

“Who counts, rules”: Comment on Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, “Politics of achieving: hawkers and pavement dwellers in Calcutta”

Miguel Angel Centeno

© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

More than 35 years ago, Steven Lukes reminded us that power is never a simple and superficial thing. It is never enough to know or explain what happens in “smoke filled rooms”; we need to also ask who was and was not there, and most importantly, how their various interests and preferences were shaped and expressed. This continued the tradition from Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, which sought to penetrate how knowledge itself and its construction could be used to control and exploit. Foucault went so far as to imply that power was knowledge and vice versa, while Bourdieu made the “symbolic capital” of the state the center of his analysis of political rule. In a beautiful encapsulation of these visions, James Scott demonstrated that the lenses through which the state “saw” the society around it (censuses, maps) shaped the definition of aspirations and the design of policies. How one sees determines what one does.

Bandyopadhyay’s article demonstrates the value of such insights and forces us to ask questions about how the liberal dreams of markets and democracy play out in the streets of the developing world.

To the “poverty tourist” being shown the folkloric local color of the Calcutta streets, the social and political distinctions between the hawkers and dwellers she might encounter would be invisible. The gap between the observer and the two objects of her gaze is so great as to make the lived differences of those selling goods and those merely living on the streets apparently inconsequential. Both disappear in the morass of poverty and apparent powerlessness. The opening of any path open to political participation, any space left for self-realization and communal protection would seem progress. But democratic action comes in many guises, and democratic waves do not necessarily lift all ships. Bandyopadhyay shows us that even within powerlessness, there are hierarchies and strategies and that some subaltern groups

M. A. Centeno (✉)
Department of Sociology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08540, USA
e-mail: cenmiga@princeton.edu

retain a significantly differential degree of agency in defining their relationship with the state.

As I see it, the heart of the article documents how the politics of knowledge and its control determine outcomes. Neither the dwellers nor the hawkers represent key constituencies and neither appears to offer the state enough promises of votes or threats of violence with which to exact political leverage. Instead, the hawkers have reproduced some of the functions and structures of the state in order to develop what might be called a junior partnership with it. If they cannot claim any privilege as political or social actors, they may do so through their organizational form. In perhaps the critical example of this kind of empowerment, the hawkers' syndicate is responsible for producing and issuing the identity documents needed to placate policemen and regulators. The HSC thereby appropriates the political role (and there is no denying that it is a political one) of deciding and labeling who belongs and who does not.

The construction of the HSC also points out the error with taking informality at face value. No matter our attempt at analytical sophistication, social scientists tend to think in dichotomous categories. Thus, groups and social sectors are formal or informal, organized or unorganized. The experience of the hawkers makes clear that even if it is not recognized by the state (or taxed by it, which is often the same thing), the informal economy does not exist in an institutional vacuum. Property rights and market niches need to be mutually recognized: this is my corner and only I get sell these goods. The HSC serves to safeguard these and even possesses that ultimate Weberian characteristic of a complex organization: a sophisticated record keeping apparatus and archive. Precisely because it does this, it is then recognized by the state as a functional equivalent. Without necessarily any legal standing (Bandyopadhyay is not clear on this point), it assumes many of the functions and characteristics of a state agency. This simultaneously gives the HSC a great deal of power and legitimacy; since it can keep records, it can determine who fits and who does not. The surveys conducted by the HSC may be political tools, but they have the requisite backing of expert knowledge and the appropriate technical patina of "social fact."

The lesson on the footpath is a familiar one from labor history: organize, organize, organize. The power of institutionalization is never clearer than in the account of how the HSC can determine which parts of the relevant areas are open for inspection and tours. As with many arenas of social life (for example, college admissions, tenure files, and bank balance sheets), the power of defining the framework of judgment and the empirical sample is decisive. Only what is seen exists in politics, no matter how biased or deceptive that vision may be. Perhaps not surprisingly, this form of organization and level of power comes with its own Kafkaesque dysfunctions as when the HSC prohibits access to records as these may "expose the inner contradictions of the committee." No obstinate and officious government clerk could have said it better.

The institutionalized visibility granted the HSC has its own negation: the invisibility of the dwellers. Where prior to the 1970s they had been the subject of government policies and efforts, the rise of a hawkers' organization and the absence of an equivalent for the dwellers makes their presence invisible. Since they are not organized, they do not exist. They are not counted, so they do not count. One

missing strand in the story is why the dwellers do not replicate the institutional strategy of the hawkers. Certainly the years of welfarist reforms by the urban agencies would have left some organizational residue? What explains the dwellers' apparent silence? Is it that their transformation into the cinematized objects of pity disempowered them? Does their scattering through the city during the daylight hours make it structurally impossible to organize? Do they lack the resources to do so (archives, after all, require papers, clips, pencils, and a room in which to house them all)? Or have there been confrontations and a decision made by the state to recognize one set of institutions and not another? Here I have a small complaint to register: while the personalities and agents behind the HSC are well drawn, we get a less clear picture of which agencies are involved here. The CMDA, the Congress party and the Left Front make auxiliary appearances, but it is not clear who or what represents them on the footpaths. Who are the enforcers? Who is the doing the reading of the institutionalized material? This is an important missing aspect of the story: why have the hawkers been able to apparently monopolize the production of “local knowledge”? How was the vacuum created? These questions are particularly important in light of very different patterns observed in other Indian cities.

Bandyopadhyay does provide one possible answer and this has to do very much with the historical context in which these developments take place. The dwellers appear to have been the focus of government attention until the 1990s. The “story of forgetting” told here reminds us of the iron law of oligarchy no matter the ideological colors of the organization. Since the pavement dwellers represented something of an empirical affront to the claims of Left Front exceptionalism, their presence had to be ignored. Since their existence indicated the continued problems of the landless in Golden Bengal, it had to be erased from the visible record. If problems or challenges remain unacknowledged, then uncomfortable truths or difficult challenges can be ignored.

This was made infinitely easier because of the neoliberalization of India during these years. Consider that one characteristic of neoliberalism is the supplanting of political by economic rights; the interests of the customer and the producer trump those of the voter. Moreover, the psychological and physical comfort of those whose money and approval is critical for the state (i.e., the rich and the foreign) is more important than the intrinsic rights of the locals.

The dwellers offered no currency accepted in the neoliberal market: their voting block was dispersed, they had no money to invest or even with which to consume, nor any skills to offer the global market place. All they possess (literally) is their claim to an abstract Indian citizenship, but they belong to an “old” or “traditional” India that is supposed to have disappeared. Their very existence contradicts the modernity narrative of an India transformed. They are citizens of the wrong country. Contrast this with the narrative presented by the hawkers: perhaps equally poor (yet what may appear to be marginal differences make a huge difference for those on the bottom), but exhibiting that most important of attributes in the neoliberal narrative: entrepreneurship. These are not huddled masses waiting for Patrick Swayze to save them, but actors imbued with a form of protestant ethic. Moreover, they also possess the wherewithal to establish themselves as *bona fide* actors and even wear latex gloves when the tourists come to gawk. *These* are the deserving poor.

One might quibble with this article. As someone who has never been to Calcutta, for example, I have to accept that the critical distinction on the footpath is between dweller and hawker. Are these the most relevant categories or are other identities hidden by this apparent functional dichotomy? Alternative identities or agendas are not addressed. Yet, the insights remain: how governability can take many shapes and how forms of representation matter. Perhaps most importantly Bandyopadhyay reminds us to look beyond the simple categories of poor or disposed and note that the same political and institutional forces shaping the life of those who reside in Calcutta's high rises are also relevant for those far below.