From Proactive to Complacent Politics: Reproducing Spaces of Inequality in a Bolivian Marketplace

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Abstract: During the early 1970s, a group of small-scale vendors in Challapata, Bolivia, fought for and won the right to sell in the marketplace. In doing so they undermined the power of a local group of elite shopkeepers and built the plaza that has become the centre of the town's marketplace activity. Although the original collective action sought to assert a disadvantaged group's right to gain a livelihood, the inequalities and practices of exclusion that vendors once fought against have been reproduced over the course of a generation. In this article I explore how and why this transition occurred and suggest that the case study provides a cautionary tale about the struggles of marginalized groups.

Keywords: politics of space, marketplace vendors, Bolivia

Résumé : Au début des années 1970, un groupe de petits vendeurs à Challapata, en Bolivie, ont lutté et obtenu le droit de vendre leurs produits sur la place du marché. Ce faisant, ils ont sapé le pouvoir d'un groupe local de commerçants influents et construit la *plaza* qui est devenue le centre des activités du marché de la ville. Bien que l'action collective initiale ait visé à défendre le droit d'un groupe défavorisé à subvenir à ses besoins, les inégalités et les pratiques d'exclusion contre lesquelles ces vendeurs ont alors lutté se sont reproduites au bout d'une génération. Dans cet article, j'explore comment et pourquoi cette transition a eu lieu, et suggère que l'étude de cas fournit une leçon de prudence en ce qui a trait aux luttes des groupes marginalisés.

Mots-clés : politique de l'espace, vendeurs de marché, Bolivie.

Introduction

The politics of public space and its links with marginalized groups and issues of social justice have become a subject of much scholarly attention. Recent collective efforts of anthropologists and geographers, in particular, have emphasized the need to understand the connection between the politics of space and the social, cultural and economic processes that occur within space. While much of this literature is concerned with the outcomes that such politics have for disadvantaged groups, there is a range of approaches, from those that examine how the exclusionary practices of elites further marginalize disadvantaged groups (e.g., Low and Smith 2006) to those that understand the place-based politics of marginalized groups as a means to create and engage in alternative livelihood practices (e.g., Harcourt and Escobar 2005). While conducting research among marketplace vendors in Challapata, Bolivia, I encountered a case that addresses the issues raised by both perspectives. In the early 1970s, a group of small-scale, disadvantaged vendors fought for and won the right to sell in the marketplace. In doing so, they undermined the power of a local group of elite shopkeepers and built the plaza that has become the centre of the town's marketplace activity. Their actions can be interpreted as an example of the livelihood practices suggested by Arturo Escobar, Wendy Harcourt and J.K. Gibson-Graham (Escobar 2008; Escobar and Harcourt 2005; Gibson-Graham 2005, 2006) as offering alternatives to the dominant global capitalist economy. Nonetheless, the inequalities and practices of exclusion that vendors once fought against have been reproduced over the course of a generation. These inequalities and practices now occur among the vendors themselves, demonstrating that the exclusionary practices described by authors such as Setha Low (2006) and Don Mitchell and Lynn A. Staeheli (2006) are not just an elite privilege. Moreover, vendors today seem complacent within this system of

inequality. Rather than fighting for equality, vendors are focused on their individual business affairs.

My concern in this article is with how and why this transition occurred. I begin with an introduction to Challapata, its marketplace and the current politics of vendors. I then relate the story of the construction of Plaza Antofagasta and the politics surrounding its establishment. This is followed by a discussion of the current social and economic processes in the marketplace. I argue that the social and economic processes that emerged from the early struggle of the vendors not only underlie the reproduction of inequalities and practices of exclusion but also limit the vendors' capacity for collective resistance. My case therefore offers a cautionary tale about the struggles of marginalized groups. What may begin as a struggle to assert the rights and livelihood practices of a disadvantaged group can be transformed to reproduce the conditions they once fought against.

Challapata and Selling

Challapata is a commercial town located in the southern Bolivian highlands, 110 kilometres south of the city of Oruro. The town is well known in Bolivia for the large open-air marketplace it hosts each weekend. Although the town's population is about 7 thousand, the marketplace serves over 40 thousand people who live in the rural area, over a hundred kilometres in diameter, surrounding Challapata. Other than the small shops that some people operate within their homes, Challapata's marketplace is the only place to purchase goods in this area. The marketplace is large, with more than four hundred vendors selling a wide range of products that include food, clothing, hardware and other household goods. Most consumers are small-scale farmers who cultivate crops for both subsistence and commercial sale. When farmers have products to sell, they do so through transactions with wholesalers who travel to Challapata from major Bolivian cities, such as Oruro and La Paz. The wholesalers resell these goods in other regions and cities of Bolivia. The products that farmers produce for wholesale trade are those that are best suited for the cool, dry climate of the Bolivian high plain, which lies at 3,700 metres above sea level. Quinoa, the meat of llama and sheep, and cheese are the most important commercial products. Farmers also produce potatoes—largely for subsistence—and farmers with access to land in lower-lying valleys cultivate small amounts of root vegetables for their own consumption. The retail goods sold in Challapata are purchased by vendors in the wholesale markets located in the cities of Oruro and Potosí. None of these goods is produced for commercial sale in the area served by the marketplace; instead, they are produced elsewhere in Bolivia and in other countries. In short, Challapata's marketplace is the place where goods produced in the area are collected for resale elsewhere in Bolivia, and goods produced outside the area are sold for local household consumption.

My research focused on the lives and work of fruit and vegetable vendors who live in Challapata. I obtained my data through participant observation and interviews I conducted in Challapata from June 1998 to July 1999.[1] While I conversed with and observed and participated in the activities of many vendors, I came to know seven vegetable and six fruit vendors quite well. I helped these vendors with their work and spent many hours with them discussing selling, the marketplace and life in general. Vendors are best described as living in multi-occupational households. Most vendors have access to a small plot of land where they cultivate some crops for their own consumption. As well, they and their spouses are often engaged in other income-earning activities, such as small-scale shopkeeping and, when available, waged work. Nonetheless, vendors consider their principal occupation to be that of selling, and they identify themselves as vendors.[2] Although the majority of vendors are women, the occupation of selling is not exclusively female; many men regularly sell, and many businesses are jointly operated by spouses.

Vendors do not constitute a homogeneous group. They enter the marketplace with varying access to the different resources needed for selling. Thus, among fruit and vegetable vendors, some sell a small volume of produce; others, a medium volume; and a certain few, a large volume of goods.[3] These economic differences have not resulted in class distinctions among vendors. Challapata vendors share several characteristics with petty commodity producers (see Babb 1989). They are self-employed, and the resources on which they rely, including labour, are accessed through their households. Vendors whose income exceeds that required for their basic subsistence will use their extra cash in a variety of ways, such as saving for their children's education, their retirement or even a family vacation. Those vendors who wish to expand the size of their businesses will use some of their extra income to reinvest in their businesses. None of the fruit and vegetable vendors engages in accumulation strategies that one would expect to encounter in a capitalist firm. Instead, vendors are focused on household provisioning.[4] Moreover, small-scale vendors are not necessarily poorer than vendors who operate larger businesses because their spouses

may have full-time work and their earnings from sales may provide only a small portion of their total household income.

One attribute of vendors that captured my interest was the high prevalence of political complacency.[5] Vendors expressed no concern for local or national politics. Nor did they seem interested in collectively organizing to improve their working conditions in the marketplace. Moreover, there was almost a complete lack of cooperation, reciprocity and mutual aid among vendors. They would rarely extend a helping hand to a neighbouring vendor, and when they did, it was usually for a sibling or other close family member.[6] Nonetheless, on a formal basis, vendors are very organized politically. In Challapata there are several vendors' associations, each representing the vendors of a particular product.[7] Thus, there is an association of fruit vendors, one of vegetable vendors and so on. All these associations are linked together under the local Congress of Vendors' Associations. This congress is the instrument through which associations and, by extension, individual vendors can express their concerns with one another. It is also the means through which vendors express their collective concerns to the Challapata municipal government. The congress is also linked with other congresses of vendors' associations at the national level through its membership in the national association of vendors. Thus, each vendor is linked politically with other vendors both in Challapata and throughout Bolivia. In other words, a highly structured political organization offers the potential for Challapata vendors to be collectively mobilized in the marketplace and in both local and national arenas.[8]

In practice, however, vendors do not express any interest in any type of politics or even in their associations. Most vendors are concerned about their businesses, nothing more. When I first asked vendors whether they had any associations representing their interests, many initially said no. It was only after some probing that they revealed the existence of their associations. This acknowledgment was almost always accompanied by the statement that the associations are not functioning or that they fail to serve any purpose. Indeed, when I asked whether I could attend any of their association meetings, I was told that there were no such meetings. The most prevalent way in which politics are expressed among vendors is through informal, rather than formal, means. Vendors who are not on friendly terms will engage in petty quarrels and bickering over stall space and selling techniques. These disputes are often rooted in competition, and they occur between vendors who operate businesses of a similar size and between those with businesses of different sizes. Those on friendly terms will gossip about other vendors and about townspeople in general. They also spend equal time discussing a variety of topics, such as their family concerns and the price and supply of fresh produce in wholesale markets. I never heard vendors discuss local or national politics, and their discussions of vendors' associations were always the result of my own prompting. In short, while an organizational framework exists for vendors to become actively involved in marketplace, municipal and national politics, vendors do not express any interest in participating or even in discussing such politics.

Today's complacency has not always been the predominant characteristic of vendor politics. Like vendors studied by other scholars (e.g., Babb 1989; Clark 1988, 1994; Cross 1998; Lazar 2008; Lessinger 1988; Seligmann 1998, 2000; Smart 1988), Challapata vendors have demonstrated strong political organization to protect their rights. For example, before the elimination of price controls across Bolivia in 1985, regulated prices were a constant source of conflict between vendors and government authorities. Vendors have also collectively protested efforts by the municipal government to increase the fees they pay to access their marketplace stalls.[9] These struggles over price controls and stall fees are best understood as reactive conflicts over policies that impinge on vendors' capacities to earn an income. Yet Challapata vendors once engaged in a far more proactive struggle that entailed their right to sell in the marketplace. This struggle over the construction of what is now the central plaza of marketplace activity represents an important moment in the history of the Challapata marketplace. Not only does this event signify the growth and expansion of the marketplace, it also constitutes a rupture in the hold on power and wealth that certain families once had in Challapata. Nonetheless, the extension of the marketplace to Plaza Antofagasta, the struggle that ensued and the construction of the plaza itself are not publicly discussed events. No one related the story of the construction of this plaza to me until the last few months of my original fieldwork. Once I was aware of the struggle, I began to ask vendors about it. Vendors who had participated in the struggle recalled the event with some detail and much interest. Here I relate this story as it was told to me by vendors involved in the struggle.

The Construction of Plaza Antofagasta

Plaza Antofagasta was built in 1973, but the events that led directly to its construction began in about 1971, one year before General Banzer's almost decade-long military dictatorship. Before the construction of this plaza,

the marketplace was small, and it was located in Challapata's original principal plaza, Plaza 16 de Julio, which lies two blocks east of Plaza Antofagasta. Several wealthy and politically powerful families owned houses and shops on the streets bordering this plaza. On market day, small-scale vendors of agricultural products also sold their wares in the plaza. Pack animals, used to carry goods to and from Challapata, were kept in the area that is now Plaza Antofagasta. By the late 1960s, the number of animals had decreased as trucks and buses became the more frequent modes of transportation.

Vendors said there were two reasons why small-scale vendors began to move their selling locations to Plaza Antofagasta. First, throughout the 1960s, the number of small-scale vendors selling in Plaza 16 de Julio had gradually increased and, by the end of the decade, the plaza was congested with sellers. This growth coincides with several features of Challapata's history. Between 1950 and 1976, the town's population doubled.[10] The 1960s also saw a rise in the importance of commercial farming. As farmers in the immediate area surrounding Challapata reoriented their agricultural practices from subsistence to commercial production, they became more reliant on the town's marketplace for their household needs.[11] Moreover, inheritance practices limited the number of people who could farm on a full-time basis.[12] Marketplace selling was considered a good income-earning opportunity for those who could not access enough land to provide for their livelihoods. Second, with Plaza 16 de Julio congested with vendors, new vendors began selling from the streets lining the plaza. Shopkeepers, fearing that these vendors would decrease their sales, were abusive toward these small-scale vendors. Vendors said that shopkeepers would not let them sell near their shops, claiming they made the area dirty. As a result, small-scale vendors slowly began to move their selling location to the area that is now Plaza Antofagasta. Throughout the relocation of small-scale vendors' selling locations, the area that is now Plaza Antofagasta remained an undeveloped area of land.

The movement of small-scale vendors to Plaza Antofagasta created a great deal of concern among the shopkeepers of Plaza 16 de Julio, who were afraid that the majority of marketplace activities would follow the small-scale vendors, resulting in a loss of their sales. Shopkeepers therefore asked the local government to intervene on their behalf. Their request was successful because of their local political power. The marketplace superintendent began to verbally abuse the small-scale vendors selling in what is now Plaza Antofagasta. Vendors were told they could not sell in the area and had to relocate their selling activities back to Plaza 16 de Julio. Vendors ignored these threats and continued to sell in Plaza Antofagasta. The local government eventually asked the military, which has a base in Challapata, to assist them in their struggle. By this time, the market area in Plaza Antofagasta was well established. The plaza itself, however, had yet to be constructed. In their efforts to move vendors back to Plaza 16 de Julio, vendors said the military used verbal and psychological abuse. Threats were made, and vendors were ordered to sell in Plaza 16 de Julio.

During the struggle to establish Plaza Antofagasta as a marketplace area, vendors began to collectively organize and formed their first union. The establishment of the union occurred just before Banzer's military dictatorship banned all forms of organized labour.[13] I therefore asked people if they were not afraid to form unions and to engage in a struggle with the military. Everyone I asked responded with "no"; as one vendor stated, "We were not afraid, I was not afraid." Nevertheless, the union was formed with some degree of secrecy.

In 1973 vendors constructed Plaza Antofagasta with their own labour and with materials purchased with their own money.[14] Union leaders negotiated with both the municipal government and the military, and Plaza Antofagasta became officially recognized as a marketplace area. Most of the wealthy families who owned shops in Plaza 16 de Julio have since left Challapata.[15] While the few who remain continue to have a disproportionate hold on wealth and political power in Challapata, it is far less than it was in the past. As well, new families who have accumulated wealth through their marketplace businesses are now included among the wealthiest families in Challapata.

The political mobilization of vendors, their defiance of local elites and municipal authorities and their establishment of a new area of marketplace activity could be understood as an example of what Escobar (2008), Escobar and Harcourt (2005) and Gibson-Graham (2005, 2006) suggest constitutes the efforts of marginalized groups to engage in alternative economic practices. Gibson-Graham (2005:148–150), in particular, celebrate the micro-entrepreneurial activities of low-income groups as a form of anti-capitalist economic practices. Indeed, they list local trading systems, informal markets, self-employment and independent enterprises as some of the economic practices that offer alternatives to a dominant capitalist system (Gibson-Graham 2005:138, 2006:76). In constructing Plaza Antofagasta, vendors established a space in which economic activities could be conducted among more or less equal participants. As I have already noted, vendors today, as well as those in the 1970s, are best described as petty traders involved

in simple commodity circulation. Rather than accumulation, the goal of their trading activities is household provisioning (see Cook 1976). Furthermore, the farmers who constitute the majority of their customers are petty commodity producers who also seek to provision their households. The vendors' union was formed to ensure that more powerful economic players, such as wealthy shopkeepers, could not take away the right of vendors to sell in the marketplace. Yet, today, the inequalities and exclusionary practices that vendors once fought against have re-emerged. Moreover, vendors seem politically complacent about these changes.

What is missing from my portrayal of the events in Challapata is an understanding of the social, political and economic processes that came into play following the construction of Plaza Antofagasta. Challapata's marketplace does not exist in isolation from broader political-economic processes, nor have such processes within the marketplace itself remained static. To understand the transition from proactive to complacent politics and the reproduction of inequality and exclusion, we need to explore some of the political and economic processes that have occurred in the Challapata marketplace. These processes are linked with three features of the Challapata marketplace that underlie the current political complacency of vendors: the absence of formal regulations that impede the ability to sell, the high level of competition among vendors and the manner in which inequalities in economic power among vendors are manifested. Before I explore these features, I discuss some of the changes that occurred in the area surrounding Challapata since the early 1970s.

After the construction of Plaza Antofagasta, the marketplace continued to expand. Today, it encompasses three plazas and the streets that extend beyond these plazas. Because the number of vendors is so much larger, the original union has been divided into numerous associations united under one congress.[16] The duration of the marketplace has also lengthened. Although it is officially, and originally, a Sunday marketplace, the number of market days has increased. In 1999 selling activities began at noon on Saturday and continued until late Sunday afternoon. As well, a small number of vegetable and fruit vendors continued to sell on Monday. By 2006 many vendors of a variety of products were selling on Monday, and a small number of vegetable and fruit vendors continued to sell on Tuesday. The reasons for this expansion include population growth, the further integration of farmers into the cash economy and the lack of opportunities for waged work. Challapata's population has almost doubled since the early 1970s, and the number of rural residents, who constitute the bulk of vendors' customers, has also increased.[17] Although many of these rural residents are small-scale farmers engaged in largely subsistence production, they are not completely self-sufficient and rely on the marketplace to purchase some necessary goods. Some farmers are best described as commodity producers, and their involvement in commercial farming has intensified since the early 1970s. This is especially so in the agricultural area directly adjacent to Challapata and in the area known as Salinas. The former is an important producer of dairy products, while the latter is well known for quinoa production. In short, population growth and the improved cash incomes of some customers have resulted in a larger customer base for the marketplace.

It cannot be assumed, however, that this situation has directly benefited all vendors. The marketplace serves an area characterized by a lack of basic infrastructure, such as electricity and paved roads; a high incidence of poverty;[18] and limited employment opportunities. Most customers have little cash to spend, which, in turn, limits the income-earning potential associated with selling. Nonetheless, with few opportunities for waged work, marketplace selling is an important source of income for Challapata households. An estimated 60 to 80 per cent of Bolivia's working-age population is employed in the informal economy (Brett 2006). The predominance of this economy in Bolivia is, in part, a result of the country's neoliberal economic policies that were implemented throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These policies included privatization of state-owned enterprises, decreased state funding for social welfare programs and the elimination of price controls. The outcome for most Bolivians has been a reduction in the value of their incomes, decreased employment opportunities and declining support from state welfare agencies. In response, many Bolivians have mobilized their own resources and have sought their livelihoods through self-employment (Gill 2000:3–4).[19] Since Challapata residents have been engaged in commercial activities for decades, the degree to which neoliberalism has shaped their livelihoods is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, waged work in mining and construction had been an important source of income for some Challapateños, and access to this work is now more limited than in the past. Consequently, even more people have entered the marketplace as sellers to earn an income. As I discuss below, this expanding number of sellers trying to make sales to an increasing number of cash-poor customers has transformed the original intent of Plaza Antofagasta to provide a space for small-scale and relatively equal vendors to earn a livelihood.

Reproducing Control, Competition and Inequality

The construction of Plaza Antofagasta signalled the demise of shopkeeper control and power over small-scale vendors. No institution or authoritative group has since assumed this control. Unlike many other marketplaces in Bolivia (e.g., Buechler and Buechler 1977; Buechler 1978; Lazar 2008) and elsewhere in the world (e.g., Babb 1989; Clark 1994; Cross 1998; Davis 1973; Seligmann 2000), the municipal government has limited involvement in marketplace activities. The government does provide an area for the marketplace and a few minimal services such as the bathroom, one water tap and lighting. It also collects the annual and weekend fees that vendors pay for the rights to use their stalls. The municipal government, however, provides no written rules and regulations that monitor selling activities. Nor has the government tried to limit the size of the marketplace. Indeed, the government has good reasons to embrace its growth. Not only are the stall fees paid by vendors an important source of revenue, the marketplace itself is also well known throughout Bolivia, and its expansion underscores the importance of Challapata as an urban centre.

In contrast, vendors' associations do implement some controls over the activities of vendors. Although officially labour unions, the associations share several characteristics with the neighbourhood associations of gated communities and the business improvement district associations discussed respectively by Low (2006) and Mitchell and Staeheli (2006). They regulate, through membership, who sells in the marketplace, allocate stall space, act as a liaison between their membership and the municipal government, mediate disputes among vendors and, for vendors of prepared foods, determine prices.[20] To sell a particular product, a vendor must be a member of the association representing the interests of those who sell that product. Hence, a member of the Vegetable Vendors' Association cannot sell meat unless she or he becomes a member of the Meat Vendors' Association. To become a member, the vendor solicits the association for membership. Members then collectively decide whether the vendor can or cannot join.[21] Once a member, the association provides the vendor with a stall space to which she or he is granted use rights. When negotiating with the municipal government, the associations focus on ensuring that the government interferes as little as possible with vendors' affairs, maintaining the current rate of stall fees and requesting improved services such as more water taps and bathrooms. Many of the regulations governing selling are therefore in the hands of the vendors themselves, and they were initially implemented to protect their interests. As a result of this internalization of control, there is no tangible source of discontent with an outside group like the municipal government, and there appears to be nothing to protest on a collective basis.

Although the number of customers has increased, so has the number of vendors. In fact, a lack of customers is an important factor that limits vendors' business success. Whenever I pointed out that the number of customers had increased, vendors always countered with "so have the number of vendors." Vendors must compete with one another to make sales, and their ability to do so is not equal. Competition to obtain customers is not manifested through competitive pricing as vendors' retail prices do not differ.[22] Instead, their ability to attract customers and make sales is linked with both the size and location of their stalls. Indeed, when I asked vendors what was most important for selling, many said it was access to a suitable stall. Although the number of marketplace days has extended beyond the original one, the bulk of vendors' sales are made on Sunday morning. Each sale must therefore be completed quickly to take advantage of the highest concentration of customers. Vendors rely on the labour of their household members in making their sales during this busy time. In general, the greater the number of people helping with selling, the greater the volume of goods sold. Only four or five people can work comfortably in even the largest stalls, and most stalls can accommodate only two to three people. Stall size thus limits the number of people who can assist a vendor with her or his sales. Stall location also affects access to customers, and those with the best location are close to the centre of marketplace activity—Plaza Antofagasta. Since these were the first stalls to be allocated to vendors after the construction of the plaza, most vendors who have access to them are long-term sellers in Challapata, and, importantly, they or their close kin were the vendors who constructed Plaza Antofagasta. As a result, it is mostly the long-term and large-scale vendors who have access to the better-located stalls in the marketplace. These stalls most likely will remain within the hands of the families of the vendors who now occupy them. Once a vendor has been allocated a stall, she or he has exclusive rights to this stall. When a vendor retires from selling or moves to a new location, the stall can be, and is, passed on to another family member.[23] Consequently, some vendors and their families have been able to monopolize control over some of the largest and best-located stalls. This control gives them a certain advantage in selling,

because their larger and better-located stalls provide a competitive edge.

Some of these same vendors have also gained a certain amount of economic control in the marketplace by selling wholesale quantities to some of the small-scale vendors. Vendors with sufficient funds to increase the size of their retail business encounter two limitations to the expansion of their retail activities: access to customers and access to labour. Vendors who have maximized their use of both resources and who wish to expand their business must do so through non-retail activities. The route that is sometimes taken is wholesale trade. Most fresh-produce vendors travel to Oruro or Potosí each week to purchase their goods in these cities' wholesale markets. Vendors who sell a very small volume of goods may not make this trip because of the cost and time involved. They have the option of buying their products from other retailers in Challapata. The two largest fruit vendors and two of the largest vegetable vendors provide this service. Unlike other Challapata vendors who purchase produce in Oruro and Potosí, these four vendors regularly purchase more produce than they are able to sell in retail amounts. They do so to sell in wholesale quantities to the small number of vendors who do not travel. The profit gained from this wholesale trade is minimal; nonetheless, the degree of control these four vendors obtain over the produce market gives them some leverage in setting retail prices. Because they pay a lower wholesale price and sell a much larger volume than the small-scale vendors to whom they sell, they can set maximum retail prices. This situation means that these retailers/wholesalers can influence the profits earned by other vendors.

In short, the marketplace is now crowded with vendors. Those vendors who once fought for their rights to adequate selling space now covet these rights and pass them on to their family members. As well, a small group of large-scale vendors has been able to gain some economic influence through both the large volume of produce they sell and their wholesale sales to some small-scale vendors. Thus, economic processes have led to the emergence of a small group of vendors who wield a greater amount of economic power within the marketplace. This reproduction of power, however, is not a duplication of the past, and it is here that a sense of community among vendors plays an important role.

Before the construction of Plaza Antofagasta, shopkeepers tried to prohibit small-scale vendors from selling in the marketplace. Today, there are no such barriers, and space for new stalls is still available for new vendors. Nonetheless, the location of this space is not close to the main areas of marketplace activity. Consequently, although newcomers do have the right to sell once they join a vendors' association, they may find it difficult to sell enough of their stock to earn a profit or even to maintain their businesses. The "community" of vendors in Challapata is in some ways Janus-faced, for, while willing to accept newcomers into the group, it does so as long as they keep their distance. This attribute of inclusion/exclusion is not the only outcome associated with the notion of community. It is also important in masking the differences among vendors.

Today there are no distinctions in social status among the vendors in the Challapata marketplace. Vendors recognize that some of their peers may be richer or poorer than themselves, but they do not see them as socially better or lesser. All are vendors, and all are members of their respective vendors' association. Nor does any one group of vendors have a greater amount of political power than another. All the interests of all vendors are channelled to the municipal government by their associations. Importantly, a small-scale vendor is just as likely as a large-scale vendor to become a member of their respective vendors' association executive. The economic power that some large-scale vendors hold is thus far more discreet than that once held by shopkeepers. Moreover, the relationship between the vendors who sell wholesale and retail and the small-scale vendors to whom they sell is underscored by mutual dependence, which, in turn, ensures that the relationship remains cordial. The former rely on the latter to boost the volume of their sales, and the latter count on the former to conduct their businesses. As a result, large-scale vendors are not threatened by—and perhaps may even welcome—the entry of such small-scale vendors into the marketplace. Small-scale vendors, while they recognize the economic disadvantages of buying in Challapata, appreciate the services provided by vendors who also sell wholesale. Some of these small-scale vendors would not be able to sell without these wholesale services. Furthermore, all the large-scale vendors began their businesses with a much lower volume of sales than they have today. Over time they have been able to accumulate the funds and obtain access to the other resources necessary for their current large volume of sales. They therefore epitomize the success stories that many newcomers to the marketplace may wish to emulate. This symbol of success, which appears achievable by all, was made clear to me on several occasions. One medium-scale fruit vendor, for example, said she wants to become a large-scale vendor like her friend, and she firmly believes that, with time and hard work, she will realize

this goal. Stated succinctly, relations among vendors today, although underscored by competition and, in some instances, economic power of one over another, are also rooted in common interests and models.

In short, the current political complacency of vendors is, in part, the outcome of some of the characteristics and features of the local marketplace that were put into motion with the construction of Plaza Antofagasta. Today there are no local or national government policies that directly regulate vendors' selling activities. Instead, vendors govern themselves. The result is that the common interests shared by vendors have taken a backseat, in their relations among each other, to the competitive aspects of these same relations. This competition is expressed through petty quarrels between individual vendors, which the associations seek to resolve. Vendors do not enter the marketplace as economic equals, and some vendors, because of their well-located stalls and superior access to other resources, are better equipped to compete than others. As well, some large-scale vendors have obtained a certain amount of economic power within the marketplace. These economic differences among vendors, however, are smoothed over by their common membership in vendors' associations and their shared occupation and status as vendors. In other words, social, political and economic processes over time have shaped the original intent of Plaza Antofagasta to serve as a space in which vendors could assert their right to sell. Over the course of a generation, inequalities among vendors have re-emerged. Nevertheless, unlike in the past, there is no overt conflict between relatively powerful and powerless vendors because of both their shared status as vendors and the mechanisms of control having been placed in the hands of the vendors themselves.

The Politics of Space and the Reproduction of Inequalities

The case I have presented here is not unique. Elayne Zorn (2004), for example, documented how *campesinos* of Taquile Island in Peru took control over both tourism on the island and the sale of household-produced textiles. Over time, inequalities among island residents emerged because of differences in access to the resources necessary to engage in tourism and textile production. In both my case and that presented by Zorn, we find economically disadvantaged groups collectively mobilizing to assert their right to gain a livelihood. Their struggles and the practices they sought to implement are similar to those which Escobar (2008), Escobar and Harcourt (2005) and Gibson-Graham (2005, 2006) mention in their discussions of the alternative possibilities embedded within the economic practices of disadvantaged groups. Yet the long-term outcomes in both cases suggest that we should not be too quick in celebrating such activities. Economic and social processes have resulted in the reproduction of the inequalities both struggles sought to eliminate.

In the case of Challapata, today we encounter a marketplace congested with sellers where a small number of large-scale vendors have gained some economic power. In contrast to the previous generation of vendors, who, facing similar conditions, collectively mobilized to assert their right to sell, vendors today are complacent about the inequalities within the marketplace. In this paper I have argued that this complacency is a result of several features of Challapata's marketplace that are, in turn, the outcome of the struggle to build Plaza Antofagasta. Through the establishment of their associations, vendors as an organized group gained a degree of control over marketplace rules and regulations to protect their interests. Consequently, there is no tangible source of discontent with the municipal government, and from the perspective of most vendors, there appears to be nothing to protest on a collective basis. With nothing to collectively protest, vendors have become focused on the competitive nature of their interrelationships.

I also suggested that vendors' associations have served to mask inequalities among vendors. Unlike in the past, when vendors competed with a group of economically and politically powerful shopkeepers, vendors today compete among their peers. Hence, although vendors recognize that they are economically differentiated, they are all members of their respective vendors' association, and they share the same occupation and social status. Moreover, like the neighbourhood associations of gated communities (Low 2006) and the property owners of business improvement district associations (Mitchell and Staeheli 2006), Challapata vendors, via their associations, dictate who can sell and where they can sell in the marketplace. For newcomers seeking to gain a livelihood through selling, the outcome is a disadvantaged position within the marketplace. Today all these inequalities are made somewhat opaque by vendors' belief both in their common status and in the possibility of success for all. In other words, the notion of community not only conceals inequalities among members but also enforces practices of exclusion.

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Notes

1 I returned to Challapata for a very brief visit (about three days in total) in May and July 2006. My analysis is largely based on the data obtained in 1998–99.

2 Many recent publications about Bolivia have focused on identity politics and, in particular, the politics associated with indigenous identity (e.g., Albro 2005; Gustafson 2009; Gutiaerrez Aguilar 2014; Postero 2007). Residents of Challapata do not use ethnic or racial designations when using identity labels for themselves or others. Instead, they identify themselves and others with labels associated with occupation and place. Vendors in Challapata refer to themselves as *vendadoras* (vendors) and *Challapateños*, and they refer to their rural neighbours as *campesinos* (farmers).

3 Fruit and vegetable vendors' businesses can be grouped by size, from small to large. Small-scale vendors sell less than 1,000 pounds of produce each weekend, medium-scale vendors sell between 1,000 and 4,000 pounds, and large-scale vendors sell over 4,000 pounds. The profits that vendors earn also vary and are dependent on both their profit margins and the volume sold. Some small-scale vendors will earn less than 100 bolivianos each weekend, whereas some large-scale vendors will earn hundreds of bolivianos each weekend. The income of vendors therefore varies along a continuum from low to high.

4 I discuss vendors' business goals and the decisions they make elsewhere (Gordon 2009).

5 Bolivia has a long, rich history of political protest. During my stay in 1998–99 there were city-wide strikes in La Paz and Oruro, transportation strikes, teacher strikes and numerous roadblocks associated with farmer protests.

6 I discuss the social relations associated with selling elsewhere (Gordon 2011).

7 Although officially named associations, these are closed-shop unions.

8 Vendors are involved in a number of different political relationships. I discuss these relationships in detail elsewhere (Gordon 2011).

9 In 1999 vendors paid the municipal government six bolivianos annually and 50 centavos each weekend for access to their stalls. Both fees constitute a very small amount of money. At that time, six bolivianos was the standard price for lunch, and 50 centavos was the price of a small snack.

10 According to Bolivian census data, Challapata's population was 1,887 in 1900, 2,329 in 1950, 4,307 in 1976, 6,661 in 1992 (República de Bolivia 1995) and 7,683 in 2001 (República de Bolivia N.d.).

11 This transformation from subsistence to commercial production coincides with changes in smallholder agricultural production in other areas of the Bolivian altiplano (Buechler and Buechler 1971; Buechler 1972; Clark 1968; McEwen 1975; Preston 1978; Wennergren and Whitaker 1975).

12 In theory, property is passed on through partible inheritance. In practice, one son usually inherits the farm and is able to engage in farming as a principal occupation. Other sons, as well as daughters if they have no spouse, will have access to small plots on the farm where they can cultivate products, usually potatoes, for subsistence.

13 All unions were banned by the military dictatorship of General Banzer in 1974 (Dunkerley 1984).

14 The plaza is a very large square made of cement.

15 Townspeople said that these families had relocated to large cities in Bolivia or left the country altogether.

16 According to vendors, there were 10 fruit and 7 vegetable vendors when Plaza Antofagasta was constructed. In 1998–99 there were approximately 35 fruit vendors, 60 vegetable vendors and a total of more than 200 vendors of foodstuffs.

17 I do not have 1970 population statistics for the rural area served by the marketplace; however, the rural population did increase from approximately 31,000 in 1992 (República de Bolivia 1995) to 42,000 in 2001 (República de Bolivia no date).

18 Based on data obtained from the 1992 census, one government document states that the incidence of poverty among the population of the three provinces, Avaroa, L. Cabrera and S. Pagador, that constitute the area for which Challapata is a commercial centre was 93.5, 96.8 and 91.1 per cent respectively. The same figure for the total population of Bolivia was 70.5 per cent. Infant mortality rates in the three provinces were 145 (province of Avaroa), 130 (province of L. Cabrera) and 115 (province of S. Pagador) per 1,000 births. The infant mortality rate for the total population of Bolivia was 75 per 1,000 births (República de Bolivia 1995).

19 See Dunkerley 2007 and Kohl and Farthing 2006 for more recent discussions of Bolivian neoliberalism.

20 I use the term *prepared foods* to refer to the cooked meals and snacks that some vendors sell. The association of prepared food vendors employs this price control in order to eliminate price competition. The prices of all other products, except one, are not regulated. The exception is the price of bread, which is regulated by the municipal government. I was told that municipal governments throughout Bolivia control the price of bread.

21 I do not know of anyone being denied membership in an association, and I suspect that most solicitations for membership are granted.

22 See Gordon 2010 for a detailed analysis of the processes underlying price formation in Challapata.

23 Some vendors have increased the size of their stalls via this inheritance practice. Some vendors will also register their children as members of their association. This practice ensures that the children will have access to a stall if they take up the occupation of selling and allows a vendor to increase her or his stall size.

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