of Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat in 2008, and the military overthrow of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, and Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014.

discredited as an offense to the royalty, sometimes as creating social problems and as the current dictatorship often cites, as being the cause of political problems²⁷. Further, the issue of *old* capital versus *new* capital problematizes the theoretical battle waged for radical democracy in Thailand that I envision. Progressives in Thailand see the monopolization of power by the royal network with its military and business affiliates, old capital, as being the foremost obstruction to democracy while neo-liberalization or new capital is understood as legitimizing and supporting their movement²⁸. So the debate in Thailand over what type of system is right for them is much different than that in the West. Should we rely on a monarchical system informed by Buddhism and Brahmanism that is democratically enlightened by virtue of merit that has been accrued over a series of lifetimes? Should a neoliberalism personified by the populist/billionaire/fugitive ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra be embraced as a model for developing Thai democracy? The discussion of radical democracy in this type of political situation, in a country that has yet to completely step away from its feudal attitudes and looks to the forces of globalization as a current that is supportive of democracy may seem fanciful. But as I will show in Chapters Four and Five, in a modest and different yet conspicuously mutinous way mobile vendors practice a form of anarchic capitalism that is nourished by their radical democratic attitudes.

The incongruence between NL ideology and a democracy that emphasizes individuals' and groups' ability to shape their own way of existence is stark especially when looked at

²⁷ <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asia/flash-protests-jar-thailand-coup-leaders-tighten-grip-n114526> - <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asia/flash-protests-jar-thailand-coup-leaders-tighten-grip-n114526>

²⁸ Professor Surachay, a leader of *Seri Thai*- Free Thai- the most recent incarnation of the progressive/ revolutionary movement of the country's political refugees, sees globalization and neoliberalization as the enemy of and antidote to this Royal network. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ewO1ohKd0s>

in terms of freedom. Amartya Sen sees the deep relationship between economics and development, freedom and agency. He states that, “Economic growth cannot sensibly be treated as an end within itself . . . it has to be more concerned with freedom” (15). His argument is that development as a feature and goal of democratic government must be grounded in freedom, if there is no freedom than there is no development. In this respect NL is at odds with the goals of “democratic” government since the freedom it concerns itself with is limited, limited to the freedom of capital. Even as modern liberal governments are understood to be institutions that protect individual rights, NL’s establishment as the most important ideology in contemporary political economic practice means that it has hijacked democratic government into being an impediment towards freedom. So the state, not just in its totalitarian or authoritarian incarnation, but also in its *democratic* visages, can be an obstacle in achieving freedom. Thus Purcell formulates, focusing directly on urban life, his goal of “recapturing democracy, specifically a counter project to the neoliberal project, an urban movement nurtured by recognizing and supporting attitudes and activities that make cities more democratic” (*Recapturing Democracy* 3). It is as part of this movement, disregarding formal state directives and expressing democratic potential, where I would like you to discover the vendors, an unquestionably urban movement whose freedom is fostered by this environment and its inhabitants.

Lefebvre would remedy NL impediments to freedom through a socialism that allows a “deepening, expanding, and extending of democracy that leads to a dictatorship of the

proletariat” (91). This broadening of democracy would be the product of *autogestion* or self-management²⁹.

Each time a social group...refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, autogestion is occurring (135).

Purcell expands on this idea to “imagine self-management in all areas of life” (“Possible Worlds” 8). That is as individuals take over the responsibility for managing themselves the role of the state decreases and becomes less central to the affairs of society. This is a critical part of the process of recapturing democracy. One that cities are profoundly qualified for as they are an environment that fosters this self-management as mobile vendors show us.

Capitalism’s success has resulted from and depends on an abstraction of the city that imagines it as the headquarters for its mechanisms. Portes notes that the urban is not a neutral space, “[they] are not only passive receptors, but active vehicles for the implementation of novel capitalist strategies through their resources of infrastructure, communications facilities and, above all, people” (2). This is where “needs and desires” as understood through capitals impulse to increase itself and the necessity for it to quantify its results, “are uncoupled and crudely cobbled back together” (Lefebvre 308). The city is an imposing physical manifestation of this impulse, the site of its management

²⁹ A term Lefebvre uses it to explain the process of groups mastering its own conditions. An example is the workers takeover of factories in Paris 1968.

and the focal point for selling the fruits of its production. Its abstraction and actualization in this form appears monolithic; the verticality approaches the heavens, the wires, pipes, and tunnels that join together its various branches imply a logic, connectivity, and authority. This is the “industrial city where urban inhabitants are rendered politically passive” (*Down-Deep* 22). But it is still the reproduction of an abstract idea thus open to alternatives, especially those that recognize social space.

Mobile vendors make it impossible to ignore the city as a social space. And this makes them a relevant subject when discussing the development of radical democracy within the urban environment. The face to face encounters that take place as they provide essential requisites to its inhabitants is one important way that they create this social space.

Lefebvre says, “...[urban] space has taken on... a sort of reality of its own” (*qtd. Down Deep* 26). That is, the density of the city multiplies the opportunities for communication, encounters, and negotiations that occur in the competition for resources to enrich our physical and emotional habitat.

It is here where Lefebvre differentiates between the *city* and the *urban*. Whereas the city is a tool to maximize *exchange value*, the urban implies *use value*. The capitalist city is narrowly construed in its possibilities as dictated through its commercial and economic potential, yet ideologically it “aspires...to be understood as total center” (332). Its shape and the way it is understood by its inhabitants validate capitalism as being at the heart of “modernism”³⁰. For Lefebvre the city represents technology, data, and the information

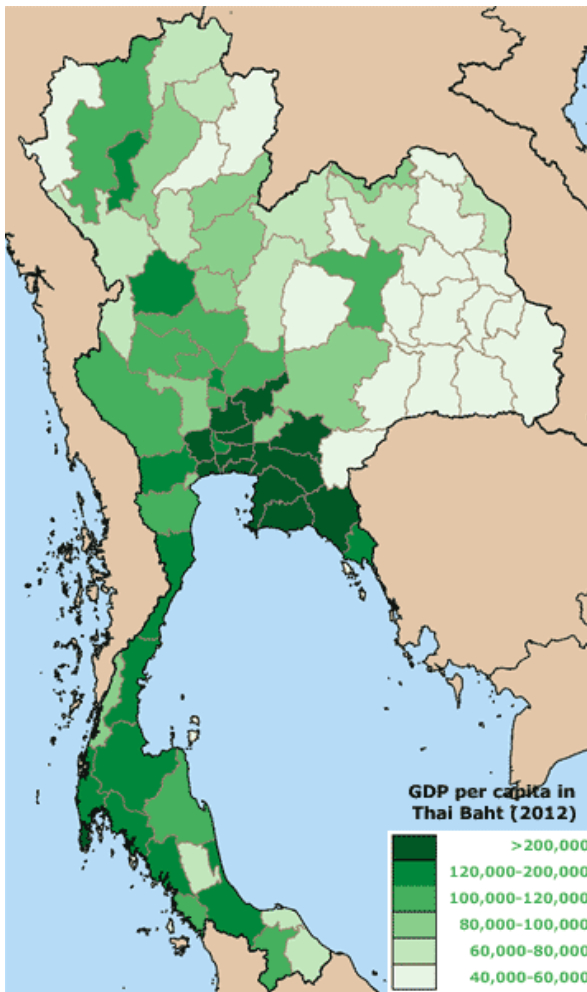
³⁰ Here I think of Loos definition of the word, acknowledging its “archetypal” understandings of progress and rationality of political, economic, and social processes as developed during the Enlightenment of 18th

that guide how it is imagined and produced. This quasi-knowledge educes a sense of realizing something coherent and complete, but it is *not* knowledge as it has yet to “...effectively connect the mental and social” (334). In other words, if reason is applied as a “meta-commentary” (Lowe 20) on the capitalist understandings that produce the city, we can see that it lacks a vision of the city as a lived in urban society and the habitat of people who make use of it to achieve their personal goals. Capitalist ideology in its production of the city defines it in a way that “has[ve] not succeeded in getting out of the mental space and into the social space (Lefebvre 328).

One of the principal components of the social space of Bangkok are Thailand’s internal immigrants. These people come mainly from the North and Northeast having been pulled into the city by potential opportunities. Moreover, they have been pushed out of their villages by economic pressure. This dislocation, as I will explain, sets the stage for mobile vendors’ antagonistic relationship within the conceived neoliberal city. Purcell stresses that these push factors are “the primary force driving Southern urbanization” (Down-Deep 15). The agriculture for export model has driven the need for mechanization and consolidation in order to compete in world markets, the resulting affects on the villagers looking to be an after thought. For example the huge land-titling project that ideally was designed to enable small farmers access to credit to aid them in this project resulted in corrupt practices, losses of traditionally used common areas and, when owners were unable to meet debt payments, the loss of individual farms. Much of this land became the property of wealthy investors or the military (Hirsch 6). Both rural restructuring that advanced entry into global markets *and* the integration into these

century Europe while being aware of its paradoxical partnership with slavery, colonialism, and domination. *Subject Siam* 2006: 19-21

markets removed, depending upon how you wish to look at it, geographical and political protections or barriers. This altered local markets, intensified land scarcity and escalated the migration, the flotation, to Bangkok (Down-Deep 16). I include a regional map of Thailand's gross domestic product that illustrates this phenomenon³¹.



This map shows the income disparity between the outer provinces and the primate city. It also illustrates the overall flow of internal migration. Populations in the white-lower

³¹ www.thaiwebsites.com

GDP per capita- area in the rural northeast, Isaan,³² have moved in large numbers to the dark green area-higher GDP per capita-in the center of the map, the Bangkok metropolitan area (Curran 231; Guest 6:). This issue of immigration is important because the process of relocating from the village to the city, which in the case of vendors mostly means relocating to slums, is a process closely intertwined with how the capitalist project is reproduced in Southern Asian Countries. Mega cities do not just appear- they are capital projects demanding a wider geographical process of relocating labor from the countryside. Those who lack resources, status, or education are alienated from their homes and the least privileged of this group, the political economic “flotsam” of Northeast Thailand, comprises the majority of Bangkok’s mobile vendors (Nirathron “Fighting Poverty” 71).

In a sense, researching the vendors in this way means that the paper becomes an ethnography of a specific response to the effects of neoliberalism. I do not believe that this is an ideal response. The noise, pollution, and stress that vendors are exposed to takes a toll on their health. But the informal urban networks created through the work they do is “something different”, an alternative to the workings of neoliberalism’s imagined city and therefore are worth watching (Down-Deep 17). The vendors’ reality is largely beyond the scope of formal controls. They express democratic attitudes and the relationships they engender are deeply intertwined in the process of generating Bangkok’s unique environment of urban inhabitation, its social space.

³² Isaan is Thailand’s largest, most populous, and poorest region. It is the Pali-Sanskrit word for Northeast. Thai borrows many words from Pali/Sanskrit language reflecting the deep influence Indian culture and religion has in Southeast Asia

Lefebvre reminds us that the city is more than just people and things. The *sidewalk ballet* of Jane Jacobs points to the diversity of goals, the agency, and activeness of people in the urban (Jacobs 24, 27, 181). Individuals embody multiple social identities, and the urban setting is where these are challenged, modified, and reinforced through interactions and relationships. Purcell interprets Lefebvre saying, “urban society draws inhabitants . . . into vital urban spaces where they encounter each other and engage in collective and meaningful negotiations about what kind of city they desire” (*Down-Deep* 23). It is the *inhabitation*, the social aspect, of the city that is important in identifying what the urban offers as a site of democratic futures (*Recapturing Democracy* 102). In the eyes of the state and capital partnership whose goal is to achieve progress, modernity, and order, social and informal relations are phantasm-like, illusive and fitfully acknowledged. Yet these are the type of relations that vendors, their customers, *and* government authorities recurrently engage in.

I borrow from Roy themes that have to do with rephrasing of formality and informality within the political economies of the South. Early mainstream economists divided these two things into camps that connote binaries such as modern vs. traditional, rural vs. urban, and legible vs. illegible. Alternatively, Roy sees informality as being an intrinsic part of the system arguing that “[the informal] has to be understood not as a grassroots phenomenon, but rather as a *feature* of structures of power” (*Why India Cannot Plan* 84). The study of Kolkata’s and Bangalore’s “idiom of urbanization” is a critique of informality and how these municipalities use it as a strategy to solve their difficulties in acquiring land to expand infrastructure. She contends that in the case of India, formality

itself is a “fiction” and the state, as it selectively decides when to follow and break its own laws in the name of large projects is itself a “deregulated, dynamic process of informality” (80-2).

Bangkok’s globalized business climate masquerades under a similar guise. It relies on the mobile vendors, the informal economy, to mitigate the problem of a relatively high cost of living for its employees. While multinational corporations jealously create and guard their images of quality within a forward looking type of globalism, the flip side of this *formality* are catastrophes in garment factories which are not up to code, blatant exploitation of workers, and suppression of rights to use the city. Vendors and the NL project are closely connected, and Roy’s problemization of formal and informal political strategies offers a useful way of understanding how this relationship works. But in furthering the discourse on informality, while it may be that the linkage between NL and informality is sometimes symbiotic it is not seamless. There is a tension, an ideological and philosophical gap between the two systems and their respective goals. That of on the one hand, large businesses and government working together to maximize return of capital, and on the other, families, as producing and consuming units seeking to achieve a minimum level of subsistence³³. This tension, and the vendors being outsiders in the process of achieving formal state goals reveals cracks in the abstraction of Bangkok’s formal economy. Their being out of step with NL and the state creates a dynamic, multi-faceted urban scene which indicates potential for a “for wider political struggle” (Purcell “Possible Worlds” 2). I argue that what the vendors are doing is what Purcell is saying,

³³ Scott, in *The Moral Economy of The Peasant* explains peasants economic and political strategies in terms of their risk aversion and “subsistence ethic”.

that is, they have an *attitude* that is habitual, well suited to urban life in Bangkok, and oppositional to neoliberalism (Down-Deep 4). This is expressed through both their negotiation for space and the ongoing definition of their social and legal status. The occupation and use, the inhabitation of Bangkok by vendors, can be critiqued as an intentional and unintentional democratic movement whose urban setting defies control by neoliberal ideology.

This chapter has surveyed Purcell's theories on urban democracy that I connect with the origins, processes, and democratic potential of mobile vendors. The following chapter is an extensive review of the empirical literature that explains how the mobile vending scene fits culturally, historically, and economically into Bangkok's informal urban economy. My use of the resources has produced a collage like work whose clarity may be enhanced by pointing out specifically where in the work I made use this evidence. At the end of the paper I include an annotated list of the main sources with brief explanations of how I linked these evidences to insights and arguments within each chapter.

Chapter 3

Review of the Empirical Literature and Related Ethnographies

For over 50 years the continuing emergence of primate cities have transformed the developing world³⁴. As explained in the previous chapter this phenomenon has been characterized by large inflows of population from rural areas. The emphasis that policy leaders have placed on industrialization, plus the agriculture for export model and its linked reliance on mechanization have led to a dearth of economic opportunity in these areas. Thus the cities become a magnet for disadvantaged groups looking for possibilities unavailable in their villages and provinces (Nirathron, *Fighting Poverty*). The production for export model has created a great amount jobs in the formal sector but still not enough of them to fully meet the need for employment that this immigration has brought about. So between the lack of opportunity at home and the fluctuating demand for labor in Thai urban centers, which is tremendously sensitive to global economic cycles and export demand, making a living can be problematic. For those unable to find employment in the formal sector looking for work in the informal sector is the alternative. Mobile vending is a significant part of this sector and in the case of Bangkok it is estimated that 390,000³⁵ people make a living through vending supporting their families in the city and back in the

³⁴ *Primate city* is a geographical term coined by Mark Jefferson referring to a city that dwarfs others in the region in terms of population and economic and political importance. This may be measured by its size compared to the next largest city or by percentage of the country's population living in the primate. Bangkok is the capital, the business and education center of Thailand, and ten times larger than Chiang Mai the second largest city.

³⁵ Labor Force Survey of 2000

village. This vending whether performed in mobile, temporary, or semi-permanent sites is ubiquitous, and supplies the basic daily needs of the majority of Bangkok residents.

While Bangkok's inhabitants have good knowledge of the locations of the vendors they patronize, it can be said that academics and policy strategists as a group have neglected the subject of vending and its related issues such as class division, disconnect between desired representations of Bangkok as a *world city* and social realities, as well as constructing useful strategies in maximizing benefits that vending can bring to the city. As a result there has been a relatively small amount of work produced on the subject (Bhomik, Global Urban 15).

The wide practice of street vending from the central business districts, to areas lining the sites of the factories that surround Bangkok, to the mouth of the alleys that are the location of the residences of most of the lower classes, does not mean that the activity as it is currently practiced is universally accepted. One recommendation presented to Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)-the municipal governing body of Bangkok- is to cease street vending completely (Pannilai 9). That is, to move activities inside of designated buildings and at the same time provide training so that the sellers may find other employment. Pannilai concludes that problems associated with hygiene, disruption of pedestrian and motor traffic, and the way the disorder created/presented by vendors affects Bangkok's image and defies proper administration are reasons why it should be moved inside. This type of proposal illuminates the dilemma that authority has in facing the reality of street vending. The drastic nature of this solution is also an

example of how strong an influence the theoretical conceptualization of city as a place for formal economic activity has in defining its use (Nopporn 2007). Those whose pattern of use does not conform to this conceptualization become *persona non grata* and they must be controlled or excluded. To be sure there are other ways of understanding Bangkok's mobile vending.

Street vending, also known as hawking, has been defined as one of the most visible categories under the broader classification of the informal economy (Bhowmik, Global Urban 8; Murray 20). In Thailand this general activity is known as *haap re paeng loy*. *Haap re*, the original form of Asian mobile vending means to carry and wander (my translation). The vendors tote two baskets containing wares suspended on either ends of a pole (Grivijitr 2). They travel along routes searching for customers and stopping at places where regulars know them or where there is high foot traffic. While this type of vending can still be seen the activity has been adapted and modified with a good deal of variety in accord with the obstacles and opportunities of modern urban life.

Modern vendors utilize carts of different types. The most basic are three wheeled wagons that have glass sided cases containing goods or ingredients necessary to prepare food. Often the vendors will have large umbrellas to protect against the hot sun and a chair to sit in while waiting for customers. They pull their carts from home or from nearby rented spaces to a selling location. They may move periodically in order to capture foot traffic according to flow of the workers or students who are their customers. It is not uncommon to see a cart containing a gas stove, chairs, tables, ice chests

containing food, tubs and utensils which is attached to a motorbike-a self contained mobile restaurant. Vendors that live some distance from the selling site can then drive to their location instead of having to push their carts.

Vendors sell right up on the sidewalk or if it is a more elaborate set up may place their gear on the side of the road with the activities straddling the sidewalk (Grivijitr 2). If they have an agreement with the shop or building owner they can set up abutting the building. Sometimes the temporary stalls are part of the shop house businesses that extend out from the building. Sometimes building owners set up stalls that sell drinks or sweets and then hire people to operate the business. Vendors also set up stalls on empty lots or in areas that are understood as abandoned. As Walsh explains, aside from these relatively informal types of arrangements are the registered selling areas that the BMA has set up (“The Street Vendors of Bangkok” 3). The stall operators are charged rent and clean up fees. There has been some resistance and conflict regarding this type of arrangement as it drives up the operating costs for the sellers (“After the 1997 Financial Crisis in Bangkok” 264).

These cart and booth vending activities are called *paeng loy*, which means floating stalls (Grivijitr 1). Both *haap re* and *paeng loy* are characterized by a lack of permanent fixtures and formalized access to space and utilities. Vending activities cover a spectrum of mobility, from that of wandering without any fixed site, to those with relatively fixed locations and those types that fall in between (Bhowmik, “Street Vendors in the Global Urban Economy” 6; Tepowongsirirat 53; Yasmeeen “Foodscape”). Vending entails food

sales, household goods, gifts, toys and clothes (Walsh, “The Street Vendors of Bangkok” 186).

Yasmeen’s *Bangkok’s Foodscape* is an ethnography focusing on food sellers that applies gender and urban studies in theorizing the scene. These themes help explain how pre-Thai cultural modes echo in contemporary reproductions of vending. For example it has been noted that Siamese culture, in comparison to other S.E. Asian cultures, has allowed women a great deal of freedom in conducting business in the public sphere (Keyes, “Golden Peninsula”; McGee, “The Southeast Asian City”). This traditional norm creates space for women in vending activities and is clearly manifested in the preponderance of female vendors. As for perspectives of urban change, the persistence of vending in the face of modernization can partly be explained through its historical cultural roots in the klong-canal-based commerce of Siam (Yasmeen “Foodscape” 53; Mateo-Babiano). Modern Thai culture is described as a lateral superficial concept of appearance that is layered on top of the *real* world, the traditional, understood, and unchallenged (Van Esterik 4). The modern, land based, material city sits on top of a liquid, ephemeral, and hierarchical traditional city (Noparatnaraporn 58). Paved roads cover and take the place of klongs, but klongs still exist in the Thai imagination and their vision of the world.

I cite extensively from Yasmeen’s work to describe how gender relations, immigration and urban change are relevant to mobile vendors and the problems they face. So it becomes necessary for me to be clear on how my work differs from hers. *Foodscape*

presents an overall picture of the Bangkok food scene including small and large restaurants, fixed and semi fixed food vendors. The author focuses on previously mentioned socio-economic issues to give a sense of the complexity of the scene and the complications which food vendors of all kinds face. The work establishes how they innovate and respond to changes that are occurring while drawing upon traditional Thai norms. But as it is pointed out “ [no] single study can address the entirety of Bangkok's food system” (195). Food sellers connect with urban inhabitants on the most basic biological level, supplying them with nourishment. The issues and problems that mobile food vendors and fixed site sellers encounter overlap in quite a few ways so I have incorporated a good deal of her ethnographic work into my thesis. But I have intentionally concentrated on mobile vendors and have not discriminated between food sellers and the sellers of other products. By doing this I mark their spatial insecurity, a condition that predicates ongoing practical and ideological negotiations and battles with those who control vital urban spaces (Nopporn 41). The paper highlights how urban development and policy informed by neoliberal ideology instigates a competition for and redefinition of contested urban spaces where from the neo-liberal world-view mobile vendors play the role of the “opposition”. Their symbolic and practical un-fixedness, as well as the complex set of relationships they enter into confound the modern city and call attention to its’ livability and use value.

Method of Collecting and Using the Evidence

Up until the mid 1990's there was little written about Bangkok's mobile vending. Starting with the financial crisis in 1996 we saw that the number of vendors grew rapidly as the continuing migration from the countryside combined with the many laid off workers struggling to find income increased their ranks (Bhowmik, "The Street Vendors of Bangkok" 255). At this point scholars started paying more attention to the matter. Yet, up until today there has still not been published a book devoted specifically to the subject³⁶. I did not have funds to conduct my own ethnographic research so this required I take a different path. It was an opportunity to do something new but at the same time it was necessary for me to apply some creativity in gathering the evidence. So while I was not able to avail myself of any tomes dedicated specifically to the subject what I was able to access were journal articles, some longer some shorter, a number of doctoral dissertations written by Thai researchers³⁷, BMA case studies, planning reports and documents, Thai newspaper, radio and TV reports that were related to the story, and web blogs that discussed the mobile vendors. In searching the web, mostly through Google Scholar, I used among others the tags, *Bangkok mobile food vending*, *street vending*, and *food hawking*. Some sources were found through looking at the works cited within benchmark works, or works that cited the benchmark works. My advisors identified books and articles that were relevant for their comparative and theoretical content.

³⁶ In mid 2014 Hansen's *Street Economies in the Urban Global South* became available to me. While it does not offer a case study of Bangkok, it does mirror the content of my work in terms of its theoretical focus on the interplay between informal economies and neo-liberal dominance in developing countries.

³⁷ *Thailis* was my digital source for these dissertations

The academic work I have encountered ranges from ethnographic—sociological, anthropological, and gendered—to theorizing the location and economics of vending. In order to add perspective to the work I included research from other sites in Southeast Asia as well as the U.S. This extends the research beyond a *culturalist* approach that would explore the “uniqueness” of the Thai case and offers opportunities for the scene to be understood comparatively. It “breaks {ing} down the artificial divide between nature and culture and focuses instead on understanding the different ways in which categories of reason and rationality emerge in different locations” (Sears 51). Aside from the research coming from the hands of Western scholars who have done fieldwork on vending my study leans heavily on the fieldwork and dissertations of Thai scholars and doctoral students from departments of Urban Studies, Urban Planning, Development Education, and Philosophy. Included is one first hand source, an interview with a sky train platform vendor³⁸.

I have taken these existing accounts and interviews, policy reports, and government documents to surround the mobile vendors in order to capture a sense of what they are doing and what it might mean politically. These include cases and examples of accommodation, antagonism, resistance, and shared inhabitation. I have used the ethnographic studies as evidence to support the claims about the social and economic changes that prompt what vendors do. The policy reports and case studies show how the neoliberal agents of the BMA struggle to contend with vendors’ use of the city and their methods of evasion which in turn tarnishes its legitimacy and the abstract vision of the

³⁸ The Sky Train is Bangkok’s elevated rail system.

ordered city. Field studies and various media reports were put into service to show how interaction between vendors and inhabitants engender both, relations that enhance the urban experience hinting at its democratic nature, and spark a debate over the densely populated and contested public and private spaces of Bangkok.³⁹.

Ethnographies

Early accounts of the genesis of Thai mobile vending give a sense of the current scenes' cultural and economic roots, why it is socially accepted, and how it has become so pervasive. Pre-Thai i.e. Siamese, commerce was characterized by a canal and river based system of transportation. Mateo-Babiano writes of the Central Thai water-based system and the movement of people and goods on the Chao Praya River and its tributaries (454). New klongs were dug to improve transportation and to control water during the flooding season. These klongs also provided additional locations for residences and commerce. Some prepared food was sold by boat but most of the goods were fresh produce or dry goods. In the mid 19th century many Chinese came to settle in Siam and the water way based selling began a process of hybridization (Keyes, "Buddhist Kingdom" 98, 277). The new immigrants established floating houses that sold household goods, dry goods, as well as prepared foods (Mateo-Babiano 454-5; Askew 54). As Thailand's relationship with the West grew in importance Siam's Kings, starting with King Rama IV (1851-1868) saw the necessity of replicating aspects of the modern state as produced in the Anglo—European West. One of the main features of this development was a road

³⁹ My research is enriched through having lived in Bangkok for a total of one year during parts of 2006 and 2010 as a student at the Intensive Thai Language Seminar for Foreigners at Chulalongkorn University.

system designed in part to meet the demands of the growing export based commerce (Noparatnaraporn 58). While the current mobile vending culture was made possible by the creation of a road system, some of its main characteristics come to be through the conception of the Sino-Thai culture that was taking place during the same time period.

Keyes speaks of the agriculture-based society in Thailand and how this starts to change in the 1860's ("Buddhist Kingdom" 275-6). The waves of Chinese immigration quickened the growth of an urban and market based society. The immigrants filled a mercantile role in the economy and one of the common activities for new arrivals was food hawking (McGee 58). Most of the early immigrants came without families and did not have the means or knowledge to prepare food and hawking answered this need (Yasmeen, "Foodscape" 14). Urban society and the emergence of a middle class also helped to popularize the idea of eating outside the home, or *public eating*—Yasmeen's term. (Kam Pgae). The growth of Chinese style shop houses-- multi-story buildings and residences with shops on the ground floor-- creates a cultural and physical space for this eating of which mobile food vending is one type (Mateo-Babiano 454).

The traditional agency of Thai women to act in a commercial role within the public sphere is part of the cultural base on which mobile food vending grew (Yasmeen, "Foodscape" 94-5). In the early period of modernization urbanization expands the role that women played in family finance as can clearly be seen through their participation in the selling of raw and prepared food (Baker 103). Women were also the main sellers of foodstuffs in the markets (Keyes, "Buddhist Kingdom" 146). Inter-marriage between

trading minded Chinese and culturally empowered Thai women allows for the large role that they come to play in mobile vending.

This large role aside from dovetailing with the traditional female role in economic production is also related to Thai conceptions of the female gender as nurturer (Keyes “Buddhist Kingdom” 123; Yasmeen, “Foodscape” 130). The food prepared by small vending enterprises not only *liang* --take care of--the urban population, but also comprises a good part of the family diet (Nirathron, “Fighting Poverty” 22, 36; Tepwongsirirat 224). Additionally, in order to take care of extended families, income earned is sent back to the home village (Yasmeen “Foodscape” 131). The strong representation of Thai women in vending can partly be explained by understanding the traditional cultural roles they have in family and wider society.

Whereas the ubiquity of women in vending within Thailand is something echoed in other parts of the world it is not universal and is not necessarily duplicative of the Thai production. In Cambodia and the Philippines it is found that women dominate vending activities (23; Tinker 334). However, in India, a country with a large vending scene -i.e. an estimated 260,000 in Dehli, 500,000 in Mumbai--there are very few women vendors (Bhowmik, “Global Urban ” 49; Rajagopal 96). Keyes explains that the role of women in Theravada Buddhist societies have been more varied than those of societies influenced by Chinese or Islamic cultures (*Ambiguous Gender*). Even so, nowadays we find that in Indonesia and Vietnam women do play a large part in vending. Through the mid 90’s the literature indicates that although Indonesian women made up a large part of street sellers,

their roles were more commonly performed in the *warteg*-permanent stalls- or *kampong*-small shops on side streets- rather than in the modern business districts (Yasmeen, “Foodscape” 93; Murray 82-3). I understand that now, in 2014, female vendors are to be found throughout Jakarta⁴⁰. Hiemstra describes the vending entrepreneurs in Hue and Hanoi as being “nearly all women”(2). In contrast, a study of New York’s Greenwich Village magazine vending scene found all but one of the sellers were men (Duneier).

After the Asian financial crisis of 1996 the literature illustrates a changing demographic. We see a large increase in the amount of food vendors and also see that males are playing a greater role than they previously had (Nirathron “Fighting Poverty” 15, 33). In a 2006 study Kusakabe notes roughly equal gender participation and that husbands and wives often work together as a team (22). The group of male vendors who have recently entered the scene, “challenge the view of street vendors as being... mostly women” (Walsh “After the 1997 Financial Crisis in Bangkok” 255). The Bangkok “Sandwich Man” phenomena, that of an ex-stockbroker becoming the new face of mobile food vending after his financial business failed, also confuses other assumptions about vendors (Yasmeen “Stockbrokers Turned Sandwich Vendors” 1)⁴¹. The growing prevalence of men in particular trading activities that previously were seen as the domain of women is also noted in Indonesia (Murray 88). While vending is still an important economic

⁴⁰ We briefly discussed the prevalence of female vendors in Jakarta during the Seminar in S.E. Asian History May 22, 2013 University of Washington.

⁴¹ The Bangkok “Sandwich Man” widens understandings of vendors and their performance. He problematizes the image of them as being female, poor, and from the countryside through being male, an ex-real estate broker and from Bangkok. Fallout from the financial crisis of the 90’s brought former professionals down from the skyscrapers to the streets to work as vendors. This sparked new types of reproduction in the performance of vending. It is interesting to note that now, ten years after Rajagopal spoke of the “eclipse of the Sandwich Man”—Walter Benjamin’s original walking advertiser—we find that they have reappeared in the U.S. (5) The modern incarnation of both kinds of sandwich men, Benjamin’s and Bangkok’s, speak to economic insecurity in the age of the globalism.

opportunity for woman the entry of more men into the occupation is significant as it reveals changes in social and economic realities. I will discuss the upward-downward economic mobility for which vending provides a vehicle, but first will turn to what the literature says about vending and its importance to the poor.

Many of those unable to find work in the formal sector because of lack of education or family responsibilities find their way into vending. It becomes a subsistence strategy for the poorest of the Bangkok citizens (Narumol “Haap Re Ahaan” 2). While the extreme poor comprise a minority of sellers nevertheless, the practice underlines the importance of the occupation for the economically disadvantaged (Narumol 6; Nirathron “The Business of Food Street Vendors” 430). Those who are unable to find work in the formal sector because of age, lack of skills, or failure of the formal sector to create enough jobs often find their way into vending (Keyes “Buddhist Kingdom” 311; Nopporn 66). Vending becomes a safety valve offering a vocation for unemployed urban residents (Yasmeen “Workers in the Urban” 33; Nirathron “Fighting Poverty” 15; Kusakabe 24; Tepowongsirirat 58). Many of the urban residents are immigrants who moved to the city looking for factory work, and a good proportion of these are ex-farmers, predominantly from the Northeast (Yasmeen *Foodscape*; Nirathron, “The Business of Food Street Vendors” 433; Nopporn 65; Tepowongsirirat 58).

The waves of immigration to the variously designated mega/primate/global cities/ in which Bangkok stands out because of its regional importance, have been driven by industrialization and globalization (Sternstein 9). The agricultural sector is seen as

resource from which to draw assets to develop the industrial sector (Rodan 81). As the economic assets are drawn toward the centers to invest in large urban enterprises the human resources follow. As mentioned above job opportunities in the formal industrial or service sectors are not sufficient to meet the demand and this is why immigrants seek work in the informal sector including vending. There is a fair amount of agreement in the ethnographic descriptions of Bangkok food vendors in terms of gender, social class, where they come from, and why they come to vending. But the literature that has to do with their role in a changing society and definition of their economic function problematizes the issue. Even in global cities these questions still puzzle administrators, authorities, and urban planners (Duneier). Factors that brought about the large increase in vending--urbanization, industrialization, and globalization drive its conceptualization within Thai society. In the next section I review studies that explain vending in this context.

Social and Economic Change

There has been little work on the societal implications of vending in Thailand. I therefore include in this section theoretical (socio-economic) writings that enrich the analysis and provide modeling for the project. Industrialization and urbanization have had the effect of creating societal poles that define people according to where they live and the occupations they perform. Borer speaks of need to “mend [this] rift between culture and place” (172). This rift can be seen as a theoretical conflict taking place on the ground, that is, a *Gemeinschaften* (traditional, primitive, low) culture existing inside of a

Gesellschaften (civilized, complex, high) society (177). But separating the two may conceal the influence that capitalism has had in creating this theoretical divide, insiders and outsiders.

Nopporn borrows freely from Foucault and especially Lefebvre explaining how the “truth about outsiders” is defined by the power structures that drive capitalistic society, and in turn these truths support the legitimacy of the power structure (28). Vendors, by performing outside of the formal economy are defined as “others”. The unsettled nature of their locations and operation do not fit into the idealized style of functioning within the world city therefore they become an intrusion (56). But the scale of this intrusion, visible from the rapid growth of vending since the 70’s and especially after the financial crisis, is linked to Thailand’s modernization and research supports this. Industrialization-formal economy- changes the nature of commerce, creates mobile food vending -informal economy- and then rebukes it as being an impediment to development (66; Bhowmik *Global* 4). Vending does not fit into the *ideology* of modern Bangkok yet it is a result of it, supports it, and is widespread (Plattner 306; Tinker 331; Yasmeen, *Foodscape* 66). The body of this paper will test vendors’ potential in challenging their condition within this capitalist system and offers the possibility of revealing distinctions in the nature of Thai economic construction as a product of globalization *and* the democratic attitudes vendors employ in challenging it.

Understanding societies in developing countries in reference to the economic globalization that is occurring was underlined by Geertz who presciently pointed out the

importance of seeing social change in terms of the way capital moves. Anthropologists have to “give a more unambiguous interpretation of their findings in terms of general (economic) problems, and the cultural work must be oriented toward the theoretical work (5).” Harms and Duneier have authored works that shed light on the social-economic paradox and process of mobile vending. Harms offers a spatial interpretation of life on the outskirts of Saigon that traces the perceived boundaries between urban and rural, inside and outside, and the modern and traditional (72, 223). Political and economic themes-Marxist, Capitalist, and agricultural-- direct the conversation of how dualism molds the expanding urban periphery. While oppositions serve to divide people into classes, he explains that the permeability of this structure offers opportunities for individuals. In contrast to the marginality that connects with Lefebvre’s ideas of *otherness*, Harms’ *edginess* evokes a sense of opportunity and agency that offers economic possibility to successfully negotiate the situation by moving back and forth between the binaries (36,84). People can stand on either side of the boundary depending on potential benefits offered by the context. He cites the vendor who dresses up in peasant clothes as she enters the city to sell traditional food and then when returning home puts on her regular western clothes (56). The edge becomes “an empirical mediator between people and institutions” (Borer 2). Saigon’s outsiders oscillate between pairs of structurally understood theoretical poles- spatial, cultural, and temporal- that can either overpower, or offer opportunity. Even as modernity loses its theoretical influence to theories of post-modernity, Harms takes seriously Vietnamese ideals of modernity as they represent an ideological compass point by which they chart their progress. He uses the constructed binaries “to more productively understand the

absorption of ideology into reality” (222). The comparisons between inhabitants of Saigon’s edge and Bangkok mobile vendors are many, thus Harms approach is useful in conceptualizing Thailand’s scene.

Theorists in the 50’s and 60’s characterized vending as inefficient (Geertz), waiting to be modified and predicted that as Southeast Asian economies developed it would disappear (Nopporn 25). During this time it was believed that there is no place for the informal economy within a modernization that stresses large enterprises that seek to maximize benefit from scale and efficiency. This approach has been called the Ford-Keynesian order (Cross 33). Modernization theory fed into neo-classical preoccupations with the functioning of markets and policy. Later on this transforms into neoliberal theories that identify freedom of movement of capital as key in fostering growth (Rodan 2-3). None of these theories consider the informal markets as an important factor. Until today we see that vendors are undercounted in official statistics (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” xiv; Nirathron, “Fighting Poverty from The Street” 27).

But as early as the 70’s it was noted that informal markets had “not only persisted along with modern enterprises but had expanded”, calling for a re-examination of the informal economy (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” 2; Yasmeen, “Workers in the Urban” 2). Research supported by the International Labor Organization and others have noted the importance of the informal economy to the economic health of developing countries (Kusakabe10; Nirathron “The Business of Food Street Vendors ” 431; Rajagopal 96). Its persistence in

the 70's and 80's and then its expansion following financial crisis of the 90's which impelled many of the unemployed to go into vending- downward mobility - problematized these previous theories. Even as scholars are reluctant to label recent economic theories as "post-modernist" there has been more pluralism in the way economies are described (Harms, Cross 32). Social conflict theory sees "markets, states, and institutions as products of interests and conflicts emanating from class relations and inequalities generated within societies and by the forces of global capitalism" (Rodan 77). In face of the shifting balance of powers that characterize modern economic development, this theory helps account for the resilience and growth of vending. The decline of manufacturing spurred by globalization in many U.S. cities caused declines in the standard of living of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who already lived in cities some of whom turn to the informal economy. Thailand in contrast experienced an immigration/ industrialization phenomena directly related to this globalization which itself concentrated groups of people underserved by the system in the city, many whom also participate in the informal economy.

Economic change and social relationships confuse the theoretical margins, poles, and edges that define the location of mobile vending. We see that the vendors in developing *and* developed countries exist because they fill a "gap in the retail chain" (Bhowmik, "Global Urban Economy" 17). Duneier argues that the seemingly random, chaotic and socially destabilizing act of magazine vending in Greenwich Village is to the contrary, ordered, logical, and provides tangible social benefit (123; Mateo-Babiano 477). The vendors have a system of acquiring stock, staking out and maintaining control of their

selling spaces and operating their enterprises (Duneier 88-95). If they are not following the letter of the law, there is at least an acknowledged moral system (9). The coming into existence of these Greenwich Villages sellers, which roughly corresponds to the period of rapid growth of vendors in Bangkok's scene, is a response to the economic changes that were occurring in the mid 90's, namely fewer opportunities for people without specialized skills (121). This economic pressure and its effects remind us of the similar events in Bangkok. In New York, vending becomes a safety net for those unable to enter formal employment because of prison records, drug use, and or lack of education. The sellers comprise a culture and a support network that exists beneath the dominant social normative (63). The customers most of whom exist in social strata above the vendors want to be a part of the street scene because they like the diversity and the economic benefits of being able to purchase cheap books (71). Vendors have been *otherized* by neoliberalism's modernization of the city but they are in close contact with, and provide benefit for those who embody idealized conceptions of residents of the world city (Rajagopal 107).

Duneier asserts that urban administrative policy is sometimes based on "facts" which are not backed up by research. He offers as an example Kelling's "broken window" theory that has been so influential in urban policy and credited with the reduction of crime in New York City. The intellectual validity of this theory is disputed, "as it is formulated as a claim about the behavior of people who look at the broken window, rather than also being a theory about the behavior of the people who are the broken windows" (288). The theory skips to conclusions about the human broken windows and their anti-social

behavior without “solid evidence” to back it up (287). Willingness of authorities to accept as fact things that are not backed with research is seen in Thai policy as well. One of the main reasons given for stricter control of the vendors is the “problem” they create for traffic (Pannilai; JS 100 Radio). Yet in my review through this year, 2014, I have found no research that supports this claim – Bhowmik found nothing through 2005 (*Global Urban* 33). Cross though, tacitly accepts that vendors interfere with traffic but the reason is “that city planners have left them no other viable place to go” (42). This makes it appear that because vendors do not conform to the ideal of subjects of the imagined modern city authority therefore seeks a way to remedy the problem legally, and spatially (Duneier 133).

The literature indicates that vending not only questions the reproduction of the modern business enterprise through challenging its preeminence on the streets, but also through a cross directional exchange of strategies. Portes and Castell- have already argued for the relationship between the formal and informal economy. Mobile vending can be defined as the sale of legal goods outside of the purview of formal business regulation (Cross 36). Being illegible in this way means being able to avoid taxation and regulation thereby lowering cost. By tapping into informal means of distribution and production formal enterprises are also able to increase profits (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” 4). Large enterprises rely on “informal and semi-formal distributors that reduce final costs to the consumer” (Cross 38). The reproduction of this type of formal--informal relationship can be seen in the wide sales of soft drinks and snack foods by vendors. Disguised wage work such as yogurt drink sales where mobile vendors sell products for large firms on

commission is one example of how formal enterprises mirror informal methods (Nirathron, "Fighting Poverty" 25; Wilson 82). Rajagopal refers to a marketing article to show how modern enterprises draw upon the icon of vendors and the imagery of service they provide in the branding of their products (97). While it is documented that formal business borrows and benefits from vending, the vendors' strategies also overlap with and borrow strategies from formal enterprises.

Vendors who have goals of capital accumulation or expansion of sales as opposed to just subsistence place importance on financial planning, marketing and knowledge of food in demand, all of which resemble modern strategies (Nirathron, "The Business of Food Vendors" 434). Thought is given to personal presentation as a way of broadcasting images of cleanliness and quality (437). With the focal point in vending sales being the vendor's body and the production of food taking place right in front of the customer this representation is an important success indicator (Rajagopal 98). Even though much of the food sold is still traditional, after the financial crisis we see that "new generation" vendors (Maneepong 4) are ready to change the products they sell so as to take advantage of trends in eating fashion (Nirathron, "The Business of Food Vendors" 438; Walsh "After the 1997 Financial Crisis" 262; Walsh, "The Street Vendors" 186-188)⁴². The "Sandwich Man"-stockbroker turned sandwich vendor- points to the growing sophistication embodied in the new breed of vendors (Yasmeen, "Stockbrokers" 92).

Vending in the literature before the crisis is largely represented as a survival strategy for the poor yet it is interesting that incomes are often higher than those in factory or other

⁴² Gourmet coffee, Western style sandwiches, and sushi are examples of new products.

types of semi-skilled or unskilled labor. In a study of 236 mobile vendors it was found that 95% of these subjects earned more than the minimum wage (Nirathron, “Fighting Poverty” 71) While understood in the potential it offers the lowest economic classes for upward mobility, since the financial crisis vending also has become a refuge for skilled workers regrouping from the downward mobility imposed on them as a result of layoffs (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” 8; Tinker 343; Walsh “The Street Vendors of Bangkok” 186).

As more sophisticated individuals, those with higher education and experience in the corporate world, enter selling one would expect to see a greater willingness to cooperate in lobbying the BMA for clearer rights and benefits. To the contrary the new generation sellers tend to be “politically passive, shunning solidarity with the street vending movement” (Maneepong 6). This group tends to rely on flexibility and mobility in locating space to sell as opposed to trying to negotiate with authorities (Walsh, “After the 1997 Financial Crisis” 266). This lack of cohesiveness means that the state gets limited input from the group in the discussion/competition for spatial and legal resources and “may induce the poor state performance in dealing with vending” (Unger 18).

There has been some local organizing but this has been on a small and ineffective scale. While Walsh notes the “political activist sense” of the first wave of vendors who appeared concurrent with increasing immigration of the 70’s and 80’s, this is really just in comparison with the new breed vendors who tend to stand aside from any organization (Walsh, “After the 1997 Financial Crisis” 265; Yasmeen, *Foodscape* 206). Embree’s

characterization of Thai society as a “loosely based system” has been supplanted by other models but we still see features of this older theory in Rodan’s description of Thais’ “limited socialibility” and Yasmeen’s noting of the lack of community building activities (Embree 182; Rodan 73; Yasmeen “Foodscape” 205). I have found no Thai participation in the international organization SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association), an international organization based in India that lobbies for vendors. Thailand street vendors were not included in the roster of *Streetnet* participants, also an international alliance of street vendors that has approximately 40 affiliates. Does this reflect the atmosphere of political repression in the country? If so, then this anonymity or flying under the radar may be considered another way in which the Thai case recalibrates this idea of being radically democratic.

Over the past 40 years vending has expanded in scope and importance. Low paid workers in the formal-and informal-sectors rely on it for low cost and nutritional food (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” 32; Yasmeen “Stockbrokers” 32). Those who must, or voluntarily choose, to make a living in vending may comprise about 2% of Bangkok’s population⁴³. Meanwhile, municipal policy and its administration shift between stricter and more lenient control of vendors informed by factors such as the state of the economy, politics and space limitations. Differing representations of space by the players in competition for the streets have a role in this discussion as well. In the next section I discuss the literature of how this competition plays out in terms of existing policy administration and discussions of policy suggestions/proposals that mostly search for

⁴³ I refer to *The Government of India document on The National Policy for Urban Street Vendors* as a source for this benchmark (*qtd* in Bhowmik “Global Urban” 49).

ways to place vending practice as a postmodern reality within the landscape of a mega/global city.

Policy and Advocacy

The literature concerning administrative policy reflects how changes in the economy, power relations, and juxtapositions in the use of space inform and are informed by mobile vending. Vending fits uneasily in this discussion as its performance presents aspects of pre-modernity. These aspects, such as non-fixed locations and relative invisibility to the state, contradict explicit goals and the implicit habitus of administrative authority. In trying to gain benefit from policy creation the vendors are at a disadvantage, they “lack {ing} a voice and effective means of competing in the sphere of the state, a sphere that ideally seeks to offer benefit to the greatest amount of people” (Bhomik, “Global Urban” xvi). The need that vending fills in feeding the majority of the population of Bangkok means there is a degree of rooted support for them. But research describes how municipal administration --whose goals include creation of a “modern, clean, and safe city that supports formal business enterprise”—waver in what role it would assign to the vendors, alternately ignoring, obstructing, and sometimes making allowances for them (Nopporn 2007). Policy analysts stress the importance of creating this “voice” through organizing (Kusakabe 42; Yasmeen “Stockbrokers” 39). In the body of research the discussion of policy often leads directly into the matter of advocacy, or clarifying the voice and interests of the vendors.

Kusakabe charts the shifting attitudes of BMA governors toward vending over the past 40 years that range from negative-seeking eradication- to positive-seeking solutions (13-15). She finds that when the economy is strong, vending is a “threat to orderliness” but as noted above, during recession it becomes a solution or a safety net to problems of unemployment thus policy seeks to foster it (Nirathron “Fighting Poverty” 21-22, 56; “The Business of Street Food” 440). Since the late 90’s administrators have tried to create places for vendors by assigning approved selling zones and offering registration but these policies do not affect the majority of vendors, those who are not registered and do not sell in formally approved zones (Bhowmik “Street Vendors in Asia” 2258). One policy solution that shows the BMA’s desire to make room for the vendors are the *Jut Phon Pan*⁴⁴-selling tolerated zones (Walsh “The Street Vendors of Bangkok”186). But the temporary nature of this type of solution demonstrates the BMA’s hesitance to accept vendors and the difficulty the administrators have in finding a place for vending.

This competition for space takes on the nature of a battle in which the vendors are seen as criminals and the “law must sanction violence in order to protect the salaried classes’ privileges and deny the rest their rights (Bhowmik “The Street Vendors of Bangkok” 2264; Rajagopal, 95:101). There have been violent confrontations and unsanctioned removal of vendors at Siam Square and the Bo Bae market. Literature documents vendors being pressured for unauthorized rents, i.e. bribes, and other types of persecution such as being forced from unauthorized selling areas and destruction of property

⁴⁴ *Jut Phon Pan* can be translated as point of mitigation or toleration. It does not connote any permanency regarding these rights.

(Kusakabe 3; Maneepong 6; Walsh “After the 1997 Financial Crisis 265”) ⁴⁵. The Prachatai article about the conflict in Siam Square ⁴⁶ that I refer to in Chapter 5 identifies five different administrative bodies that conceivably could claim authority over space used by the vendors. But when interested faculty members at Chulalongkorn University ⁴⁷ organized a conference to try and solve the problem at Siam Square not a single representative from any of these groups participated. The lack of clarity in what body is responsible in establishing and enforcing laws offer space for extra-legal activities (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” 11). Payments to the mafia and bribes to police are understood by the vendors as being rent. These actions are facilitated by both unclear regulations and the lack of mechanisms for proper enforcement (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” 11; Duneier 256; Pannilai).

We find that vendors have little input on dictating land use. Yet even when police have the legal right to evict they are reluctant to use force against vendors in view of the negative public opinion it generates. At times the government is sympathetic and accommodative toward the vendors (Walsh, “After the 1997 Financial Crisis” 266; Yasmeen “Informal Food Sector” 38). Legal means such as the Indian rulings and BMA regulations make allowances for and recognize vendors’ right to use the sidewalk to make a living (Bhowmik, “Global Urban” 292). While idealizations of modernity and use of space in the world city are at odds with vending, other theories of urbanism offer a space for it. Jane Jacobs’ “sidewalk ballet” posits an urban zone that offers for a

⁴⁵ Bo Bae wholesale market was partially redeveloped and vendors were relocated. There have been clashes with the authorities as many of them have been unable to successfully operate their businesses in the new location because of higher rents and lessor customer traffic.

⁴⁶ Siam Square is one of the busy commercial centers of Bangkok and a site for vending.

⁴⁷ Chulalongkorn University is the owner of the Siam Square.

diversity of use (24, 27, 181). Jacobs' theory is echoed in Lefebvre's comparison of the "planned city to the practical city"⁴⁸. Walsh describes the BMA's mixed results in trying to cross these theoretical divides. A restricted site for vending activities created by the authorities takes on the appearance a cultural relic inside a "living museum" (Walsh "The Street Vendors of Bangkok 188). The complexities involving municipal policy generation and enforcement are aspects of vending that need more research (Yasmeen "Informal Food Sector" 38).

Recently new ways of thinking about vending have been proposed by academics and policy researchers. BMA recognizes that vending is not going away and is considering accommodating the vendors by widening sidewalks. Potential shifts in policy stance are also indicated by including mobile vendors into public relations and tourism schemes such as *The Charm of Thailand*. Instead of trying to eliminate vending the BMA considers spotlighting it as a way to focus on Thai culture and attract more tourists (Nirathron "Fighting Poverty" 59; Sujit 2012). The literature offers other ways to look at programs like this such as an expression of "localism battling against globalism" (Hewison 2000) or the acknowledgement of the urban as a "multi-functional multi-layered place" (Kusakabe 35). These concepts influence policy and allow space for vending in the "post-modern" city. Positive shifts in the paradigm of how vending is imagined by policy leaders is supported by Bangkok urbanites who "value their street foods...and the mobile vendors [that can be found] easily in any large Third World City" (Yasmeen "Informal Food Sector" 39).

⁴⁸ Gehl's *Life Between Buildings* draws upon these ideas as well.

Kusakabe's International Labor Organization report on policy issues stresses participatory governance that offers security for the vendor's selling locations. She cites Rupkamdee's 2005⁴⁹ study that included one site where the vendors were allowed a high degree of self-management, another where an individual won a concession to manage the market from the BMA, and the third a private market. The success in each of these sites is attributed to communication between the vendors and the managers (Kusakabe 16). But in the aggregate there has been little recorded either about participation of vendors in management of sites, or any meaningful type of organizing beyond that of local selling groups. Yasmeen says that vending associations are often formed in response to "impending real estate development" (Yasmeen "Informal Food Sector" 36). But to date there is no citywide association that exists to advance the vendors' capability to participate in the management of their overall activities or to sound out as a unified voice in negotiation of Bangkok Municipal policy. In her comparative study of vending between Cambodia, Mongolia, and Thailand, Kusakabe emphasizes a top down approach to policy change, where municipal administrations use strategies such as regularization of existing use and development of vacant sites as ways to accommodate vendors (33). She does not stress the importance of organizing. Alternatively Yasmeen, and especially Bhowmik understand organizing as an important part in preserving, improving, and formalizing vendor's rights.

⁴⁹ I unfortunately was unable to acquire this report.

The literature on policy and advocacy envisions a vending community that by virtue of its necessity within the overall system would have more formally recognized status. By strengthening their voice and through direct encounter with the larger system they may achieve greater security. Vending's battle is best fought when "micro-entrepreneurs are organized among themselves (32; Bhowmik, "Street Vendors in Asia" 2258). Seen in this way they might look like just another branch of the NL system, lobbying, codifying, and formalizing. But if this is happening in Bangkok it is only happening in the most subdued of fashions. Most of the vendors have modest economic goals and are not registered within the municipal system or involved in any type of social movement. They do not have the look of an organizational entity. Encounters with authorities are mostly ambiguous and uncertain, neither side residing securely within neoliberal ideology. I see the vendors' democratic attitudes as more antagonistic and subversive to the system than as something that fits within it. In the following chapters I emphasize these themes adding another viewpoint to the literature.

Summary

In this chapter I have reviewed, analyzed and linked the literature of mobile vending in Bangkok. I have also included related socio-anthropological works that serve as templates in theorizing the Bangkok scene. Some of the Thai dissertations I have cited incorporate Marxist and post-modern theories such as those of Foucault and Lefebvre in explaining vending. Foreign writers especially Yasmeen, Tinker, and Walsh have made significant contributions to the body of work. I have also included writings that reflect

upon the space, history, and urban policy of Bangkok as well as Thai socio-economics. These are some of the permeable fields layered upon each other and ordered by national and global context where the imagining of the margins and edges that define vending takes place. However, as pointed out in the review there is more work to be done especially research that focuses on the agency and the democratic potential of vendors in their urban relations.

There has been little research that explains how vendors express democratic attitudes in their use of Bangkok's public space. And there is little work on the nature of their informal urban relations and how this challenges the authority of formal municipal institutions. These issues are windows that offer answers to questions of what modernity, globalism, and freedom means in a Southeast Asian context. The body of the thesis will analyze mobile vendors in their spaces of reproduction and will theorize their relations with authority and the inhabitants of Bangkok. Mobile vending in some venues is not so mobile. The food courts of many big buildings in Bangkok recall the vendor, selling the same type of foods as the vendors from carts that never move. Street food festivals copying the down to earth scene just outside are set up in side of luxury shopping malls. Meanwhile at the other end of the spectrum of mobility, young people shouldering bags of goods for sale test the boundaries of civil discipline in the modern city by setting up itinerant selling places on the sky train platforms that surround the most popular shopping areas. When authorities show up to enforce the rules that are difficult to explain but well understood they are ready to flee at a moments notice. The more well know type of vendors, those who crowd the sidewalks all around the city deal with a spectrum of

entities that have authority over their spaces. Building owners, shop owners, police, and mafia all exert power to decide who can sell what and when they can sell it. I will analyze points of encounter between the sellers, authorities, and inhabitants in these contested urban spaces to create a rich sense of the nature of this ideological encounter.

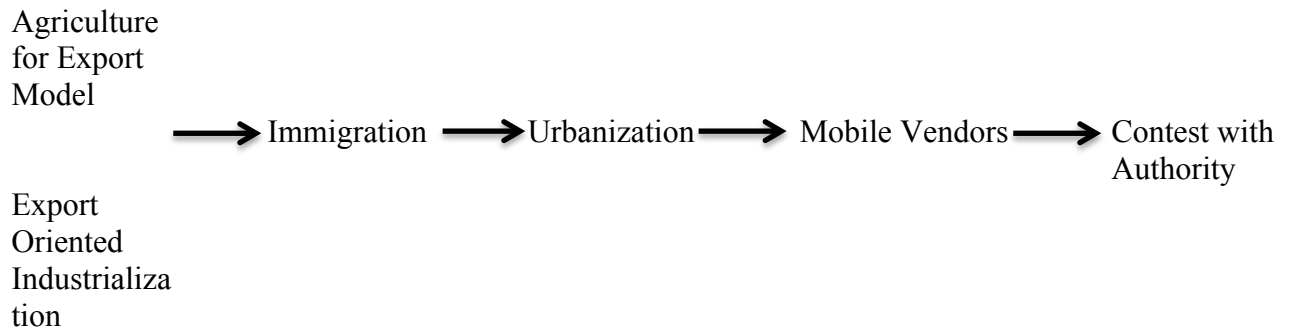
Chapter 4

Mobility, Space, and Democratic Attitudes

The social and economic volatility that Southeast Asian countries have experienced over the past 50 years should not come as a surprise. Not only have they struggled with the difficulty of establishing modern states in this extended post-colonial, post-war(s) period, but also with the problems that come with capitalism and compressing the process of industrialization, which took more than two hundred years in the West, into a much shorter period of time. NL, the dominant manifestation of capitalism today, detaches the idea of labor from people, defines it in terms of its relation to unit costs of production, and looks for advantages in seeking the most favorable, i.e. cheapest, circumstances in which to access this labor. It also commoditizes abstract space as a place of production where the two, labor and space become factors within a basic equation of, *investment*, considered as resources and space, times *labor* equals possibilities in producing *profit*.

This process of reifying NL into the political economic habitat of Thailand has put great pressure on the former villagers and current inhabitants of Bangkok. People become transportable assets putting distances between families and eroding established social productions. As the capitalist system expands, understandings of land that are linked with family, community, and food production are redefined into spaces of production with the goal of profit. Villagers' work in being redefined as *labor* pushes them towards urban centers where they can maximize return on the expenditure of their energies. In

responding to the new economic model they migrate to these urban centers. But in relocating to the NL center some find or intentionally place themselves at the conceptual margins of this system, at odds with it and in some ways disconnected from it. The adoption of the agriculture for export model, industrialization and the resulting wave of immigration to Bangkok itself has produced this class of people, those who in being pushed from their original rural environment find themselves in a state of conflict within the urban environment. Mobility of capital and labor in searching for the highest return are basic tenets of NL and it has transformed both the landscape and social scape of Thailand. I include a simple flow chart to illustrate this progression of events that started in the mid 1950's and accelerated into the 1990's.



Mobile vending has expanded hand in hand with capitalization and industrialization this being clear starting with the early *take off*⁵⁰ period of industrial development in the Global South. It was mischaracterized as a phenomenon that would disappear as modernization began to offer wider inclusion into the formal economy. Vendors were seen as being part of the traditional sector included with peasant farming and domestic services. Marxist theorists during the period portrayed them as being “effectively

⁵⁰ Geertz et al

unemployed performing useless functions as parasites on the real and productive economy” (Hansen 20-1). By categorizing them as irrelevant economically and socially, their political significance was underestimated as well. Social scientists and economists of the 70’s and 80’s⁵¹ and up until today, reclassify vending as a vital part of urban systems. But to say that they are a part of the system perhaps may cause us to overlook the radical nature of their project. In some ways their practice is antithetical to the basic theories of NL urban systems and at the least, the effect of their practice on the urban environment of Bangkok is quite different from what is envisioned in this type of system.

It is not easy to see vendors as a democratic movement-perhaps they are not. They can be easily by theorized into the capitalist system through their marketing schemes, close integration with the system and the financial goals that motivate them. Seen in this way their subversive luster grows dull, they look instead to be an entrepreneurial class absorbing the trickle of benefits that flows down from this system to nourish their own upward mobility. It is also because in a large sense they are politically invisible, voiceless. They play no ongoing formal role in the governing of their activities or the spaces they use. But it is just *when* the voiceless visualize and *act* as if they are part of the governance, act “as if being equal” a process Ranciere calls *subjectification*, that the destabilization of the current order and a process of democracy begins (Purcell “Down-Deep” 67-9). Unlike the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street movements, oftentimes these brave starts of democracy are opaque, hard to see for what they are. Purcell draws from Calvino saying “we must ‘seek and learn to recognize’ actual democracy when it

⁵¹ Hart, Kusakabe, et al

emerges...If we are not looking for it, or are not very good at seeing it will pass unnoticed” (89). Accordingly, this chapter becomes an exercise in *seeing* how vendors’ mobility and modification of space challenges the current hegemony. Mobility and abstract productions of space are essential to producing the city as a central element of the NL project. But these are also keys to the vendors’ process of offering an alternative way of imagining the city. I argue that Bangkok vendors’ mobility is a democratic line of action in response to the political and economic pressures that the state and NL ideology has imposed upon them. Further, the modifications of urban space that result organically from their activities represent democratic alternatives to neo-liberal ideology that narrowly defines the urban as a place to maximize exchange value. Nopporn Chantaranamchoo’s case study of a market in Bangkok’s central business district offers an opportunity to see how these alternatives emerge. In the *Royal Market*, capitalism and development, the city and its inhabitants, clash and mix and the market is transformed into a site of resistance and of becoming democratic.

The Royal Market

Bangkok was established as Siam’s royal capital in the 1770’s and Dalaat Baan Luang- The Royal Market- has been in operation since that time. It is situated adjacent to canals that were originally constructed as a moat to protect the royal capital. The neighboring area has been the location of extended royal households, buildings of government administration, and other privileged classes. It is proximal to river based transportation

routes for the Kingdom's agricultural products that connected with the growing ocean based mercantile activities between Siam and other parts of Asia. These logistics grew in importance after the Bowring Treaty in 1855 that expanded trading activities in Siam and sparked economic transformations, especially those associated with the export of rice. Today the market is in the middle of the Central Cultural and Economic district.

In the early 1950's Bangkok's population experienced rapid growth and the pressures associated with increasing urban density. Demand for dry and fresh foods increased as did the value of real estate. The Royal Market, popular with farmers because they could sell without a middleman, started to become over crowded with buyers and sellers.

Market activities overflowed onto the streets and towards the walls of the Royal Thai Temple. The Temple and the market were becoming popular points of interest for foreign tourists but it was seen that the busy scene outside the market was disorderly and sullied the prestige of the Temple⁵². Thus, with the location's growing importance as an economic zone and its status as a symbol of Thailand that is broadcast to the rest of the nation and the world Prime Minister Phibun Songkram⁵³ issued an order for the market to be moved across the canal (Nopporn 48). This was the first time that the market became a site of resistance. The vendors did not willingly leave the market because it was a hardship to move their stalls and living quarters and also because the new location did have the same density of pedestrian traffic. The authorities sprayed water on them to drive them out and offered free space at the new location.

⁵² The Temple, Wat Phra Kaew, is the spiritual heart of Thailand.

⁵³ Phibun Songkram was acutely aware of the value of the production of symbols in his campaign to modernize Thailand. He employed programs that dictated social norms such as the use of western utensils, clothes and even up until the modification of folk dances and the way children were named to align more closely with western norms.

When Nopporn comes to research the market in 2004-5 he finds a new set of economic and administrative dynamics have been dictating activities within and surrounding the market. These factors have forced the vendors to modify their behaviors in order to furtively and successfully claim rights to the use of the city.

In 1961 the Bangkok Municipal Authority-BMA-employed the American city planning firm Litchfield and Associates in creating a 30-year plan for Bangkok. The plan anticipating its continuing growth as the commercial and industrial hub for the region designated sites for the factories that would surround the city, a system for sanitation, construction of roads and other public utilities, all things we are familiar with in the city as a place offering maximum efficiency for the operation of business. This plan followed the blueprint designed for economic development that places investment and the urban at its core (Nopporn 60-63). By the time of the Dalaat Baan Luang case study it has transformed from being primarily a fruit and vegetable market to becoming a center for flower sales and part of the BMA's strategy to encourage tourism and export sales. What happened to the market, and how did this reinforce a mobile vending street economy?

After the BMA began to employ the Litchfield development plan for Bangkok the market "that previously was a place of *relationships between people* becomes a place of *orderliness and progress*" (95, my translation and italics). Marketing of fresh fruits, vegetables, and prepared foods while being a central requirement for Thai food culture is something that does not match flower sales in terms of its potential for export sales and in

attracting tourists. It is a gritty activity, something that occurs not because of its aesthetics even though there is an innate beauty to the process of marketing goods that sustain the inhabitants of the city. Within the BMA plan The Royal Market with its focus on flower sales is recast as an export and tourist hub. Food vending is then squeezed out to the edges of the market and transformed into mobile vending an activity inconsistent with the BMA goals.

Nopporn offers a Foucaultian logic for how mobile food vending becomes something that is rejected. He explains that as the government adopts capitalist ideology the new “knowledge” of the primacy of exchange value in developing a successful economy is imbued with the power of the government and evolves into “truth”. Thus truth and knowledge informed by the power of the BMA places mobile vendors outside the parameters of progress because they are not part of the envisioned system (28). The BMA cites sanitation and traffic concerns as reasons to control or eradicate mobile vending in favor of more permanent type of markets. Nopporn responds that the real reason for pushing out the food vendors is not the lack of cleanliness and order but actually because they do not contribute to the overall GDP following the government plan for economic development (102).

Control of policy and the imposition of its practice such as through the selective issuance of permission cards to vendors does not fully account for the process whereby groups who do not easily fit into the formal economic ideal are split off and separated from the groups that do. This ideology requires that vendors be reimagined as marginal and

antithetical to *sangkom suay ngaam*, that for lack of a better term in English I define as civil society. They are recast as drug addicts, spreaders of disease, the cause of traffic problems, and those who lack cleanliness and orderliness⁵⁴ (42-46). At the same time the growing white collar class whose status is derived from the capitalist system adopts and adds its own legitimacy to this knowledge as vendors come to be seen as an obstacle to progress. So in Thailand's modernization project those who do not fall into desired categories of the economy have lost legitimacy in the relations they have with authority, in this case the BMA. They do not have a part, but they continue to part-take.

The market becomes a place that is geared toward the logistics of retail and wholesale marketing of flowers including areas for arrangement and preparation for transport. The flower vendors are prioritized and receive special privileges through issuance of cards that give them formal permission to the stalls where they may conduct their businesses. As the amount of sellers, not just in the Royal Market but through out the city, have mushroomed the city has established a system of *allowance zones*. These sites are sidewalks and other uninhabited areas surrounding established markets or other high pedestrian traffic zones that sellers have traditionally used and that the BMA has established as semi-formal if not permanent zones where vendors may apply for permission to sell. The permission cards for the allowance zones around Dalaat Baan Luang are predominantly issued to the flower vendors. So simultaneous with the production of the market as dictated by the capitalist ideology embraced by the BMA is

⁵⁴ The Office of City Planning Report 2012 Bangkok Municipal Authority. This type of language is found in other municipal planning reports such as the one written by Pannilai.

the estrangement of the vendors, that is, the *bodies* of food vendors lose their substance in the eyes of authority. They are pushed out of the market and must go mobile.

During periods when the industrial economy cannot create employment opportunities equal to the amount of people who have immigrated to the city to look for jobs those who go to the informal economy to find work such as vendors are redefined as criminals.

Conversely when labor demand is strong vendors are then looked at as lazy and incompetent for not participating in the system. Government policy shifts and social stereotypes regarding the vendors change in response to economic conditions, becoming at times stricter and more negative, and at other times more lenient and more positive (Kusakabe 14). Thailand's economic changes, its focus on the export of rice and industrialization which led to the huge population increases in Bangkok (diagram pg. 69) and then the administrative changes following ideology that reproduces the city as the center for maximizing exchange value, tends to erase the value of vendors as inhabitants. In their status as equalizers for an imperfect economic system they become disembodied of their humanity, history, and rights and this is the argument of Nopporn's study, that they become "others".

This otherness manifests through ageism, sexism, and regionalism. Nopporn interviewed a total of 17 vendors, twelve woman and five men with an average age of 48 years (Nopporn 53). While ageism in the Thai economy is something that has been neglected in research my empirical observations including that of looking at employment advertising, is that that employers focus on hiring people under the age of 35. Large companies do

not look to hire laborers above this age so many have no choice but to become mobile vendors. The gender differential in the study does not accurately represent the general proportions in mobile vending but it does echo the results of Yasmeen's study of Bangkok's food culture. Her research revealed that women are overrepresented in mobile vending when compared to employment in other sectors and further, that this reveals patterns of exploitation (*Foodscape* 5,12). While this gendered role in food preparation is something that reflects "social structure and female responsibility" in the Thai rural household, Khun Pasuk, a leading Thai economist adds that "the ability to dominate women [in the urban milieu] becomes inextricably bound up with concepts of commercial and political power..." (96). Finally, the great majority of vendors come from the economically disadvantaged Northeast an area that is considered by traditional power centers in Bangkok as politically, linguistically and socially inferior thus it is disenfranchised (Nirathron, "Fighting Poverty" 33). In terms of economic status mobile vendors clearly operate in a different i.e. lower, realm than those who administrate them and those who more easily find access to public utilities and space in the city, namely those who work within the formal economy. The otherness of mobile vendors results in their being pushed into conflict with political economic hegemony. Their commercial activities, by necessity, are structurally an alternative approach to this hegemony.

What I would like to emphasize is that when mobile vendors take to the street as "others" and successfully evade and resist authority reinforcing themselves as part of the economic fabric of Bangkok, just by not being a part of the big story they destabilize and invalidate the NL claim to being the *center* of knowledge that would produce the city in

accord with its ideology. When they are pushed to the ideological and physical edges of the market they begin to subvert the system of top down order and control inspired by NL and carried out through the authority of the BMA. Their intention is to make a living but in doing so they must counter authority, that is, they must become mobile so as to evade and not provoke it. They are battling the system by seeking to meet their desires without being controlled by authority. These are the democratic attitudes that Purcell speaks of and that lead to the tactics of evasion and resistance that the mobile vendors around the Royal Market employ.

Because of the system of issuing permission cards and the high rents that food vendors are unable to afford conflicts between the vendors using sidewalks to sell and the authorities enforcing the regulations regularly occur. While these encounters may look like a game of cat and mouse as vendors flee from the authorities the stakes are high as the confiscation of goods and the fines that are imposed cause substantial losses for these people. The words of the subjects in The Royal Market case study help us to understand how the process of vendor's resistance through mobility works. Phi Sompit a vendor who is one the subjects of Nopporn's case study explains,

“I started selling here over twenty years ago...at that time the authorities had already started chasing us out. I'd jump into a tuk-tuk⁵⁵ to escape and they would follow and get me. Hop onto a bus they'd follow and get me. Nowadays they use a pick-up truck to chase us. I use a cart like you see here. When the BMA comes we run away. So

⁵⁵ Small three wheeled vehicles used as taxis and transports.

they use motorcycles to follow us and the pick up truck would come following behind.

When they came to get us I would flee into the market and they would still follow to arrest me. When I push my cart into the alley to get away, again they would come after me.

Some times I would get caught three times in one day” (Nopporn 103 my translation).

The point that can be drawn from this excerpt is that the goal of selling goods must be tempered by the need to be mobile so as to resist authority. While using carts instead of the traditional baskets in order to carry as much merchandise as possible would be ideal, the vendors must think first about their ability to evade BMA authorities. Even though the carts are something that could enable the vendors to sell more and increase their income they instead become a mechanism whose main advantage lies in allowing vendors to more easily evade authorities. Another one of the case study subjects is quoted,

“The carts are better then the baskets in that you can easily go wherever you need to go. If you continuously push the cart they can’t get you. If you carry the baskets and then place them on the ground the BMA has the right to arrest you” (Nopporn 98).

So in order to meet their economic needs vendors consciously decide to contest authority by making use of their main advantage, which is, mobility (Hansen 11). The Bangkok Transit System, or Skytrain, is an elevated railway connecting the most important commercial centers of the city. The huge foundations for the tracks that rise high above the ground and the overpasses that serve as platforms and walkways for passengers evoke

a striking vision of urban futures that recall *Metropolis*⁵⁶ and the class conflict theme that forms the message of this movie. These platforms, or skywalks, also serve as a site where vendors use their strategic advantage of mobility in resisting BMA authority.

Skytrain passengers are generally middle and upper class city residents as the minimum fare of 20 Baht per trip is almost triple the cost of a ticket on the regular non-air-conditioned buses that the majority of Bangkok's population uses⁵⁷. The dense pedestrian traffic comprised of people with financial resources turn the Skytrain walkways into an irresistible site for vendors who offer lower prices than the high-end department stores surrounding these areas. The vendors allow their customers the convenience of being able to pick up necessities without having to make additional stops on their way home. While vending on these overpasses was not an intended use the BMA has loosely structured system that allows selling in certain places during certain hours. In an interview with Nan a vendor who worked on the overpasses from 2002-4 I learned that the typical vendor who comes to the Skytrain to sell does so because the salary from their regular job is not enough to make ends meet. In Nan's case the owner of the clothing shop at her regular job would allow her to take product from the shop to sell at the Skytrain platform and reimburse the shop owner later. Others would buy product at the wholesale markets then bring it to the platform to sell. Here again, mobility is part of the process of accessing selling sites and as necessary, to evade authorities. I excerpt here parts of our interview.

⁵⁶ In the movie the underclass live and work below the ground producing for the upper class that lives above them.

⁵⁷ Exchange rate currently is approximately 31 Baht to the Dollar.

“At 6:30 pm, after the rush hour, the BMA allows vending on the overpasses in front of MBK and Siam Square⁵⁸. We would wait on the sides of the walkways staking out a place to sell. When selling during the prohibited times we made use of a ‘news line’, meaning that when authorities approached the stairwells or escalators to go up and check the walkways friends who were selling from carts and stalls below would call out to warn us or just cry out ‘Dad is coming!’ This would give us time to gather up the merchandise and run off blending into the crowds. If we didn’t find out in time we’d just stand off to the side because there was no way the BMA could prove that we had been selling or that the stuff was ours. The authorities would just throw the merchandise away. We wouldn’t bring a lot product to sell just so we could more easily get away from them. The losses were not that much and we were also able to avoid being fined. If caught we had a choice of settling up with the authorities for about 200 Baht or being brought to the police station and paying a 500 Baht fine⁵⁹. The vendors who faced the greatest risk were those selling fake copyrighted products like purses or clothing. Authorities focused most of their energy on arresting this type of vendor and if caught they could be fined 10,000 or more baht. After 10:00 pm when the department stores around Siam Square closed and the pedestrian traffic died down, we would carry our goods following the Skytrain line for about 2 miles down to the Anu Sawari station. Anu Sawari is one of the main transportation centers and there are a lot of people there even until 1 or 2 A.M.”

⁵⁸ MBK and Siam Square are major shopping centers that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each day.

⁵⁹ Minimum wage is 300 baht per day

The older female vendors of the Royal Market and the running vendors of the Skytrain contest the BMA in a non-confrontational way. They try to avoid problems with the authorities, but to do so must make a series of calculations involving risk and reward, and have deep knowledge of their urban environment and how authorities enforce the municipal regulations. The Skytrain vendors make adjustments in what and how they sell so as to avoid problems with the BMA. They share information about the movement and severity of the enforcement of regulation by the authorities that changes based on local conditions and the economic environment (Hansen 148-52). In their need to have access to the densely inhabited parts of Bangkok they latently but necessarily enter into an ideological battle with the NL vision. The fact that the BMA focuses on cracking down against the sale of the copyrighted goods gives us an idea where the battle lines are drawn as the BMA in its relations with the Skytrain vendors prioritizes protecting the rights of the multinational corporations. So in this clash of interests the first tactic in avoiding direct confrontation is that of evasion, a tactic commonly used by disadvantaged groups when the economic system fails them⁶⁰. These non-confrontational processes of resistance and evasion by subaltern groups are a natural reaction toward exclusionary hegemonies and it pressures authorities to modify their methods of regulation.

But to simply say that vendors run away from or evade the BMA speaks to the economic problems they face without adequately unpacking the radical democratic potential that exists in this evasion. In carrying out practices that are necessary to make a living and

⁶⁰ An example that reflects a similar dynamic of hegemonic and subaltern relations can be drawn from pre-colonial feudal Southeast Asia. When taxation or corvee labor requirements became too extractive people would escape to the highlands, maintaining trading and tributary relations with the more highly formalized polities, only in a less exploitive form (Scott 2009).

raise families they avoid the government's control, go their own way, in other words express democratic attitudes. In the introduction I quoted Purcell saying 'that as individuals take over responsibility for managing themselves the role of the state decreases and becomes less central to the affairs of society'. Deleuze and Guattari, explains this process as a *flight* "which is able to carry off a piece of the system as it escapes (Purcell Down-Deep 85)." This is an energetic idea when applied in theorizing opposition to NL economic ideology-imagining it as a thing lacking physical substance, light enough for parts of it to be carried into the atmosphere where its dominance is dissolved and is replaced by the lines of action of groups working to achieve their own productions of desire. Purcell also proposes the naturalistic metaphor of a flock of starlings in flight to explain how democratic movements may operate. They are hunting insects and at the same time trying to avoid becoming prey. This idea resonates strongly with the vendors, a group composed of many individuals with a common economic agenda. They are going about their business, avoiding the state even if they are not thinking about it. They share information, can change direction quickly, and by changing their position in relation to the viewer, can disappear (122-3, 135). Each is aware of, but not overly concerned with the actions of the wider flock, but all take action in order to access resources or escape danger. Their movements, flights, materialization and disappearance are evasive tactics employed with the goal of not being captured or controlled by capitals' hegemony.

Urban Spaces and Mobile Vendors

Capitalism's advancement of the urban as a space conceived for the highest achievement of exchange value is undermined by the produced space of vendors, by Siamese and modern socio-cultural patterns of Bangkok life, and paradoxically by the commoditization of space. The vendors and their customers consciously and unconsciously draw from these sources problematizing NL's vision by producing a "counter space" that insists on the primacy of its use value (Hansen 154). So even though the economics of capital has produced an environment where "that which was scarce [food], has become abundant and that which was abundant [space] has become scarce" (Lefebvre 329) the spatial scarcity does not easily lend itself to uncontested hegemony. In fact, the density creates an urban environment where diversity cannot help but strain to manifest itself against the accultural homogeneity of NL. Vendors' inventiveness and flexibility⁶¹ in asserting and inserting themselves into what they see are appropriate spaces and the way their selling practices modify these places establishes a milieu of lived space that has a complexity informed by traditional culture and the economic reality of urban poverty. These spaces can be ideologically incompatible and physically incongruous with NL's abstract spaces. The stark differences result in vendors becoming actors on the stage of urban life who play a highly visible, yet abstract, role of opposition to political authority.

Purcell, reflecting on urban life speaks of how the right to inhabit, to be present in the city, necessarily becomes a spatial right and a right to *use* (*Down-Deep* 93-5). He

⁶¹ I should say here that in terms of democratic movement this flexibility tends towards standing back from confrontation. Instead of being more insistent on the right to certain spaces, most vendors instead prefer to not to battle with authorities and instead look for spaces where they do not encounter problems (Maneepong 2012: 6).

expands on the definition of these rights to include the recognition of social use value, the right to an urban life, the right to be present in material place, and the decentralization of decision making "...from the central to the municipal and then to the neighborhood (96)." This ongoing definition requires a versatility that allows for the desires of its inhabitants to take a leading part in determining what goes on shared social urban spaces. The crux is a reorientation in understanding the city from the perspective of its role as the center of exchange relationships to that of seeing it as a place of inhabitation. Purcell's ideas about urban inhabitation ring in accord with Jacob's metaphor of the *sidewalk ballet*⁶² and Gehl's work on the importance of *social ergonomics* in the development of urban centers⁶³. While it may be said that "cities gave rise to NL"⁶⁴ Purcell insists on the democratic nature of the urban. This is so because of the opportunities the environment offers to groups with shared interests to act and interact and especially the way the spaces these groups produce represent political and economic self-management (*Down-Deep* 89). These ideas do not challenge hegemony head to head and the self-management of vending spaces overlap hegemony's controlled space. But the street markets that come to exist through the desires of vendors and their customers offer alternatives in imagining the urban.

While the NL project situates the legal process i.e. ownership rights, as central in maintaining primacy, Purcell's democratic counter-project relocating the urban as a place of inhabitation offers an alternative understanding of rights "as political claims that

⁶² Jane Jacobs ideas concerning the "rich interactions" of urban residents (Jacobs, 2012 181).

⁶³ *Life Between the Buildings* (Gehl 1987)

⁶⁴ David Harvey has written about the connection between the 1975 New York City bailout its relation to the rise of neo-liberalism.

movements make on wider society” (98). The vending movement, which is not deliberate and self-conscious in the same manner as the law making process of the NL project, in an indirect way still makes demands, specifically for the use value of the city. The *manut ngeru deuan*-monthly salaried humans-must come by the requisites of life yet their choices are limited by cost. The needs of these workers, who make up the majority of Bangkok’s population and the lion’s share of vendors’ customers, call into creation neighborhoods of street commerce between the high-rise buildings. As the vendors meet *their* needs for financial requisites and the material needs of Bangkok’s workers, these contested reproduced spaces represent a political claim. There is a clash of conceived and perceived spaces between NL’s top-down directed production of space in search of great profits and the space of the less ambitious but no less critical individualized transactions of vendors who are more concerned with subsistence than surplus.

Neoliberalism’s need to impose order on the streets and the profusion of vendors in challenge to this order give rise to what Rajagopal calls the process of achieving “an unattainable disciplinary project” (5). Vendors selling illegal and untaxed goods on contested spaces mostly ignore this discipline and so in the eyes of authority they are “weeds on the landscape” (Kelling). A Bangkok policeman is quoted saying “Vendors are just difficult to control...you are away for only a couple of days, when you come back they are already all over the place” (Tepwongsirirat 182). Vendors resist by looking for the paths of least resistance, inserting themselves into spaces that they see as appropriate and potentially productive. Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the rhizome illustrates a decentralized and non-hierarchical process of activity explaining,

“...deterritorialized elements of desire can arrange themselves like a rhizomatic plant.... each element of the rhizome can connect to any other [and} each element can disconnect at any time from any other element...these superficial connections, taken together, can nevertheless create a coherent (or even a strong) aggregate because the connections are so numerous (*qtd. in Down-Deep* 134).” Purcell refines this in terms of what it means for radical democracy by pointing out that these rhizomes are not just static nodes, but rather “aggregates of lines, fleeing elements” (134) and they are moving together in a direction, any direction that takes them away from that which would discipline them.

So we find that there are vending communities clustered throughout the city. Their placement is contingent upon pedestrian traffic and where vendors meet the least amount of suppression by authorities. The Silom district, home to one of these communities, is a densely packed area home to mainstream and nightlife businesses, world class shopping malls, four-star hotels and it is next to the city’s largest park. Other than meeting basic needs of buyers and sellers, what are the social factors that make a street vending community possible on the sidewalks of some of the most expensive real estate in Asia? Answering this question may explain how and why vendors are able to resist NL.

While Silom has a legal vending zone, the density of the area causes the activities to spill out onto the surrounding sidewalks creating a lively scene bordering on the frenetic.

Through out the day and evening there are food sales while in the evening some of the daytime stall shops and clothes vendors are replaced with souvenir vendors to serve tourists (Kumdheth 3). It is very popular with tourists who aside from being able to

connect with Thai culture also have access to Western style fast food outlets. It is a scene of urban gentrification that draws upon the social capital that Thais associate with things Western.

Gentrification, one of NL's schemes in creating urban value, (Purcell "Recapturing" 112) is identified as a threat to the vendors (Tepwongsirirat 179). But surprisingly, it comes forth as a phenomenon that sustains vending as well. In New York's Greenwich Village of the 90's, attendant with the rise in property values and changes in the economic demographics of the neighborhood was the emergence of a busy second hand printed matter street market. This market, run mainly by homeless or semi-homeless ex-convicts or drug addicts, "others" without recourse to sufficient resources, became a part of the neighborhood and a destination in itself. Residents like the market because they can get books and magazines at cheaper prices. But significantly it becomes a site for "interaction that weakens the... barriers between persons otherwise separated by vast social and economic inequalities" (Duneier 71). When the tourists who come to Silom because of the perceived security that its' spatial familiarity offers⁶⁵ and the upper-middle class executives who work in the area are willing to venture down to the streets that are overflowing with vendors, this site also becomes a place of encounter and centrality where barriers are broken down.

When people walk on busy city streets "fleeting glances...are preferred forms of interaction" (Rajagopal 9). Similarly when we buy food from a franchise there is a

⁶⁵ There are many upper end department stores selling international brands and Western fast food outlets.

minimum of interaction with the staff, their job is to effectively perform the greatest number of transactions possible. In contrast, the “socially equitable” (Mateo-Babiano 456) spaces of Silom’s sidewalk economy have the atmosphere of a fair, offering psychological respite from oppressive heat, noise, and pollution with its color, smells and opportunities for barter. When we purchase food from vendors we enter *their* space of production and have a fuller experience enabled by the more direct sensory interaction. Rajagopal says, “The smell of the oil, the condition of the utensils, the quality of the foodstuffs, and the personal hygiene of the cook are all on display. As a former *pheriwala*⁶⁶ pointed out to me, in no restaurant can one follow so minutely every phase of the process of preparing a dish (Rajagopal 9)”. In Khon Kaen⁶⁷ and Mukdahan⁶⁸ central parts of the city are blocked off from cars each evening and vending stalls are set up producing an environment where vendors, residents and tourists connect and reinforce the urban as a space of inhabitation. People are attracted to these self managed street vending neighborhoods because of the atmosphere of being physically outside *and* because they are able to escape into an environment that offers an opportunity to experience the vitality of democratically produced space. The spatial monoculture that NL creates and where it most comfortably resides is challenged by the diverse liveliness of the lived spaces where vendors and their customers interact. “While the shopping malls are spaces of segregation and exclusion” (Tepwongsirirat 166)⁶⁹ the receptive atmosphere of vending

⁶⁶ The Hindi term for hawker

⁶⁷ The fast growing unofficial capital of Northeast Thailand

⁶⁸ A border town on the Mekong River

⁶⁹ In Brazil, shopping malls themselves have become places of resistance to exclusion as lower class teenagers have taken to what are called “little strolls” in the upscale shopping centers. While the teens do not necessarily have a political aim, it has created alarm among the elites who label them as “barbarians invading private property” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/world/americas/brazils-latest-clash-with-its-urban-youth-takes-place-at-the-mall.html>).

spaces with the refreshing democratic feeling that comes from people pursuing their own lines of action becomes a site of resistance and an ideological challenge to hegemony. What they are doing is different from fleeing because there is also creation, formation, and there are warm sets of connections occurring.

When Bangkok vendors' production of lived space is analyzed as an *outcome* of NL's production of space, the contradictions in how the BMA copes with them as they pursue their occupation reveals the scope of their challenge to hegemony. The nature of urban life creates spatial scarcities that force vendors to contest authority. These scarcities also push inhabitants out onto the streets to make individually driven informal connections with vendors that take place beyond the sovereignty of the municipality.

NL's need for low waged workers and Bangkok's urban density has created what for the writer is a bizarre environment where as many as half of the apartments do not have kitchens (Yasmeen, "Stockbrokers" 96; "Foodscape" 68). This means that for the average person most every meal except for those consumed at the place of employment's cafeteria or those meals that can be prepared with a hot plate is purchased outside the home from street food vendors. Two entrees and rice can be purchased from street vendors for about 50 Baht as opposed to the 100 Baht the same food possibly of lower quality would cost if purchased from a restaurant or indoor food court. So even if meals are consumed at home it is likely that it was purchased from a vendor and brought home in a plastic bag⁷⁰. Economic calculations and commoditization of space make vendors, a

⁷⁰ In Bangkok's vernacular this phenomena is referred to as *mae baan tung plastic*-the plastic bag housewife (Yasmeen "Foodscape" 75)

lot of vendors, a prerequisite of life in the city. The ubiquitous mostly unregulated spaces that come about from this challenge the BMA's project of creating a space of *orderliness and progress* in accord with NL ideology.

Even when the BMA creates regulated spaces that allow vending, the strategy of commoditizing selling areas results in spaces where its authority is challenged. As we saw in The Royal Market the BMA allowance zones and scheme of authorizing permission cards to the flower vendors in order to reproduce the market as a flower center resulted in the uprooting and mobilization of the food vendors. It also reproduced the sidewalks surrounding the market from a place where poor people could eke out a living through vending into an expensive commodity. It may be said that it was transformed from a public space into a space of exchange value. The flower vendors subdivide and sublet the sidewalk spaces in violation of the regulations so there are different groups of vendors working there twenty-four hours a day. As many as six different governmental entities are involved in its administration including district, environmental, municipal, assistant provincial, police, and the office of real estate. The system becomes so complicated that authorities cannot enforce the rules, limiting themselves to "basic principles of administration that ask, are they creating problems? If not, then we do not intervene" (Nopporn 83 my translation). Between the BMA's conception of the market as showplace and profit center and the spatial use that is practiced there is a gap that authorities resolve by looking past the regulations. We see here an overlap between neoliberal and radical democratic ideology where businesses, in this case the smallest business units possible, are left free to manage their own affairs.

The disciplinary practice of authorities is modified to respond to socio-economic concerns in the most basic way, allowing vendors to operate with a relative degree of self-management. But the process of reaching state goals of order and modernity are problematized by the reality of urban nature and vendors' daily routine of resisting its directives.

The 2007 BMA district report breaks down the demographics of registered vendors as follows⁷¹

Table 1: Registered street vendors in Bangkok

Items	Total of vendors
Noodles	1,010 (6.18%)
Food	4,333 (26.50%)
Regional food (southern and northern)	1,733 (10.60%)
Desserts	1,283 (7.85%)
Beverages	997 (6.10%)
Fresh vegetables and fruit	2,470 (15.03%)
New clothes, bags, hats, shoes	3,652 (22.34%)
Second-hand products and clothes	2 (0.01%)
Telephones, mobile phones and accessories	27 (0.16%)
Lottery	424 (2.58%)
Cosmetics, gift items and accessories	344 (2.10%)
Buddha images and antiques	74 (0.45%)
Total	16,349

Source: BMA district office level figures, 2007

A more recent document identifies 736 allowance zones where approximately 21,000 registered vendors operate (BMA Planning Document 16-21). While there are no formal statistics for the total number of street vendors the National Policy for Urban Street

⁷¹ (Walsh 2010: 186)

Vendors/ Hawkers in India estimates that “street vendors constitute approximately 2 per cent of the population of a metropolis” (Bhowmik “Street Vendors in Asia” 2256). If this ratio is applied to Bangkok’s metropolitan population of 15,000,000 people (Bangkok Municipal Authority 2014) the result is an estimate of 300,000 vendors. The National Statistical Office (2000) offers a figure of 390,000 street vendors (Kusakabe 10).

Referring to the BMA figure for registered vendors and comparing it with the figure for total vendors, we find only 4% of street vendors are registered and have access to a site that is formally recognized by the BMA. The majority, rely on a variety of arrangements where vendors’ use of space is an activity that the BMA may ignore, overlook, or tacitly allow.

Many vendors are able to reach semi-formal agreements with shop owners who allow them to set up in front of their shop houses (Yasmeen, “Foodscape” 173) Some of biggest vending streets are lined up in front of luxury shopping centers in the commercial zones such as Central World Ratchaprasong⁷² where the vendors pay the owners of the property accordingly high rents for the right to sell. Others like the Skywalk vendors described above and especially the poorest of vendors follow routes that take advantage of temporal pedestrian flows forgoing the benefit of a stable site for the advantage of not having to pay rent. These approaches are either out of the realm of or only loosely under the control of the BMA.

⁷² Significantly, this site is also the place where army troops and black shirted assassins, still unknown who they were under the orders of, killed upwards of 40 people as the government pushed to clear out the central site of the 2010 Red Shirt Protests.

Democratic attitudes towards space in Bangkok are also enriched and driven by a distinct set of *culturally* informed spatial attitudes that support vendors' occupation of public urban space in their contest against NL. Cultural attitudes may or may not support democratic attitudes but Noparatnaraporn explores what he calls "the aquatic everyday world of Bangkok" and a historical cultural normative emerges from the geography of the city that embraces this spatial right of use. He argues that this Thai "regimes of surfaces" have been important in transformation of urban space (57).

Bangkok's history of canal based life and commerce contains a heritage in which *fluidity* informs conceptions of space (Noparatnaraporn 79, Mateo-Babiano 453). This is within the particular context of Southeast Asian geography that is distinguished by annual flooding causing river flows to change course and alter locations in reference to rivers. Lived in spaces physically disappear and others come to be. Fluidity is the constant and space takes on a quality of un-fixedness. One surface reality of downtown Bangkok with its Western inspired grids and high rises is that of legality and order, but "it is in the uses of land that *unboundedness* reigns: any activity might go anywhere, there is no zoning in the Western sense, and Bangkok is a space of chaotic and improbable juxtapositions." So as Thai capitalists employ this "deep-rooted cultural practice...of the disregard for boundaries and regulation" so do the vendors and their floating stalls as they pursue their own economic desires (Noparatnaraporn 77). Cultural normatives that problematize ownership of space are incorporated in Thai consciousness and this partly explains the democratic attitudes of vendors in their use of space (Tepwongsirirat 159). It may also

explain the tacit acceptance of such by the authorities that are reluctant to oppose these *Thai* democratic attitudes.

Mobility, the possibilities that exist in abstract space, and the modification of lived in spaces in Bangkok are features and tactics that offer vendors opportunities to express their democratic attitudes. These abstractions of movement and space are dimensions where the activities of vendors, their customers, authorities and society are woven together in urban life. Vendors' movement is anathema to formal state goals and it unsettles NL's abstract vision of the city constituting a persistent challenge. The next chapter focuses on how the relations that vendors engender contradict the NL project. The BMA is recast as an informal entity confounded in dispatching its authoritarian responsibilities by the vendors' inhabitation of important and highly visible parts of the city. The deep connections informed by traditional attitudes between vendors and other inhabitants of the Bangkok community including government bureaucrats, owners of larger and smaller pieces of land that vendors use, and the general population are relationships that support and legitimize the vendors right to the city. The shared inhabitation of the city characterized by the centrality of vendors to its lived in life contradicts NL's abstract vision and allows a glimpse into the democratic nature of the urban.

Chapter 5

Vending's Urban Nature: Informality and Inhabitation

When I was 17 I traveled to New York City and visited Central Park. I was drawn to the sound of a street musician playing free jazz, a genre associated with crossing and breaking out from musical and political boundaries. At the conclusion of his performance he reached into a garbage can pulled out a bottle and smashed it onto the sidewalk, a coda to his composition. Even though the ambient noise of the buses and cars on the surrounding streets was producing a constant roar, the sound of the glass crashing to the ground with its defiant symbolism for a moment drowned out everything else. It was a striking albeit short lived example of the urban as a site of resistance. Purcell, carrying on Lefebvre's work in theorizing the political nature of the city, expands on the significance of urban resistance, explaining that since the city is pivotal in the conception and production of NL ideology its important that "we take seriously the role that the urban might play in any democratic resistance" (Purcell "Recapturing" 88). When people come together in the abstract space of informal urban relations whether for economic, social, or political goals, the main argument for inhabitation centers on the right to the city and the right to urban life. Thus in the every day life of the urban, whether through the provocative act of an artist or the daily routines of the vendors we hear the *cry* for these rights, a demand for the right to be present (93).

The Arab Spring and Occupy Movements of 2011 underlined the importance that symbolically charged and socially contested urban centers have for democratic

movements. These events of resistance stand out for their emotional intensity and the overt challenge they present to hegemony's order. In contrast, being so wound into the system of relations that keep the city operating, mobile vending is mostly an everyday type of challenge. Of the extraordinary event when the Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi sparked the Arab Spring through his self-immolation, Hansen says that, "the volatility of the economy of the street helps to explain his desperate act" (3). Indeed, it was reported that there was an argument and insults over fees-probably bribes paid to authorities- that caused the vendor to lose face and take his own life. While politically highly significant in the scope of vending activities where millions of interactions between customers, shop owners, authorities and the vendors take place every day it was an anomaly.

What I would like to stress is that urban resistance as discharged by vendors takes place within the wider framework of urban connections. It occurs as a result of the subaltern role they hold in their relations with hegemony and through the elective informal alliances they engender in their contacts with other inhabitants of the city. Mobile vendors battle with the BMA as it dispatches its primary role as caretaker of the city following NL's plan to maximize exchange value. And they destabilize the BMA's role through a complex and often contradictory set of culturally oriented political and personal relations (Bowen 406, 409). These relations sometimes clearly engender democratic attitudes such as in vendors' efforts to interact directly with the BMA and other authorities in order to negotiate for rights, or in court cases that challenge infringement of their rights. Yet sometimes, traditional arrangements such as patron-client relations

inform social and administrative attitudes that acknowledge mobile vendors right to the city. Or even a sense of tolerance, closeness and empathy that comes with the shared inhabitation of urban space, a sense that is a type of realization of its abstract democratic potential. These are not all democratic lines per se but they do resituate vendors from the political economic margins to a space where they hold importance as individuals interacting with other inhabitants in meeting the needs of both parties. And by problematizing the question of public and private spaces they necessarily spark a complex conversation about rights and democracy with a distinctly urban accent. The food carts are the kitchens for most of the residents of Bangkok and “the vendors are like family”⁷³. On a day-to-day level, they negate NL’s top down formula. So while NL is hegemonic in the discourse of creating the city its lived-in space informed by the urban relations that occur reveals a production that is heterodox and fluid. This can be understood through observing the important role the informal economy plays in the mega-cities. Looking at vendors’ informality has been fruitful in explaining their societal and economic status⁷⁴. Alternatively, it is here that Roy’s theories on the institutionalization and intentionality of informality in the mega-cities of the Global South are useful in framing how mobile vending challenges the BMA by compelling *it* to operate informally.

Informality

⁷³ Quote from my interview with the Skytrain vendor.

⁷⁴ (See Bhowmik “Street Vendors in Asian”, Hansen “Street Economies”, Walsh “The Street Vendors of Bangkok”)

Roy argues that the Indian state is a “deeply informalized entity” as it selectively decides when to follow and break its own laws in the name of large projects (“21st Century” 826). The law is characterized as an “open-ended system” where the zoning, use and ownership [of land] do not follow any single set of regulations. As noted, “almost all of Delhi violates some planning or building law...” (“Why India” 81). She also points out that “the poor recreate the margins of legality and formality, imposing new socio-spatial differentiations” which although this allows for a multitude of activities to occur, it also “create[s] the territorial impossibility of governance...(87)”. The *idiom* of informality is simultaneously a tool for development and a process that refutes NL legitimacy by allowing for and relying on economic and political activity outside the formal system. Vendors’ activities undermine the notion of the ordered city and it is the nature of the urban that allows for this.

To see how important processes that are *nok rabob*-outside the system are in Thailand, one need only to look at the most recent round of political turmoil. Starting in November of 2013 a conservative people’s movement, a faction of the main opposition party supported by royalists, bureaucrats, and middle class opponents of the elected government closed down major traffic arterials and took over a number of government ministry buildings. They forced the dissolution of Parliament turning the former administration into a caretaker government. The opposition undermined the ensuing elections through the blockade of polling places and the elections were declared invalid by the Constitutional Court in a controversial ruling that many scholars saw as being outside the realm of its jurisdiction. The opposition demanded the right to appoint a

neutral person as interim prime minister, someone who comes from *outside of the system*, that is extra-legally appointed. The police, military, and other “dark hands” are rumored to be behind the protestors who claim no formal legitimacy other than that of being *puu dii*-good people. The democratic process has been superseded through an informal process that is deeply connected with formal governmental institutions. This working outside the system, or informality, is nothing new in Thailand that even though a constitutional monarchy the most common method of regime change has been through military coup or in the most recent political change a combination of military and judicial coup (Keyes April 2014)⁷⁵. Government takes on the character of an informalized entity. I argue here that through its relations with vendors the Bangkok Municipal Administration reveals itself as an informal sub-entity as well.

The report on Mobile Vending by the Division of Policy and Planning under the Office of City Planning for Bangkok 2009 is a revealing document as it offers insight into the BMA’s dilemma. Which is in the absence of strong government institutions and an economic system that is dependent on cheap labor and the drawdown of resources from the outer provinces (World Bank 2010) it struggles with imposing the aforesaid unattainable disciplinary project upon an urban setting that in a real sense is held together by street vending. Informality is employed as a solution to fix Bangkok’s socio-economic problems. Here I excerpt the translated recommendations (mine) from the report in the section on *Policy Practice For Solving The Mobile Vending Problem In Bangkok 2012* and then critique them as they are applied as processes of informality (13).

⁷⁵ On May 22 2014 a coup d’etat took place.

- 1. Policies that aim at solving problems of selling products and services in public places and pathways that flow over into street and sidewalks by increasing allowance zones.*
- 2. Increasing the registration of street vendors.*
- 3. Designating five special zones where selling is not allowed including road surfaces.*
- 4. Collection of fees to pay for cleaning of stall selling areas all over Bangkok.*
- 5. The elimination of the problem of influential people⁷⁶ so the population of Bangkok can make a clean and honest living in an environment where people have happiness.*

The allowance zone policy is one positive step that the BMA has taken towards mitigating the insecurity of vendors. It creates legal zones for selling taking care to address concerns of hygiene, order, and traffic, problems that are routinely assigned to the vendors. But it is a tentative and insufficient policy more of a showcase than an actual solution. First, these are not stable, permanent zones that are guaranteed. Second, as noted in Chapter 3, the number of vendors involved in the program is only about 4% of the total. In the past 7 years the number of vendors who are registered has increased by only 5,000 people. Even though vendors may go through the process of applying for registration most are not able to acquire a permission card⁷⁷. The failure of the BMA to register vendors means the vast majority are in a hazy limbo constituted on the one hand

⁷⁶ This can mean mafia or groups other than the BMA who extract fees from the vendors

⁷⁷ (Khao Sot May 21, 2013).

by their economic needs and on the other by a byzantine complex of overlapping formal and informal administrative entities.

For example, the 50 sub-districts of Bangkok each of which has its own police jurisdiction, individual building owners which in some cases the BMA authorizes to rent vending space and in others cases where owners take this right upon themselves, traffic police, the Health Department, and the mafia may all at different times exercise authority over vending spaces. A case in 2010 between vendors and The Office of Capital Management for Chulalongkorn University, which is the owner of Siam Square, is interesting in that while B.E. 2535⁷⁸ says that vendors have rights under certain stipulations to sell on sidewalks, The Capital Management Office erected fences closing off public sidewalks to the vendors leaving them to wonder from where did they receive the authority to do this. When vendors protested and tried to remove the fences keeping them out of places where they had been selling for years they were confronted by a group of men wearing pink shirts threatening to kill them. These were not police or any known authorities but an ad hoc group assumed to have been organized by the Chulalongkorn Office (*Prachatai* 11-18-2010). So while formally the BMA is the primary polity with the responsibility of regulating the vendors, its weakly implemented policies along with the unclear division of jurisdiction between government agencies, property owners, and authorities-both legal and extra-legal-makes it obvious that the BMA's mandate for dealing with the vendors is so abstract that it defies clear definition. Because the effect of

⁷⁸ B.E. 2535 (1992) is The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order
B.E. 2519 (1976) is The Regulation on Bangkok Metropolis on Hawkers, and Street Vendors
B.E. 2545 (2002) is The Regulation on Bangkok Metropolis on Selling in Public Spaces. These are the primary laws regarding Street Vending and as indicated they are not strictly enforced (Narumol 2006:22).

allowance zones and registration policies are trivial compared with practices on the street and because of the way other entities take over responsibility for managing vendors, as well as the disconnect between law, policy, and practice it can be said that Bangkok's Municipal Administration is an informal entity.

In trying to mitigate traffic problems and the difficulties of pedestrians in using walkways⁷⁹ the BMA has designated certain zones such as bus stops and crosswalks as zones forbidden to vending. Spaces where vendors are commonly found are at the mouth of alleyways that meet larger streets, in front of large office buildings or government buildings or in front of shopping centers. Vendors once established, may stay on at a specific site for many years⁸⁰. Even though these sites are not registered the BMA tacitly approves of them through policy practice number 4 that allows for the *collection of fees to pay for the cleaning of stall selling areas all over Bangkok*. The policy does not designate how much is to be paid, who collects the fees, or any type of procedure that audits the fees paid, this is left to the discretion of whatever authority administers the site. The 2002 case of street vendors in front of Chulalongkorn Hospital gives a sense of how vendors invalidate the BMA as an institution that controls urban relations by exposing its structural flaws and deep informality.

The sidewalk in front of Chulalongkorn Hospital, a busy hospital in Bangkok, was a street selling site for about 100 vendors. On July 28, 2003, the pavement on which the vendor stalls used to be put up was dismantled and trees and flowers were planted about

⁷⁹ <http://www.dailynews.co.th/Content/bangkok/169573>

⁸⁰ (<http://highlight.kapook.com/view/86294>).

six meters from the fence in front of the hospital. This geographical improvement, according to researchers from the National Human Rights Commission, was cooked up for the purpose of barring all vendors from the area (Bodhikong 8). What happened was that one week earlier ITV⁸¹ broadcast a video showing a BMA officer collecting bribes from vendors. The case grew out from problems to do with a system of informal registration used at this site, lack of oversight of the BMA officers, and loopholes that existed as a result of the way the designated selling times were established.

Before the Allowance Zone program began in 2002, vendors in the area were charged a fee of anywhere between 50 and 300 baht per week depending on the size of their carts or stalls. After the program began the fees increased and they were charged according to the size of space used. Citing B.E. 2545, vendors were to be allowed *free access to selling on specified footpaths and public spaces*. The commanding officers of the BMA denied the existence of any bribe taking saying they believed that the money collected in front of the hospital were fees for the cleaning of the footpaths and to be given to the cleaning staff as a token of appreciation, not a bribe. The vendors also believed that these fees, at least partly, were for cleaning up their selling areas. At the same time the BMA collected information about the individual vendors, entered it into the database system and provided receipts to the vendors for fees paid. The vendors believed that they were authorized by the BMA to sell in front of the hospital but it was found that none of them had obtained or been able to establish any kind of permit to sell in the area (9). The study found further that the established selling rounds, 5:30-10:00 in the morning and 17:00-

⁸¹ ITV was a TV station that has been closed down since 2008.

03:00 in the evening created a problem for the vendors as 10:00-13:00 was the busiest time encompassing lunch hour for most of their customers. This created a need for the vendors to extend their selling time, a need that was met through paying of bribes collected by the officers. Whether the designation of the timing of the selling rounds was a “misjudgment” as the researchers suggested, or were intentionally designed to offer opportunities to collect bribes, it created an opening for the officers to collect the bribes that led to cases against them and the scrutiny of the BMA in how it dispatches its responsibilities. The results of the research team pointed out that the vendors were not criminals and should be included in seeking ways to improve the situation (Bodhikong 12).

So here the policy that allows for collection of fees for the cleaning of vending areas led to a result that was directly opposite of that which was intended in policy recommendation 5 namely *The elimination of the problem of influential people*⁸² so the *population of Bangkok can make a clean and honest living*. The ITV broadcast included three separate clips of payments made to officers and not more than a week later the entire selling site was removed. On the part of the BMA it looked like they believed that the problem, from the street to the higher levels of management, was so intractable that the easiest way to deal with it was by making it disappear. The BMA penalized two of the officers involved by cutting their salary by 5% for one month (Bodhikong 3).

The absence of oversight, consistent implementation, and clarity, all qualities that ideally

⁸² This is an interesting choice of words in that it does not specify any particular group. I take it to mean unauthorized individuals, including thugs acting on behalf of building owners, who extract fees from the vendors.

would be associated with formal governmental institutions are clearly lacking in this instance, the Siam Square case, and others as well (Kusakabe, Nirathron “Fighting Poverty”, Tepwongsirirat). The mobile vending phenomena, whose emergence is paired with the growth of mega-cities that result from capitalism’s logistical requirements to do with labor, markets, and productivity, overwhelms Bangkok authorities ability to manage it in accord with its NL inspired methods for creating a “modern, clean, and safe city that supports formal business enterprise” (Nopporn). Even when vendors try to interact with the BMA on a formal basis through proposing meetings or by presenting petitions to modify regulations regarding selling hours and spaces, we find it disinclined to institute relations of this kind⁸³. Part of the issue is that vendors embody the nature of an emergent democratic non-hierarchical organization that Purcell speaks of. They organize spontaneously, impermanently and “then dissolve[s] back into an undifferentiated body without organs” making it difficult for authorities to know who they should negotiate with and baffling them in their efforts to organize a formal administrative order (*Down-Deep* 133-41). The wider point is that the democratic attitudes and practices of vendors in the urban setting destabilizes the production of NL ideology as it confounds and contradict the BMA’s responsibilities, reconstructing it into an informal entity. In New York City social problems resulting from economic changes created a similar set of dynamics between authorities and vendors.

In 1993 New York City Local Law 45, guided by the “broken window” theories of Wilson and Kelling referred to in Chapter 2 was established declaring that “...a threat to public health safety and welfare exists due to the practice of permitting written matter

⁸³ <http://hilight.kapook.com/view/86294>, *Prachatai* Thu, 2010-11-18 03:12

vendors to vend on sidewalks without subjecting them to... restrictions which have been found to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public” (Duneier 238). The new law designated a required amount of space between vendors’ tables and street corners and building entrances. This cut the space available for vendors in Greenwich Village down by half. Instead of reducing disorder there were more conflicts with the police and between the vendors. Prior to the law conflicts over who had “rights” to specific spaces on the selling block were resolved mainly through acknowledgement of tenure, relationships between the vendors, and a system where hired “holders” would occupy spaces for the vendors in their absence. But after the law was established the competition for space led to greater tension. The new law, which supplanted the previous informal system, led to the police taking on a greater role in enforcement and the main tool of enforcement was the issuance of tickets that lead to fines. However the spatial constraints made it difficult to not commit infractions and the summons issued were routinely ignored⁸⁴. The difficulty that the officers had in creating a sense of order as informed by the “broken window law” led them to being pressured by commanders “to do something.” The officers relied on intimidation tactics such as seizing belongings of vendors without issuing a summons or throwing away the belongings of the offenders when they momentarily left their tables. In critiquing how the law was applied Duneier writes, “advocates of the broken window law ...acknowledged that in their discretion police [would] occasionally harass the poor” (256). So while low-level BMA authorities create their own sets of rules for financial gain, in New York officers frustrated in their efforts to impose discipline also take law into their own hands (231-286). While transgressions of the inhabitants of the high rises surrounding the street markets may be

⁸⁴ Over 90% of the summons went unanswered (Duneier 261)

out of the sight of authorities the breaches that vendors commit are highly visible. The point is that regulations devised to construct the city in accord with NL tenets of top down order, domination of economic activities, and the infringement of inhabitants right to be present in the city instead turn the authorities, whose responsibility it is to dispatch these rules, into criminals. The informality used on a daily basis by authorities erodes the legitimacy of this form of urban governance and is paired with it as an essential strategy in controlling street vendors in their natural urban environment.

Inhabitanace

Aside from the difficulty in enforcing the murky set of laws designed to control vendors and the rent seeking of authorities, why doesn't the BMA crack down harder on the vendors? As far as other Bangkok inhabitants, what is the tone of discourse concerning vendors in Bangkok and how can the close relations and conflicts that are engendered be understood as part of a process that produces democratic flows? And, what can be observed about Bangkok's urban nature as a place of interaction that is hospitable to their acts of defiance towards hegemony? I think part of the answer to these questions has to do with the way traditional Thai and Southeast Asian social relations have come to be reproduced in Bangkok's modern urban space. Another part of the answer can be found by looking at the how the contradictory attitudes that the vendors' fellow inhabitants have toward them spark a conversation about public and private space that makes us question what kind of place the city should be. As explained above, mobile vendors offer

potential in sparking urban democracy through their destabilization of NL practice, but what also needs to be brought out is how through their tacit autogestion of selling areas they offer an alternative to NL's conceived urban space. Bangkok takes on the nature of an ideological battlefield and mobile vending is a salient that points in the direction of democratic possibilities.

Patron client relationships and *nam jai*-kindness (literally water of the heart)-are two facets of traditional Thai life that endure and still inform in some ways how asymmetrical relationships play out. While the paper's focus has been to theorize the radical democratic nature of mobile vending the parallel stream has been to test the weak points of NL and hypothesize what aspects of mobile vending contest it. The modern Thai social contract as inspired by NL is exclusionary and works only to a limited degree. It is flawed and continually contested, perpetuated by its success in exploiting and suppressing the subaltern's power only pausing at the line of instigating an overt class conflict. Part of Purcell's theory of radical democracy calls for "resolving to act as if the contract never existed" and claiming agency in practicing urban life (*Down-Deep* 73). In this paper I have tried to explain how vendors' practice embodies this philosophy as they disobey the defective set of laws that are imagined to modernize, westernize and capitalize Bangkok. But historically these contracts *have* existed and one reason the social contract of Feudal Siam - Rábòp sàkgàdina tai-was able to endure was that this relationship arguably was based in part on the moral responsibility that the patron had towards the client that limited their exploitation and offered a degree of social insurance⁸⁵

⁸⁵ The opposing argument would be that this *morality* was based mainly within the goal of preserving the benefits that the system brought to the patron.

(Scott “Moral Economy” 27). NL ideology is short on moral responsibility but the nature of urban inhabitation means that people of all economic classes come into contact with each other and heartfelt relations do arise.

Patron client relations while based on hierarchical differences still stresses that those with greater power have the responsibility to help the poor if they can. In the literature on vending it is found that *puu yai*⁸⁶ - *big people* including former employers and others, provide assistance to vendors (Tepwongsirirat 88, 176; Yasmeen “Foodscape”). They are sometimes given money to buy equipment and establish businesses and landowners give permission for vendors to set up on empty spaces around their shops or front of their homes. While this type of arrangement does not offer any long-term security the rents charged are often nominal or free and without recourse to other opportunities vendors rely on this kindness. Vendors’ livelihood requires being close to areas with high levels of pedestrian traffic and having access to locations like these is crucial to their success. When conflicts over space occur with other vendors the private ownership of the patron who granted permission is cited. Patrons in these relationships receive compensation in the form of social capital or status that comes with being the benefactor. When low-level BMA authorities contest the spatial rights of vendors to do their selling, the *publicness* of the space is cited. As reward for considering this spatial ambiguity in favor of the vendors the authorities receive tribute i.e. bribes (Yasmeen, “Foodscape” 126, 173-8). While this dynamic reproduces hierarchical relations of the past, in contrast to the NL

⁸⁶ This means elders, specifically those with some kind of status whether economic, social or moral.

inspired system that in its fruition would eliminate street vendors⁸⁷, this aspect of Bangkok's neo-patron-client relationship supports them. This models a shared right, even if unevenly allocated, to the use and inhabitation of the city. This kindness is born out of a system that is clearly not democratic but it still finds commonality with democracy in concerns of recognizing the importance of others thereby allowing for resolution of problems through respect toward individual's desires. When reified by high level authorities of the BMA whose responsibility it is to administrate in line with NL aspirations of the exchange value based city the effect is that of loosening NL's abstract grip on Bangkok's urban lived in space.

At the end of 2012 the BMA started to more strictly enforce the regulations requiring vendors to have permission cards. Anu Saawri has an allowance zone but most of the sellers there were small-scale vendors unable to receive the cards or unable to afford the rents charged. Some of these people had been selling at the site for 30 years or more. As mentioned above the Siam Square sellers had effectively been evicted from their former selling places. Further, in early 2013 the BMA designated that each Monday would be designated as a cleaning day. Selling was to be forbidden thus cutting the vendors' income by about 14%. As the BMA pressed forward with the stricter enforcement vendors from both sites marched to the Office of the Director to protesting for their right to use the city citing that they had no other options to earn a living⁸⁸. In July the BMA announced that instead of closing the streets to selling every Monday they would be closed every other Monday. The spokesman cited that the reason for changing the policy

⁸⁷ Refer to Pannilai's policy recommendation in Chapter 2.

⁸⁸ <http://highlight.kapook.com/view/86294>

was the cooperation that vendors had provided in keeping the selling areas clean and the *compassion* that the BMA had for the vendors regarding their loss of income. The Daily News article that reported this event was titled *BMA Soft Hearted for Vendors* (my translation)⁸⁹. The legal codes and policy recommendations that have to do with administrating vendors refer to themes such as orderliness, cleanliness, and Bangkok's image as a modern city (*qtd.in* Pannilai, B.E.2519, B.E. 2535, B.E. 2545) but the announcement regarding moderation of the earlier measures imagines vendors as citizens participating in management of the city and as individuals struggling economically within the capitalist system. In the eyes of the BMA the vendors were transformed from a logistical impediment into individuals with families to support and children to raise. Culturally and historically understood hierarchies of power as well as a recognition of the reality of Bangkok's lived in city informed the BMA's willingness in its role as patron to alleviate the vendor's hardships. Acknowledgment of the vendor's needs even in this small way allows for imagining within the abstract space of Bangkok an urban inhabitation in which the most disadvantaged of people play a visible role. As for the Anu Saawri and Siam Square vendors who were pushed out of their selling spaces, it appears that rather than being eliminated they just walked up the stairs to the Sky Walk and continued their selling up there. It is hard to imagine that BMA officials did not anticipate that this would happen or were unaware of it after it happened. Rather, in their role as the dominant party in this neo-patron-client relationship they were in a position to mitigate the hardship of the vendors by ignoring the intent of their own regulations. In these examples compassion informed by recognition of modern urban reality trumped goals of administrative efficiency and vendors were given leeway to continue their

⁸⁹ <http://www.dailynews.co.th/Content/bangkok/171839>

democratically informed lines of flight.

Purcell sees in the urban a space rich with the possibilities of encounter, exchange of ideas, and political transformations and it is natural that as these encounters occur conflicts and disagreements take place. As a foreigner looking at Bangkok's vending scene I have made an effort to not over-romanticize this activity in spite of the nature of its variety, color, and possibilities for personal interactions that are attractive in so many ways. In fact, mobile vendors do experience push back, not only from the BMA but also from individuals who see the vendors as selfish lawbreakers who take advantage of the system by taking over public spaces for their own use.

In the later part of 2013, after the displacement of the Anu Saawri and Siam Square vendors there was a spate of publicity about the selling activities that were creating difficulties for pedestrians⁹⁰. Sections of the Sky Walk that previously were not selling places had become full of vendors. The author of one article who had not been there for several months was shocked when she found that the section around Anu Saawri had been taken over by them⁹¹. In a survey of Bangkok residents it was cited that the second most serious obstacle in walking on the sidewalks that follow the Sky Train resulted from the disorderly obstruction created by vendors⁹². I did an informal discourse analysis of a subject line on one of the more popular Thai web boards titled *After You Read This News*

⁹⁰ One article cited the danger that frying chicken on street corners presented to pedestrians <http://www.thaipost.net/x-cite/240513/73974>

⁹¹ <http://www.talkystory.com/?p=66736>

⁹² The most serious obstruction resulted from the broken up sidewalks. Daily News November 8, 2013

*Don't You Feel Sorry For The Men and Women Who Are Mobile Vendors?*⁹³ The subject concerned the newspaper article *Order vs. Compassion for Poor People: City People's Theories on Mobile Vendors*. There were over 70 responses and many replies within the individual responses. What I found was an overwhelmingly negative opinion towards the vendors. Writers cited the fact that not paying rent or taxes gives an economic advantage to the vendors over those shop owners who do pay and contribute to the (formal) economy. There was dissatisfaction over how vendors dirty the sidewalks and turn them into an urban obstacle course as pedestrians try to reach their destinations. There were comments that criticized the vendors' citing poverty as justification for breaking the laws. Some of the comments expressed suspicion over the professed poverty of the vendors⁹⁴ claiming instead that many of the vendors were well off. In fact some vendors, specifically a small proportion of the temporary stall sellers do experience a relative degree of success⁹⁵. I do not interpret the weight of these comments as representative of the opinion of the majority of Bangkok residents. The majority of Bangkok residents, like the vendors and their customers are members of the lower class⁹⁶, people who even though have increasing access to the internet probably do not have the interest to participate in web boards discussions that have to do with municipal policy. After working 12 hours for six or seven days a week there is little energy left over for this type of activity. I believe the web board discussion groups are predominantly the domain of the middle and upper middle class who might have the time to partake in them. What

⁹³ <http://pantip.com/topic/30654918> <http://pantip.com/topic/30515211>

⁹⁴ One of the comments, allegedly written by a vendor, was a complaint that the stricter enforcement was making it difficult to make the payments on her house and three cars. One of the respondents suspected that this comment was posted by a troll.

⁹⁵ Narumol identifies this group as entrepreneurs who can or are considering expansion of their enterprise (Narumol, "Mobile Street" 433)

⁹⁶ Kusakabe, Narumol "Mobile Street"

these conversations do speak to is the tension resulting from spatial scarcity and the problems concerning livability in an extremely dense habitat.

The informal nature of vendors' practice makes them an easy target to focus on as a cause of problems that urban inhabitants have to deal with every day. They are illegible, undocumented and for some who buy into NL ideology look to be "parasites on the real and productive economy". But the fact of their existence and the conversation that they precipitate, even if in a negative light such as the conversations above, make people think about the nature and quality of urban inhabitation. What type of city do we want, can the traffic and air pollution be reduced, can the BMA imagine a way to allow more bike riders, better mass transit and more green spaces? Outside of the shopping malls where are the places that people can meet together? These are questions that concern inhabitation and quality of life, in other words use value. When these commentators complain about the vendors they are also unintentionally identifying shortcomings of neoliberal exchange value centered urban system. Their dissatisfaction with the state of the capitalist city erodes the immutability of NL as a guiding ideology for the urban and opens abstract space for different ways of thinking. This is part of the value that vendors hold in stimulating urban democracy.

While the collective tone of the above subject line communicates the pressure arising from the failings of urban life that some would lay at the hands of the vendors an alternative sentiment is that mobile vendors represent the "the way of life for Thai people [and] they are the heart of the city" (<http://pantip.com/topic/30654918>). For example, vendors

help perpetuate the traditional Thai “snacking culture” and practice of eating outside (Yasmeen “Foodscape” 70). Vendors create a sense of place for their communities and in the eyes of inhabitants and tourists mobile vendors give meaning to the city through their products and their selling methods (91). What this means is that “Thai people don’t buy the government’s view on vendors” that they are undesirable or that they are others who have no proper place in the city (Tepwongsirirat 159). By providing hand-to-hand sustenance for its inhabitants vendors embody the Thai concept of *liang* or nurturing. They step into a familial role that for the uniformed staff of an inside restaurant would be hard to fill. In my opinion most Thai’s seem to adhere to democratic principles wrapped in compassion toward the vendors who are honest and hard working but do not fit into capitalism’s abstract city (159). The vendors for their part feel they have a right to the city. But their occupation of public space for private use problematizes basic precepts of liberal democracy and turns the streets into a forum on urban life, a discussion that pushes the democratic envelope.

By problematizing liberal economic theories of public and private space within the sweet democratic nature of the urban, vendors show the impossibility of achieving a strict division between these two abstract spaces in every day life. As can be seen in the previous chapters questions concerning public and private life in the competition for urban spatial resources take on urgency that vendors embody. In writing about Los Angeles during its urban renewal of the 1990’s Margaret Crawford observes, “When enough vendors gather in a single place they can muster the power to change the nature of political space” (34). She speaks of undocumented aliens illegally selling oranges and

other items who had the bravery to protest against harassment by the police. Politically ambiguous urban environments prompting events such as these, not unlike what we saw with the Siam Square and Anu Saawri vendors, led to the right to the city movement and starting in the early 2000's a series of charters⁹⁷ that articulate these rights. Purcell maintains that when property rights dictate how space is to be used this abstraction "alienates urban space from its inhabitants" (Purcell "Possible Worlds" 10). But Bangkok vendor's process of "de-alienating" space is not a legal process dispatched on their behalf through negotiation by lawyers or NGO's in what are commonly understood western political processes. It is a radical, Southeast Asian endeavor that occurs largely outside of BMA regulation and is based on relations with other inhabitants. This is a process that emphasizes choice, freedom, and more than occupation of urban space, an appropriation redefining "the existing city" (11). Vendors' relationship with the people of Bangkok whose walking they impede is analogous to their role within the Thai political economy that needs them and at the same time is confounded by their democratic lines of action. The centrality of the vendors to the shared inhabitation of life in the city allows us to see a glimmer of the potential of the urban as a site of radical democracy. It is a subtle movement, but one worth watching.

⁹⁷ I speak of the World Charter for the Right to the City, the Montreal Charter and Rights and Responsibilities and others mentioned in *Possible Worlds: Henry Lefebvre and the Right to the City* (Purcell 2013)

Conclusion

The research focus of this paper has been to describe instrumental factors, methods, and strategies of Bangkok's mobile vendors and the neoliberal agents they interface with. As Thailand's political economy has transformed from an agricultural and village/regional based system to an industrial and urban-based system hundreds of thousands have come to make their livelihood performing this work. I have scanned its overall environment and then concentrated on three of its major centers focusing on vendors' strategies and relationships. Bangkok's Royal Market, Siam Square/ Chulalongkorn University, and the Skytrain walkways were the site of the ethnographies and events that provided the majority of material for the research. My theoretical focus prompted by a desire to reveal the political nature of these people has been guided by the work on Urban Democracy by Mark Purcell and his inspirations, this in the context of a complex, volatile, and distinctly Southeast Asian state of affairs. The contribution to the body of knowledge concerning Southeast Asian subjects concerns how the production of urban space as informed by capitalistic ideology in Bangkok has produced a tenacious democratic counteraction through the practice of mobility and the reproduction of space by vendors. The process of vending and the relationships that occur between vendors, authorities, and inhabitants reveal the difficulties the NL project has in directing the industrial city and shine a light on the democratic nature of the urban.

The paper followed the genesis of Siamese mobile vending as Western economic influences and Chinese immigration inflows changed the social economic landscape of Bangkok streets. The changes that brought about huge waves of immigration from the outer provinces accelerated during the 1960's and as mobile vending paired with industrialization its rapid growth became something that could no longer escape the attention of city planners, the BMA, and social theorists. By the 1990's the great numbers of vendors actuate controversy in the form of push back from those who would imagine Bangkok as an ordered world city fully participating in the Neoliberal wave of globally oriented consumption and production. This in turn called forth the research of theorists situating it as part of the informal street economy that is part and parcel to developing countries, and as part of the daily live of urban inhabitants who support them each day with their wallets. My initial work centered on the research of Yasmeen, Narumol, and Kusakabe, which aimed respectively, towards Thai eating habits, gender roles and family economics, economic goals and success indicators, and regional comparisons with an eye on urban themes relating to how vendors challenge the primacy of the state in creating meanings of the city. I followed this path toward Nopporn's thesis, *Street Vendor: The Otherness From the Production of Urban Space* from which I gleaned ethnographical material as well as a basic familiarity with Marxist critique as it was applied specifically to mobile vending. Though I was not able to conduct field research for this project its empirical sense was heightened by drawing upon media accounts of events relevant to Bangkok mobile vending, my interview with one of the Skywalk vendors and Pantip's web board's lively discussions concerning vendors and rights to the street. For a sense of comparative background I looked at accounts of

vending throughout South and Southeast Asia, Los Angeles and especially Duneier's story of Greenwich Village second hand bookselling and Harms' account of urban transformation and expansion that is taking place around Saigon.

The majority of my initial sources focused on mobile vending as a dependent variable to the larger economic, political, and urban forces at work, forces that are conspicuous in dictating the status of vendors. But my initial feeling upon encountering vendors, one that did not fade even after considering the significance of these greater waves, was that this is a group of people whose agency is impactful and can be usefully theorized as an independent variable. This type of research is what has been lacking in the literature. Professor Curran who focuses on social issues concerning migration in developing countries understood the thesis that initially, I was tentatively approaching. I feel fortunate that she directed me towards Mark Purcell whose work emphasizes urban settings that are nurturing and respondent to the power of self directed and shared action. Purcell's philosophies on urban nature and democracy offer a set of ideas and vocabulary that are relevant to theorizing how vendors recreate the city into a space of inhabitation and ideological encounter. I also thank Professors Laurie Sears and Christoph Giebel for guiding me during the early parts of my research efforts and Sara Van Fleet for generously offering her time in discussing Thai subjects including the mobile vendors. I must also thank my wife Ratchanee for her patience and important insights concerning the vendors that she shared with me.

The main limitation of my research was the modest amount of experience I have had with Marxist critique and urban philosophy. For those who are more familiar with the disciplines the paper will reveal my comparatively simplistic understanding of these practices. That being said, I hope that through exposure to Purcell's writings I have absorbed a sufficient sense of how modern scholars interpret what is going on in the cities and especially the ongoing evolution of democratic theory in order to have sufficiently explained the particular agency of mobile vendors. My first finding was that mobility, which is vital to vendor's practice, is a conscious and practical system of contesting the BMA's political power. As policy flows from administrative levels down to the level of daily implementation there is an ongoing conflict between authority and the vendors. The vendors' tactics of evasion evokes the constant, largely unsuccessful, effort on behalf of authorities to control and punish them. This manifests itself around the ground level markets where carts transform into vehicles of resistance, as well as above, upon the unmistakably urban based air markets of the Skywalk where vendors flock together to sell, ready to flee when necessary. They draw upon Siamese notions of the fluidity of space and the liquid world laying beneath the modern city. Vendors see the city streets as a place where they can, and must, run under the ideological radar of NL which on an abstract level does not acknowledge them and on a day-to-day level seeks to control their activities that subvert the exchange valued city.

Not unlike players in the NL project vendors seek to profit from the features of modern city specifically, its population density. But unlike large businesses, individual vendors' scale, goals and activities are usually modest and aim toward subsistence. They are

intimate, friendly, and informal which leads me to my second chief finding that is, vendors' produce an alternate abstract vision for the city as a self managed place of inhabitation conducive to urban life. There is a system that mostly ignores, and erodes the legitimacy of central authority over their activities and relationships, a model of the democratic counter-project imagined by Purcell. In furthering Roy's discourse on the ambiguity of urban informality I have explained how the omnipresent reality of vendors has prompted the BMA and its lower level authorities into reacting, adjusting, and mostly allowing for their activities. This reality is constituted by the familial role they discharge as nurturers for the great majority of Bangkok inhabitants and by recalling the environment and food of village life that is the heritage of many of these people. The reproduction and enhancement of space by vendors, the displeasure of the residents who feel inconvenienced by their occupation of the sidewalks notwithstanding, calls attention to the city as a place of inclusion over order and freedom over regulation. This is where mobile vending practice resonates with Purcell's theories concerning the democratic nature of the urban.

Developing countries around the world are struggling with the many difficulties that come along with moving on from authoritarian, religious, and tribal based regimes to forms of government that offer more freedom to their people. Citizens of Western countries also struggle with questions about their own democratic governments that have a tendency to capitulate to NL ideology. In Thailand these problems, along with the urgency of an immovable, yet fading Royal regime, coalesce and manifest in Bangkok. I have located vendors in the middle of this struggle, as a medium that allows us to see the

problems this mongrelized hegemony is encountering and as a flow that hints at how urban futures may occur. This is the importance of the research.

The latest coup d'état and installation of a military dictatorship is a step backwards for democracy. The maxim of the junta, whose official name is The National Council for Peace and Order, is in the process of dispatching a cynical program they call "Returning Happiness to the People". One of the measures they are employing to achieve this goal is to remove conflict from the streets through their program "Returning the Sidewalks to the People". This has involved the removal of vendors from certain congested localities in Bangkok. Based on past history its unlikely that we will see vendors directly challenging the junta's measures. Following the model of previous experience with the interface between vendors and the BMA one of the vendors forced out was seen on the highly censored TV news pleading for mercy. No matter who governs the country the longevity of its tenure relies in part on the stability of the business environment in the city. And this means they must walk a line between the order required for the capitalist city and the necessity of the vendors to keep Bangkok functioning as an efficient capitalist center. Thus the military dictatorship will probably not crackdown much more intensely than the predecessor regimes. It is more likely that the whack a mole game of suppression and manifestation will continue as a lack of opportunities and a sufficient social safety nets means that many vendors do not have a choice. Therefore the undercurrent of vendors' friction with authority and their practice as a symbol of freedom and the lived in city will continue.

What is required is to closely follow the changes in policy and policy practice that the junta puts into place and to see how vendors adjust to these. The dynamic, as I explained in the Greenwich Village and BMA cases, has been that the stricter the policy practice, the more authority is delegitimized. This underlines significance of vendors' role in the city. While there has been an increased amount of attention paid to the role of street economies in developing countries⁹⁸, very little of it has been focused on Thailand. What I am especially curious about now are the possibilities of organization. There has been little coordination amongst vendors leaving a mostly silent void when it comes to the BMA's overall strategy and planning for their activities. Is this anonymity and formlessness a prerequisite for their success? Or rather, would the formation of a vendor's group be a form of collective action that offers a method for them to negotiate for benefits and greater recognition of their rights and significantly, allowing for an "understanding[s] of [vendor's] oppression...and [to] plow up the ground to grow a crop of democracy (Purcell "Recapturing" 81)". This is a topic of research that is worth exploring.

Mobile vendors are a deep-rooted part of Bangkok's urban life drawing cultural sustenance from Thai tradition and resilience from their role as an economic pillar to the capitalist city. At the same time they can be understood as a radical democratic movement presenting an unsolvable dilemma through their illegal standing and illegibility in relations with the BMA.

⁹⁸ See Hansen's *Street Economies in the Global South*

If we understand the Thai “state”- the informal state comprised of elite groups that has evolved over the last 60 years-as a supra power structure with a greater ability to control policy and how it is applied than whatever government happens to hold power at a particular time, we see that the state is accepting of most anything society presents it as long as it does not seriously threaten the power structure. When social and political pressures build up to an unacceptable level coups are seen as the proper way to reduce these pressures. The economic interests of the royal network, bureaucratic, business, and military institutions are jealously protected through the shaky balance of power between these groups. But the competition for acquiring benefits and protecting interests is problematized as the growing lower middle class and highly entrepreneurial new businesses classes that seek to insert themselves into this competition for power.

Contemporary vendors fit into these new classes, entrepreneurial and with a sense of spatial entitlement to the city. The state, while employing its backward sense of class entitlement and application of cultural hierarchy to control society, seeks acceptance and inclusion into the community of developed and progressive nations, this largely through its adoption of neo-liberal normatives. Bangkok is a representation of this type of normative and its lived in space is an example of the problems that come out of it. Groups that do not fit into the model are marginalized, and even those that do fit in are marginalized. By this I mean the inhabitation of the city is an afterthought to its economic goals. Public space, amenities, and parks are scant-it is not an easy place to live in. The economic endeavors of vendors expose the chasm in state-society relations. Their practices problematize public and private ownership as they occupy, contest and

redefine urban space while exercising their rights to the city. In the aggregate they point toward a more humanistic and positive interpretation of the city-they make it more livable, more social, more inhabitable. They exhibit a uniquely urban character infused with democratic mores.

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Appendix/ Annotated List of Main Sources

Askew, Marc. *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation*. 2004

The book describes Bangkok using an anthropological approach informed by urban studies and “human geography”. Key points include how understandings of land have been modified in reaction to influences such as globalization and urbanization. The material provided background for my argument at the end of chapter 4 concerning culturally oriented traditional attitudes that persist in individual neighborhoods that embrace mobile vending practice.

Baker, Chris, and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A History of Thailand*. 2014

A wide ranging study that covers the basic political, economic, social and cultural themes that informed the transformation of the Kingdom of Siam into the Nation of Thailand. The focus is on how these currents continue to shape the contemporary state of affairs. This source provided an overall survey of Thai political economy that helps explain vendors’ status in terms of the existing class divisions and economic conflicts.

Bhowmik, Sharit. *Street Vendors in the Global Urban Economy*. 2012.

Bhowmik’s work looks at vending with a focus on how it fits within urban informal economies. His work provided a comparative and statistical background

that I cite in Chapters 3 and 4. Theoretically, it provided motivation for my own work as he stresses the effect that neo-liberalism has had in “pushing the interests of vendors to the side (xii).”

Bodhikong, Komsan and Moongjongklang, Boonyarit, “Problems and Possible Solutions for Stall Sellers and Street Vendors: The Case of Stall Sellers and Street Vendors in Front of Chulalongkorn Hospital.” 2003

The purpose of this case study commissioned by the National Human Rights Commission was to research the roots of the problem concerning the spatial insecurity of vendors and how this was related to fundamental flaws in the BMA’s administration of selling spaces. I included findings from this piece at the end of Chapter 5 to expand my theories about how vendors informalize and delegitimize municipal authority by compelling it to act in a largely futile attempt to control them. These ideas feed into Purcell’s theories about the democratic nature of contested urban spaces. This research made reference to the following Municipal documents.

B.E. 2519 (1976) The Regulation on Bangkok Metropolis on Hawkers,
and Street Vendors

B.E. 2535 (1992) The Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public
Order

B.E. 2543 (2000) The BMA Ordinance on Service Fees

B.E. 2545 (2002) The Regulation of Bangkok Metropolis on Selling in
Public Spaces

Chantaranamchoo, Nopporn. *Street Vendor: The Otherness From the Production of Space*. 2007

This dissertation supplied the majority of the primary evidence used in the first part of the Chapter 4, Mobility, Space and Democratic Attitudes. My approach towards using this work was to modify its report of how the physical and ideological alienation of vendors, their otherization, is required by neoliberalism and employed by the Bangkok Municipal Authority. I rephrase this in a way that stresses their antagonistic role in contesting hegemony. The creation of the Royal Market as a space that primarily serves a function of enhancing exchange value made it necessary for vendors to employ mobility and a series of overlapping informal agreements and understandings to do with reproducing spaces in order to be able to undertake their practice. Nopporn uses a Lefebvrian approach in describing these processes so I was able to borrow these events, emphasize the vendors' agency and then connect them with Purcell's ideas about democratic attitudes and contesting urban spaces.

Duneier, Mitchell. *Sidewalk*. 1999.

I used material from this book about Greenwich Village's magazine vendors for comparison with the Bangkok scene. There is a corollary between their political-economic genesis as well as the socio-economic obstacles they seek to overcome. In Chapter 4 I show how they both help to break down barriers between those "inside" the formal economy and those who are "outside" thereby contesting and

complicating the division. In Chapter 5 I compare New York and Bangkok's vendors legal statuses with the respective high-level authorities that administrate them to reveal how they problematize goals of the ordered city. I then connect how their relations with low-level authorities, who in ineffectually dispatching the laws they have to do with the ordered city; i.e. "broken window laws" or BMA Vending Regulations, turn their parent governing bodies into informal or extra-legal entities.

Keyes, Charles F. *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*. 1987

For purposes of this paper I mostly concentrated on Chapter 5, which offered a description of Thai rural-urban immigration and especially the explanations of traditional gender roles that emphasize female participation in the management of family finances and activities in the market place that evolved into the important part that women play in mobile vending. Keyes' ideas concerning "nurturing" feed into the points I make at the end of Chapter 5 about the function vendors play in fighting for a right to the city and enhancing its livability.

Kusakabe, Kyoko. "Policy Issues on Street Vending. An Overview of Studies in Thailand, Cambodia and Mongolia Bangkok." 2006

Kusakabe's comparative research approaches the subject from an administrative and economic perspective. She problematizes vending in a survival economy and writes of the difficulties of establishing rights in an environment of unstable governments and economies. Her historical analysis notes fluctuations in BMA

policy towards vendors. These depend upon the changing state of the economy and in Chapter 4 I linked this survey with the problems that officials have in enforcing a cogent system themselves thereby taking on the appearance of a quasi-informal authority.

Mateo-Babiano, I. B. "Public Life in Bangkok's Urban Spaces." 2012

Mateo-Babiano assesses the importance of street life, including the significant role of vendors, to the enhanced livability of Bangkok. I borrowed his ideas about urban evolution, public space and mobility. On page 89 connected these with my own thoughts about vendors' reproduction of space and how they offer a democratic alternative to the neo-liberal city.

Nirathron, N. "*Fighting Poverty from the Street: A Survey of Street Food Vendors in Bangkok.*" 2006

The study focuses on the deep cultural, social, and economic ties that street vendors have in the Bangkok setting while surveying the qualitative and quantitative factors that determine and account for the success of individual vendors. Nirathron's research also includes demographic information about the regional origins of mobile vendors the majority of whom come from the economically disadvantaged Northeast. I made use of this information in Chapter 4 to help me explain the necessity of vendors' ongoing conflict within the formal economy. Her detailed description of their marketing strategies and levels of economic success was employed to offer a more comprehensive vision of vendors

that stresses their agency. The policy component of her work was used as evidence for my arguments concerning the role vendors play in the “informalization” of the BMA.

Noparatnaraporn, Cuttaleeya, and Ross King. "Memory or Nostalgia: The Imagining of Everyday Bangkok." 2007

Noparatnaraporn describes the multi-leveled abstract geography of Bangkok. One top exists the modern and superficial world inspired by capitalism, that which can be discussed and described. Layered below is the real world informed by traditional Siamese culture that is infused with epistemes of freedom. In Chapter 4 I linked his points about the senses of fluidity and unboundedness that are coupled with Thai conceptions of public space to the spatial practices of vendors and explain that this practice offers a culturally based democratic alternative to the conceived exchange-valued city.

Rajagopal, Arvind. “The Violence of Commodity Aesthetics: Hawkers, Demolition Raids, and a New Regime of Consumption.” 2001

Rajagopal explains the marginality of vendors to the modern capitalist economy while giving examples of how their practices borrow from and are borrowed by players in the formal economy. In Chapter 4 I drew from his work to help explain how their practices and aesthetics in producing street food vendors reproduce exchange valued urban spaces into places that are attractive and more inhabitable.

Tepwongsirirat, P. *The Vendor and the Street: The Use and Management of Public Spaces in Bangkok*. 2005

I wove ethnographic and theoretical material from Tepwongsirirat's thesis into both the Chapter 4 and 5. His ethnographical material was borrowed to illustrate how the proliferation of vendors contests authority and then as evidence for how gentrification becomes a process that breaks down barriers between classes of people and reproduces highly valued urban spaces into places of inhabitation and inclusion. In Chapter 5 I offer his descriptions of the relationships between vendors and inhabitants to substantiate how they problematize understandings of public and private space and how their right to the city is vindicated on a deep level through their social relationships.

Walsh, J., & Maneepong, C. "After the 1997 Financial Crisis in Bangkok: The Behaviour and Implications of a New Cohort of Street Vendors." 2012

Walsh's work focuses on the informal nature of vending activities and the way vendors have reacted to recent economic challenges. I cited this article a number of times in Chapter 3. It is relevant to my work as it stresses vendors' agency and the significant role that they play in establishing "meanings" of the city.

Yasmeen, G. "*Bangkok's Foodscape: Public Eating, Gender Relations, and Urban Change*." 2006

More than half of Bangkok's mobile vendors are selling food and they represent a key link in the set of logistics involved in feeding its inhabitants. *Foodscape*

was a source for my argument in Chapter 4 of how vendors drawing upon neo patron-client relationships with shop owners and low level authorities create spaces for their selling activities which complicate neo-liberal understandings of the exchange value based city. I also drew upon her account of the Bangkok's kitchen less apartments to support my case of how the commoditization of space and the resulting scarcity necessitates mobile vending, creates unregulated spaces and by extension problematizes neoliberalism's conceived city.