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ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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Abstract

The ethnic identity of the dominant types of sellers in an urban farmers' market in St. Louis, Missouri is analyzed. German farmers and Italian merchants dominate the produce sector of the market, representing 68 out of 87 full-time regular firms. This division of labor is explained with reference to a model of ecological competition, comparative studies of ethnicity in marketing, and the history of St. Louis.

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1. Introduction

This paper will show how the ethnic identity of sellers in a modern urban farmers' market in St. Louis, Missouri reveals the complex cultural history of the city. It is well known that immigrant populations have tended to move through a series of occupations as they became established, over generations, in their new society (Hutchinson 1956). At any point in time some people may be found in occupations characteristic of a more significant proportion of the group at an earlier stage, thus representing a form of cultural and economic "survival". Here we will draw a parallel between ethnic types in occupations and ecological species in order to use a model of ecological competition to analyze the distribution of sellers in the modern market.

Soulard Farmers Market is a vigorous retail produce market occupying about two city blocks in a neighborhood of mixed heavy industry and decaying housing in the southeastern part of St. Louis City. The market was originally founded about 1780 on land which belonged to Antoine and Julia Soulard, from whom the market drew its name. The present market structure (the second since 1845) was built by the city in 1928. It consists of a brick building forming the central horizontal bar of an "H" whose legs are long sheds built upon concrete bases about three feet above ground level. The market has 283 numbered stall-spaces mainly occupied by 87 regular firms.

specializing primarily in fresh produce (most firms occupy more than one stall-space). Six enclosed shops in the central brick building sell meat, spices, and prepared foods. In addition to the 87 regular firms who rent stalls on a yearly basis, a few vendors rent stalls on a daily basis to sell trinkets, jewelry, clothing, and other non-food products. From about twelve to twenty-five daily vendors use fewer than five percent of the stalls, occupying only a small niche in what is otherwise a market reserved for the retailing of foodstuff.

Although the market is formally open from Tuesday through Saturday all year, few firms sell all that time. On the average, most regular firms are open for business from Friday afternoon to Saturday evening throughout the summer busy season. During the peak months there may be almost 400 workers coming equally from St. Louis city and suburbs. In the winter most of the firms remain open during reduced hours.

When sellers prepare to open for business (usually before sunrise), they back their trucks up to the external side of the sheds and unload produce directly onto the rear floor of the stalls, using the trucks as storage. The front of the stalls, facing the inner aisles, consist of wide display tables upon which sellers arrange their fresh fruit and vegetables. Some sellers hawk their produce in loud voices; others are content with the hand-lettered price signs that most stalls display. During selling hours the shed aisles are crowded with shoppers who generally seem to enjoy the challenge of comparison shopping and the bustle of a traditional market place.

Most of the 87 regular firms at the market are family operations. Seventy-four are staffed by members of the same family, where teen-aged

members, parents, and grandparents often work side by side. Selling at Soulard Market is a tradition for many of these families, some having held stalls for three and four generations. Because of the stability of these family firms and because they are located at the same stalls each week, they attract the repeat business of loyal customers (Eckstein 1977).

There are four types of regular firms at Soulard Market occupying three discrete economic niches: farmers sell vegetables and fruit that are grown locally; produce merchants buy fresh fruit and vegetables shipped into the St. Louis area, transport the produce across the city from the local wholesale distribution point, break bulk, and resell it to consumers at Soulard Market; and other merchants sell foodstuff other than vegetables and fruit, such as meats, dairy products, fish, bakery goods, and prepared foods. Although a few regular firms combine farming and produce merchandizing (the fourth type), most of the regular firms clearly occupy only one of these three economic niches.

By far the most popular economic operation at Soulard Market is the selling of fresh produce. Eighty percent of the regular firms retail fruit and vegetables. One-third of the regular firms are farmers, forty percent are produce merchants, and almost eleven percent combine these two activities. Less than one-fifth of the regular firms sell foodstuff other than fresh fruit and vegetables (see Table I). Of the 369 people employed by the regular firms at Soulard Market, all but 71 work to sell fresh produce. Table I indicates that half of the workers on the market work for produce merchants, and twenty percent work for farmers. Thus the main economic niches at Soulard Market are occupied by

produce farmers and produce merchants.

The ethnic backgrounds of the principal operators for the regular firms at Soulard Market are shown in Table II. Nearly half of the firms at the market are run by people who identify themselves as being of German descent. Most of the German families are third and fourth generation immigrants. Another thirty percent of the regular firms are operated by people of Italian descent, most of whom are children of Sicilian immigrants who arrived in St. Louis since 1900. People of German and Italian descent operate almost eighty percent of the regular firms on the market.

Of significance here is that the ethnic backgrounds of the chief operators correlate with the economic niches they occupy. Almost all of the Italian-heritage families are produce merchants, who resell shipped fruit and vegetables from the local wholesale market, and most of the farmers at Soulard Market are of German descent (see Table II).

2. Economic Niches, Ethnicity, and Competitive Exclusion

Studies in sociology have dealt with the differences in occupations among first and second generation immigrants to the United States cities (e.g., Hutchinson 1956; Lieberman 1963). Lieberman mentions various factors that relate occupations to ethnic groups: primarily the skills and education of the immigrants, the skills and training required by different occupations, and the period of arrival of the ethnic group into the changing economy of the receiving society. The occupations characteristic of an ethnic group at one point in time will influence the occupations of later generations descended from that group (Lieberman presents statistical measures of this

tendency for several United States cities).

In anthropology Frederik Barth showed that three different ethnic groups in a peasant economy of North Pakistan occupied discrete, non-competing economic niches (1956). The basic principle Barth used has since been labelled "the competitive exclusion principle" (Odum 1971:213; Hardin 1960). Stated broadly this principle says that two species will rarely share the same niche. Stated more precisely it says that where there is competition between species who are ecologically similar, each species tends to narrow its niche to focus on the conditions that are optimum for it.

In biology this principle was tested extensively by Park (1962) in a classic series of experiments using two similar species of beetles, whose food and habitat was a simple jar of flour. By varying heat and humidity within narrow ranges Park was able to predict with exact success which species would expand to occupy the entire niche, eliminating the other, after equal proportions of both were placed in the jar.

In economics the competitive exclusion principle plays an indispensable role (Hardin 1960:1296), although Hardin notes that economists seldom state the principle explicitly. For our purposes, ecological niches are seen as occupational niches and speciation can be replaced with the concept of ethnic types. These alterations in language allow the principle to be applied to human societies, as long as the functional relations between the variables are similar.

In Souard Market there are two basic economic niches that deal with produce. The selling of locally-grown farm produce and the merchandising of shipped fruit and vegetables. The niches are discrete because they

represent different types of capital and labor investments, or different economic ways of life. The various ethnic populations that exist in the St. Louis area represent the different groups in competition for the two niches. This is not to say that the entire population of Italian heritage (hereafter Italian population) is economically distinct from the entire German, or Croatian, or Irish population. Nor do we claim that economic specialization is inexorably transmitted through ethnic heritage, or that every ethnic group will always have an occupation or set of occupations uniquely associated with it. We do suggest that the old concept of "cultural survival" can have meaning with respect to ethnic groups and occupations. When an ethnic group immigrates to a region, enough members of that group may take the same type of jobs so that the group becomes associated with a certain occupation. Workers in that traditional occupation dwindle in time until only a small proportion of the ethnic group remains in that economic niche. We suggest that today within many ethnic groups a subgroup can be found practicing an occupation that is "traditional," meaning learned through a chain of relatives. The importance of viewing the traditional occupation as a survival is that it reveals the history of the group. This paper is concerned with explaining the relation of ethnic groups and occupational niche at Soulard Market. The immigration history of the ethnic groups is the key to our explanation.

3. An Overview of German and Italian Immigration to St. Louis

In the beginning of the Nineteenth century St. Louis was a small town settled by French and English-American pioneers and traders. In 1830 its

population was only 6,000 while riverine cities more to the East, such as Cincinnati, had grown to 25,000. Beginning at this time St. Louis grew explosively in response to foreign immigration. By 1850 over half the people in the city were immigrants and the city was the most foreign-born city in the nation (Sullivan 1977:65). The German immigrant population alone outnumbered St. Louis native Missourians (op cit). In the early Nineteenth century social and economic conditions in Germany caused heavy emigration. Thousands of German immigrants poured into the Missouri area, lured in part by the idyllic descriptions of the Missouri "paradise" published by Dr. Gottfried Duden. He had lived on a farm in the area for a few years and then returned to Germany where he wrote about his experiences (Olson 1972). Various emigration societies were formed in Germany which organized people to form almost-utopian communities in the New World. These societies (such as the "Glessener Gessellschaft") emigrated as groups, bought huge plots of land, and formed instant towns complete with German language newspapers and schools. Towns nearby St. Louis, such as Hermann, Missouri and Belleville, Illinois were settled by these emigration societies. The German immigrants were attracted by cheap, fertile farmland and the good river communications afforded by the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and Illinois rivers near St. Louis. In contrast with the later waves of immigrants from Russia and Southern Europe, the German immigrants were middle class from the beginning of their settlement in the New World. They valued their German culture and built German communities in which that language was spoken more than English. In this regard it is significant that by 1864 German language classes were offered in the St. Louis city school district at least once a day (Olson 1972). For a while the immigration societies had a dream of

establishing a German state of the union in the United States, but this plan never was successful. By the beginning of the twentieth century the German-American population was solidly entrenched in the St. Louis metropolitan area (the mayor of the city was German-born in 1875). They were skilled workers, tradesmen, and manufacturers in the urban areas and farmers in the surrounding rural areas.

Most of the farmer-merchants of Soulard Market today are descendants of the Germans who settled the farmland around St. Louis city. Most are third and fourth generation (or more) who have inherited the family farm and business. These German families have an "edge" over other groups at Soulard today in occupying the farming-merchant niche because their ancestors immigrated at a time when farmland was cheap and available. They came in sufficient numbers, were interested in settling in farm communities, and were financially able to buy the land.

The Italian immigration experience was quite different. Emigration from Italy did not begin until the late nineteenth century, stimulated by increasingly severe economic conditions in Italy. The majority of the emigrants were from Southern Italy, travelling as single males seeking economic betterment in the New World. Chain migration, where a patron (padroni) recruited workers from his home area to labor together in some industry, and serial migration of adults in a kinship network created a tight clustering of Italians in "Little Italies" in North Eastern cities of the U. S. (MacDonald and MacDonald 1974). After they had established themselves economically men often returned to Italy to obtain brides.

By 1920 there were over 9,000 Italian immigrants settled in two St. Louis neighborhoods. One was founded by laborers from Northern Italy who had been brought over to work the clay mines in an area southwest of the city. These people built homes on the surface over the mines in a neighborhood known as "The Hill," which persists today as a solidly Italian community. The second Italian community consisted of immigrants from Sicily, who lived in a run-down neighborhood just north of downtown St. Louis known as "The Ghetto." This neighborhood was subdivided into a "Little Italy" of Italian immigrants and a "Little Jerusalem" of Russian-Jewish immigrants. In general Italians worked as laborers in the clay mines, in the growing shoe, clothing, and furniture industries, and as petty traders and vendors (O'Leary 1977).

Almost all of the Italian produce merchants at Soulard Market are descended from families who once lived in the "Little Italy" of downtown St. Louis. They started their own business and learned the occupation from relatives or friends. More than a quarter of the Italian merchants on the market today are foreign born, and half are first generation United States citizens. The competitive exclusion principle suggests that these Italian immigrants were probably more efficient produce merchants than other groups and so expanded their presence on the market. It does not, however, imply what that original "edge" might have been that allowed the Italians, rather than other immigrant groups, to gain this niche in the market. Soulard Market was a vital part of a flourishing neighborhood at the turn of the century (Schoenberg and Cummins 1975). Eastern European immigrants were settling the Soulard neighborhood and attempting to establish themselves economically, much like the Italians were doing at that time in "Little Italy" and on

"The Hill." Why didn't the Czech immigrants who lived in the immediate neighborhood of Souldard Market fill the produce merchandizing niche? The Italians who worked on the market lived across the city, so proximity to Souldard Market does not explain the Italian advantage.

4. Trade and Ethnicity

Some comparative studies can point to where to look for an explanation of the original edge Italians had in produce marketing. Trade in multi-ethnic communities is often monopolized by one ethnic group rather than being represented in the population in accordance with the proportion of each sub-group in the total. Cohen (1971) for example, discussed the role of Hausa traders in the Ibaden cattle market. He showed how problems concerning the maintenance of trust and credit in trading chains and the difficulty of obtaining valuable information about supply and demand were ameliorated by the fact that traders were all part of the same ethnic group. Schwimmer studied the marketing system of southeastern Ghana and found the role of ethnicity to be contingent on other, more traditionally "economic" variables such as the nature of production and distribution (either centralized or dispersed) (1976). Most of the ethnic dominance that he found could more easily be explained by locational advantage in production (for example, the ethnic groups which dominated the fish trade happened to live on the coast). He therefore felt less need to call upon social or cultural variables to account for the importance of ethnicity in trade.

The general issue is the importance of shared understandings and the quality of interpersonal relations as against objective economic factors,

such as the locational specificity of production or distribution, in explaining the importance of ethnicity in trade. We may hypothesize that a localized ethnic group will monopolize an economic niche if the production zone or main transfer point is located within the group's residential area. Conversely, a commodity produced and distributed in a decentralized manner will not (ceteris paribus) facilitate ethnic monopolization. The ceteris paribus conditions include an absence of significant differences in socio-economic status that would affect a group's ability to meet the threshold requirements of trade and, of course, the obvious requirement that no group have exclusive possession of esoteric knowledge required for a trade. After a group successfully monopolizes an occupation, the traditional culturological factors of shared understandings, existence of trust and multiplex ties between individuals facilitate the continued monopolization of that niche.

In our study we believe that residential propinquity to a crucial distribution point (the wholesale market) was a major factor in accounting for one ethnic group's original possession of a niche in trade.

In the 19th century the wholesale distribution point for shipped goods was located on the levee where river boats unloaded from the Mississippi in downtown St. Louis. About 1910, the wholesale produce market moved to an area just north of downtown (Marshall 1977). The workers for the wholesale market were drawn quite naturally from the surrounding neighborhood. Some were Jewish because the neighborhood had harbored Jewish immigrants before the Italians arrived. But by 1916, the Italian newcomers had pushed, while the availability of better housing had pulled the earlier immigrants further west, and the neighborhood surrounding the wholesale market had

become "Little Italy" (Crawford 1916).

Many of the workers at the wholesale market were Italian-speaking young men, and some of them took to peddling produce in their own neighborhood. Those who were successful expanded their operation by driving their wagons across the city to offer produce at the several retail farmers markets on the south side. Credit was probably extended to those peddlers, who had kin, neighbors, and patrons at the wholesale market.

At that time, also, Soulard Market expanded its facilities. Wagon sheds were built in 1916 and more were added in 1928 (Taylor 1975). It is likely that the Italian produce merchants were able to take advantage of this expansion to stabilize their positions at Soulard Market and carve out an economic niche for themselves and their children.

Urban renewal projects have since torn down the old immigrant neighborhood north of downtown St. Louis, and "Little Italy" no longer exists. The wholesale market, displaced by modern highways, has been relocated even further north of the downtown district. Although the original geographic links are gone, friendship and kinship connections persist between the Italian families at Soulard Market and the workers at the wholesale market. At the least eight men from the twenty-six Italian firms at Soulard Market are also employed at the wholesale distribution point. Six other chief operators at Soulard Market identify themselves as "cousin" to one of the produce distributors at the wholesale market, and other more complex kinship ties connect the Italian-American at both markets.

Credit is extended each week by the wholesalers to the established produce merchants at Soulard Market, and most of the Italian families have

been established with the wholesalers since the early 1920s. Nine of the chief operators report that their fathers or grandfathers immigrated to "Little Italy" between 1900 and 1906. Another eight or nine Sicilians at Soulard Market came during the 1920s, and the remaining seven have arrived since World War II. Those whose parents came to "Little Italy" in the early 1900s grew up near the produce wholesale market in north St. Louis. Proximity to and influence in the wholesale market (rather than Soulard Market itself) gave the Italian immigrants the edge they needed to claim their own economic niche at Soulard Farmers Market. Friendship, kinship, and available credit help to maintain that niche for their descendants.

TABLE 1

Classification of the regular firms at Soulard Farmers Market according to economic niches occupied.

St. Louis, Missouri. August 1, 1977. N = 87.

Economic Niche	Number	Percent of Regular Firms	Number of Workers	Percent of Workers	Average Number of Workers per Firm
<u>Farmers</u>					
Local Farm Produce	29	33.3%	74	20.1%	2.6 (sd= 1.1)
<u>Produce Merchants</u>					
Shipped Produce	35	40.2%	185	50.1%	5.3 (sd= 3.8)
<u>Other Merchants</u>					
Foodstuff, Not Produce	16	18.4%	71	19.2%	4.4 (sd= 2.7)
<u>Combinations</u>					
Farmers and Produce Merchants	07	08.1%	39	10.6%	5.6 (sd= 2.9)
Total	87				

TABLE II

Ethnic origins of the principal operators of the 87 regular firms at
Soulard Farmers Market.

St. Louis, Missouri. August 1, 1977. N = 87.

Ethnic Origins	Number	Percent
German	42	48.3%
Italian	26	29.9%
Mixed (more than three)	7	8.1%
Yugoslavian	3	3.5%
African	2	2.3%
Polish	2	2.3%
Lebanese	1	1.2%
Lebanese/Croatian	1	1.2%
Swedish/Irish	1	1.2%
Russian	1	1.2%
Unknown	1	1.2%
Total	87	

TABLE III

Comparison between economic niches occupied and ethnic origins of the principal operators of regular firms at Souldard Farmers Market. St. Louis, Missouri. August 1, 1977. N = 87.

	German	Italian	Other Ethnic	Mixed	Total
Farmers	23	1	2	3	29
Produce Merchants	5	24	6	0	35
Other Merchants	8	0	4	4	16
Combinations	6	1	0	0	7
	—	—	—	—	—
	42	26	12	7	87

	German	Italian	
Farmers	23	1	24
Produce Merchants	5	24	29
	—	—	—
	28	25	53

$$\chi^2 = 32, P > .001$$

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