Rejoinder: Contradictions and Irony in Policy Research

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We have been stimulated by this exchange on both personal and intellectual levels. Intellectual pursuits have been subdivided by scholars with various interests. However, specialization is not in itself an evil, except when it constrains fruitful analysis of empirical issues that have real-world implications for social policy and people's lives. Problems of social life and social policy typically speak to and provoke scholars of all kinds. Hence opportunities to investigate empirical interests from a variety of perspectives are opportunities for us all to learn the strengths and limitations of our tools.

We wish this kind of discussion about the importance of the informal sector and marketplaces had occurred before the destruction of the Maxwell Street Market. This exchange might have further informed policy decisions and perhaps avoided some of the negative effects of dismantling the market. Nonetheless, we thank those who commented for their thoughtful responses. We agree with many but not all of their views, as the responses below suggest. Our methodology involved integrating ethnography and analytical economics; throughout, we have tried to strike a reasonable balance between analysis and participation.

ECONOMICS, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Our article had the modest but difficult goal of combining social scientific methods to estimate benefits for an otherwise unmeasured income-earning activity in the informal economy. Commentators did not address the difficulties that might inhere in combining disciplines to answer such questions. Since both commentators brought particular interests, disciplinary affiliation, and knowledge about our work to their task, we are not surprised to find different views of what we accomplished and the problems that remain.

The research one provides depends on the questions one is asking. Halperin is correct in the points made regarding studies of markets and marketing. Indeed, the connection between vendors at Chicago's Maxwell Street Market and other parts of the local and international economy are salient, but not considered in this article. We had the more modest goal of providing a measurement of benefits that would be lost if an apparently scuffy street market were dismantled. This study was intended to serve as input into a public policy decision affecting thousands of people. Many of the topics Halperin wanted covered (e.g., organization of vending, the coordination of sources of income, gender differences in vending, ethnic differences in vending) are the subject of work in progress by Morales,1 who will be engaged next year in a Ford Foundation Fellowship to produce a book manuscript from this research.
So the question we address is not the typical anthropological investigation. Any well-trained social scientist (and many journalists) can establish the historical and comparative relevance of the people they study. What might sound like “naive” ethnography is in fact the collection and use of ethnographic data to make a particular argument about social policy. Although this is “nonstandard” reporting practice, it is not unknown; nor should its rigor be questioned a priori.

Context does certainly make a difference. The success or failure of policy initiatives often hinges on how appropriately a problem is understood and conceptualized. As we have demonstrated, one can use carefully generated ethnographic data about economic problems to influence the decision-making processes of a city council, a university, and many citizens.

Other policy questions raised by this work hinge on what is meant by “institutional arrangements” and “structures,” terms that permeate discussion of economic arrangements and activities, but reify or obfuscate the activities people are involved with in day-to-day life. Definitions of these terms are implicit in much social science research; any useful efforts at policy research must carefully delineate how concepts like structure map onto people’s lives. Judicious use of such terms is particularly important in interdisciplinary work; hence our caution in proceeding initially in this descriptive fashion. In sum, our project was not theoretically inclined, as is other work we are doing on the market. Rather, it had the modest goal of measuring benefits. Although measuring benefits is not typical anthropological reporting, the data will soon be applied to that typical stock-in-trade of ethnography, the monograph.

Surprisingly enough, the mere measurement of benefits is a contentious card in the policy game. We used this measurement (apart from other market preservation activities we were involved in) as a legitimizing tactic to defend the market. The first two authors were very involved in trying to save the market; they attempted to organize support for the vendors; they collaborated on producing lectures and bringing vendors of both genders and various ethnicities together. The authors spoke in city council hearings, wrote newspaper editorials—all to no avail. A description of this work and the difficulties encountered in trying to save the Maxwell Street Market is partly contained in Counts’s forthcoming book. Again, another paper could be written about that experience. Space limitations and *EDQ’s* desire to remove the “advocacy voice” precluded a discussion of attempts to save the market.

Halperin observed that little should be inferred from two weeks’ observation. This is certainly the case, and we were leery about sharing relatively casual observations regarding the “new” market. Our benefit estimates were derived considerably before this survey of the “new” market. However, we decided to include such estimates at the request of *EDQ* reviewers, although we were careful to indicate the need for systematic work in the future. Editorial voice walks a thin line between evidence and rhetoric; we think this exchange is fruitful, and we hope more editors will be motivated to practice with these tensions.

Finally, we are not embarrassed to say that we worked hard to preserve the market in its past location. Many reasons for its demise can be discovered in the reasons for its existence: People must spend so much time in making ends meet that they have little time for other parts of civil society. In this instance, vendors—those most interested in preserving the market—had the least amount of time to give to that project. Ironic, isn’t it?

**COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF LOCATION DECISIONS**

While Halperin fears that we are detached academics, Wivel accuses us of overzealous partisanship: damned if we do, and damned if we don’t. Perhaps the reader will conclude that we achieved the average of these two assessments—a balanced combination of participation and constructive analysis.

Of course, we agree that the decision to dismantle the market should have been subjected to full and rigorous cost-benefit analysis. Both the city of Chicago and the University of Illinois, as public institutions, had the responsibility to carry out such research as part of their own planning processes. The city and the university had several departments, filled with academics, planners, administrators, and lawyers, working on this project; they had ample budgets for analyzing the realities of the Maxwell Street Market. The simple fact is neither institution considered seriously
the possibility that the market generated sizable benefits for those involved. Rather, there were unsubstantiated claims in the press of the prevalence of “stolen goods, rotting vegetables, and pornography,” as Wiewel has shown in his comments. The Maxwell Street Market—to us and many market users—had no more of these problems than did other markets or other inner-city neighborhoods, and what level of such problems the market had could have been easily and cheaply solved with a little management and supervision. We were always surprised how well market participants regulated themselves. On Sunday, with 20,000 shoppers and about 1,000 vendors, only two police officers on foot maintained order for the whole area.

Under these circumstances, our analytical work was consciously and explicitly focused on the benefits, not the costs, of the Maxwell Street Market. The purpose was to explore the stakes of participants, vendors, and customers, as well as those who received indirect benefits. Public decisions must be sensitive—not only to the net efficiency of a change, but also to its distributional implications. The quantification of benefits generated by the Maxwell Street Market made clear that its shutting down would destroy significant benefits. Most telling, these benefits accrued to a group of Chicagoans who could hardly afford such losses. Documenting these realities strikes us as a highly legitimate academic exercise.

We did not attempt a cost-benefit analysis. But if we had, Wiewel might have been surprised at the results. The costs for allowing the market to exist intact would be the modest amounts the university would have had to incur to oversee the cleanup, parking, and security one day of the week, or the extra costs incurred by putting its future research labs in another location. However, efficient use of the Maxwell Street site has never been the issue motivating its detractors. The university has no need, in the foreseeable future, for the land in question. The university has presented only an embarrassingly sketchy plan for the land, most of which will be left for intramural athletic fields. This profligate use of urban land continues a long tradition at the university, which has consistently insisted on constructing facilities on subsidized land at lower densities than appropriate to its urban setting. At best, the university’s current plan could be described as land banking—an activity quite consistent with the continued existence of the market at its old site.

Wiewel makes clear, if only in passing, the real reason for the destruction of the market: “The mayor’s insistence that the market be moved.” And why did the mayor insist? UIC was pushed into this land deal because the mayor and the ward alderman wanted to accelerate gentrification. The people of the area were too poor, disorganized, and politically weak to fight it. The issue has never been the net benefits generated by the site itself, or even the minor costs the market would have created for the university, but the externalities the site creates for nearby gentrification.

The city and university have attempted to justify their maneuvers by creating a “replacement” market. It is smaller in size, higher in costs, higher in vendor fees, and could be scheduled for elimination by new public transit yards. Policies for operating this new market can still be changed; therefore, “the salience of the arguments” about the benefits of the market has not disappeared. Wiewel admonishes us because our estimates for losses did not change after the city and UIC announced they would set up such a replacement. In the article, we make clear that changes in our estimates must depend on the future record of the new market. Unfortunately, we doubt changes in our estimates will be necessary. Our calculations assumed that about 90% of the vendors would relocate somewhere in the metro area (but with low to high losses); that about one-third relocated to the new Canal Street Market is consistent with these assumptions. In the absence of a serious effort to replicate the old market in terms of fees, size, parking, and access to public transit, we suspect no serious revisions will be required.

The circumstances surrounding the destruction of Maxwell Street are not unique to Chicago. There appears a nationwide trend (e.g., New York City, Washington, D.C.) to make war on street vendors and informal markets in order to contain the consequences of economic restructuring. Poor, marginalized, unkempt people, struggling to survive economically, are to be kept hidden—to be forced into minimum wage jobs, welfare, or prison.

The Maxwell Street Market and markets like it around the country are cultural amenities and economic engines, fueling opportunity for those hardest to employ; they are urban treasures to be preserved. We hope our article constitutes an example to those interested in interdisciplinary work. We hope it will help others trying to promote the open marketplace of our cities.
NOTES


4. The city is now trying to encourage the university to use the vacated market site for construction of a new Chicago Bears stadium. Now, after the market has been dismantled, the city contends there is plenty of other land nearby to accommodate the university’s expansion plans. See Fran Spielman, “City to Prod UIC on Bears Plan,” Chicago Sun Times, June 23, 1995, p. 14.

5. The new market has been operating almost a year. A vendor at the new Canal Market calculated that it took over three hours each week going through the city’s bureaucratic process to obtain a space compared to zero hours at the old market. For vendors without flexible work arrangements, that is a prohibitive barrier.