THE ETHICS AND ÆSTHETICS OF THE
PUSH CART: BY MARION WINTHROP

Very now and then we hear of an altercation based upon
somebody’s wrongs in connection with the push cart. It
may be that viewed from certain individual standpoints
this little street institution is a nuisance; but the sociology
of the push cart is not, after all, so simple as it seems, and
not to speak of its nice adaptation to certain human
needs not unworthy of recognition, its æsthetic phase
is one to be taken seriously, for the push cart furnishes one of the few
notes of color in our dingy streets. In the uptown quarters we do
not ordinarily see any wares for sale other than fruit and peanuts—
to which the Italian takes as naturally as if they were a product of
his own soil. These little carts piled up with oranges, red and yellow
bananas, lemons, red and green apples make a truly Roman color
combination, gay and pleasing upon sunny days, acquiring a cu-
rious vividness in relation to a rainy street and gray skies. And
the dark-skinned owner of the cart usually composes harmoniously
with its contents. Occasionally we will see some picturesque pusher
of a cart—perhaps a Syrian or an Armenian—passing through the
street, his wares covered with a cloth of divers colors that undoubtedly
came with him to the New World, perhaps tied about his simple
possessions.

In the foreign quarters of the town push carts are as thick as
dandelions in April. They may be seen drawn up in a regular row
at the curb, packed side by side, apparently containing everything
needed for the simple life, from patent collar buttons to hats, gar-
mments of all descriptions, shoes, vegetables, fruits of all kinds, cakes,
jewelry and even rosaries. In fact, these little carts that line the
streets in the tenement districts are the New World substitute for the
Continental street booths and market days. And in certain quar-
ters it is customary to have a regular day for gathering together to
buy and sell, as on the European market day.

One has only to walk down the streets south of Washington
Square or east of St. Mark’s Place to come upon these push-cart
market neighborhoods, although they are to be found in far greater
numbers in the congested quarters farther south and east. It must
be admitted that in the Jewish quarters there is more that the eye
must pass over and ignore if it is in search of pleasure. We cannot
reasonably expect from first generation steerage emigrants of the class
that we are now receiving very definite ideas of cleanness, and the
Jewish variety of uncleanness is unpleasantly mixed with grease and
disagreeable associations of food, whereas the German and Italians acquire easily certain surface phases of cleanness that makes them pleasanter to look upon. Then, too, the Jews have not as a race the beauty of the other Orientals or of Greeks and Italians.

The push cart not only meets the demand of the neighboring laborer, the passer-by and the street child for cheap fruit to be obtained at the smallest degree of retail, it is often the commercial stepping stone of the foreign emigrant. The average Greek or Italian starts with a little capital which he invests in a push cart and its stock in trade. The next move is to the little stationary street stand, then a little shop. It is a legitimate progress, far more so than that of many of our emigrants, and it is difficult to understand why there should be so much hostility toward the first step. Yet the push cart man, who has paid for his license, is the prey of the street gamin whose cruel little pranks are invariably winked at by the policeman on the block. He is roughly treated by the officers directing traffic, and is a general object of street persecution. Some of this may be that guerrilla warfare that invariably exists between Irish and “Dago”, but whatever its cause, it is cruel and unjust. It is not easy work pushing that heavy cart about the crowded streets, dodging traffic and the teasing little hoodlums driving delivery carts who are unmercifully beating their horses, crashing pell mell into anything and everything, and deliberately charging into foot passengers and push carts. It would be far more to the point to put the energy which is used in denouncing push carts into enforcing the law which forbids boys under a certain age to drive in the streets.

It is undoubtedly true that the Italian, whose maxim is to work when he works and play when he plays, gravitates naturally toward the strongly marked light and shade of the push cart profession. For if, when he moves about, his work is heavy and difficult, when he stands still in the sun waiting for customers he can observe the passers-by or entertain callers at his ease, and not infrequently he may be seen partaking of his wares with the evident enjoyment in small pleasures which is the heritage of Southern peoples.

The only matter that needs watching in this push cart traffic is the manner in which the well-intentioned but often ignorant little dealer cares for his wares. But when we come to the microbe question we come to a problem which is tied up with the subject of foreign emigration in many and manifold ways. And as for the push cart man,—his is a humble success and one that no one need grudge him, for in the majority of cases it is hardly and honestly won.