

Street Vendor Livelihoods and Everyday Politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: The Seeds of a Diverse Economy?

Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger

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Abstract

The alternative ‘diverse economies’ vision of J. K. Gibson-Graham and supporters regarding how people make a living outside the capitalist framework, lists street vendors and informal economies of the global South as potential components. This article critiques the relevance of this vision for street vendor livelihoods in a politically socialist locale, albeit one embracing neo-liberal modernity. In their drive to create a modern, ‘civilised’ capital, Vietnam’s central government and Hanoi’s municipal authorities have a particular image of security, orderliness and development. Street vendors disrupt this picture and since 2008 have been negotiating a ban in many preferred locales. Building upon urban livelihoods, everyday politics and resistance concepts, an analysis is made of in-depth interviews with itinerant and fixed-stall vendors to unravel their heterogeneous responses to such revanchist policies. Despite subtle covert and overt resistance tactics, the study reveals that celebrated ‘community economies’ and alternative economic visions remain rare in this context.

In their 2008 *Progress in Human Geography* piece “Diverse economies: performative practices for ‘otherworlds’”, J. K. Gibson-Graham review the growing body of work, to which they have been pivotal, that sets out to explore how people make a living in both the global North and South without

necessarily privileging capitalism as an analytical entry-point; and to develop an open-ended dialogue regarding how we might perform different economies (see also Community Economies Collective (CEC), 2001; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2003, 2006). As they put it

Sarah Turner is in the Department of Geography, McGill University, 805 Sherbrooke Street West, Montréal, Québec, QCH3A 2K6, Canada. E-mail: turner@geog.mcgill.ca.

Laura Schoenberger is an independent researcher.

broadening out from Marxism and feminism, we began to repopulate the economic landscape as a proliferative space of difference, drawing eclectically on economic anthropology, economic sociology, institutional economics, area studies and studies of the underground and informal economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 615).

Among the diversity of economic activities that they suggest be made visible “as objects of inquiry and activism” (p. 616) sits the informal market, while earlier, in ‘*A Postcapitalist Politics*’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 174) they more specifically cite “house-to-house and sidewalk vending” as examples of alternative market transactions.

While offering a list of diverse economy success stories, the authors continue to acknowledge that the marginality of these approaches is difficult to overcome (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Only by rising to the challenge, making these the focus of our research and teaching and highlighting how such approaches can contribute to “social well-being and environmental regeneration” can we add credibility to these activities, potentially increase their viability as policy objects and prove that they are indeed everyday realities that

touch all our lives and dynamically shape our futures. This is the performative ontological project of ‘diverse economies’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 618).

The aim of this article then, is to engage critically with the diverse economies literature and examine the degree to which these arguments can be applied to street vending in Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. To meet this aim, we pose two specific questions: first, is there potential for diverse economies within an urban socialist landscape, albeit one in which the one-party state is pushing

head-first towards modernity via many of the trappings of neo-liberal reform? Secondly, how do the daily, lived experiences of street vendors intercept—or not—with other examples drawn upon by proponents of diverse economies? To answer these questions, after providing the context of this study, we create a conceptual framework drawing from urban street vendor livelihoods, everyday politics and resistance literatures to help unravel street vendor approaches in Hanoi. By then focusing upon the motivations and hierarchies among Hanoi’s street vendors, followed by their everyday politics and resistance strategies, we tease out how these potentially diverse economies are constructed, both ‘on the pavements’ and discursively, by street vendors themselves and by state modernising agendas.

Perhaps one of the most striking differences from the majority of work to date regarding diverse economies and the potential for alternative economic spaces, is that we want to examine the everyday realities of self-employed ‘marginal peoples’ in a *socialist state*. Regardless of whether one calls Vietnam socialist, post-socialist (Vasavakul, 2003), socialism in transition (Buraway and Verdery, 1999), late socialism (Leshkovich, 2005) or following a “market mechanism with State management and a socialist orientation” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1996; quoted in Beresford, 2003, p. 56), the fact remains that this country of 86 million is a single-party state, with historical and contemporary experiences that reflect China’s reform experiences more closely than the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe (Luong Van Hy, 2003). However, as noted in *The Economist* (2008), in a country run by “ardently capitalist communists”, a politically socialist stance fuses in the economic realm with a multiplicity of neo-liberal policies. Since the mid 1980s, these

have included social policy reforms installing user fees for education, child and health care; while a decline in gender equality has also transpired (Witter, 1996; Bloom, 1998; UNICEF, 2000).

This economic transition is epitomised by recent political decisions in the capital, where a specific discursive construction of urban development is supported. On 1 August 2008, the Vietnam state—with no need for popular debate or vote—expanded the official land area of Hanoi from 920 to 3345 square kilometres, resulting in an overnight expansion of the city's population from approximately 3.5 to 6.23 million inhabitants (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2008). In 'supersizing' Hanoi, the government aims to create an economic superhub, rapidly modernising the country's capital and generating a metropolis more populous than Singapore or Kuala Lumpur, while rivalling Ho Chi Minh City (*The Straits Times*, 2008). The Chairman of the Hanoi City People's Committee noted that it was his top responsibility and priority to "develop the capital into a more civilized and modern place" (VietnamNet, 2008). Indeed, Hanoi and its hinterlands are transforming at breakneck pace. Not only are the city limits expanding, engulfing peri-urban regions and opening up the latter to private investment for high-rise office and apartment towers, but internal neighbourhoods are earmarked to be destroyed to create new transport throughways, while city markets are renovated or demolished entirely. Guiding the city's development is the 'Hanoi capital construction master plan to 2030 and vision to 2050' aiming to make Hanoi the world's 'first sustainable city' (Turner, 2009; VietnamNet, 2009).¹

An important feature of this drive towards modernity, and central to our case here, is that since 1 July 2008 street vendors have been banned from 62 selected streets

and 48 public spaces, the latter around hospitals, schools, bus and train stations, predominantly in the city's urban core (see Figure 1; People's Committee of Hanoi, 2008; *Thanh Nien News*, 2008). The wording of the 2008 ban makes it clear that street vending does not fit the central authorities' modernity discourse, instead being considered a residual and non-productive activity and a cause of traffic congestion (People's Committee of Hanoi, 2008). The vast majority of street vendors targeted are from the neighbouring countryside (see Jensen and Peppard, 2003; Agergaard and Thao Thi Vu, 2010), experiencing dramatic modernisation efforts itself as noted earlier, with many being pushed off their land (van den Berg *et al.*, 2003; interview data). Indeed, vendors we interviewed from peri-urban locales view the city's streets as one of their only alternative livelihood means. Also pursuing a living via street vending are long-time Hanoi residents who also feel fully entitled to their small slice of public space.

A cursory observation of Hanoi's key city streets, now less busy with vendors than in the past, might signal that the state has 'won the battle' in stifling this potentially diverse economy while demonstrating to the general population once again the marginality of such activities. Yet, drawing on in-depth qualitative fieldwork, our analysis reveals that vendors' entrepreneurship and everyday politics combine in a flexible mix of compliance and subaltern resistance (Kerkvliet, 2009) to shape effective alternative discourses. It is yet to be seen, however, if Hanoi residents living on the margins are able to forge alternative visions of their place in (or outside) the local dominant economic sphere.

To answer our research questions, in-depth semi-structured interviews were completed with 40 self-employed street traders, 38 of whom were women, between

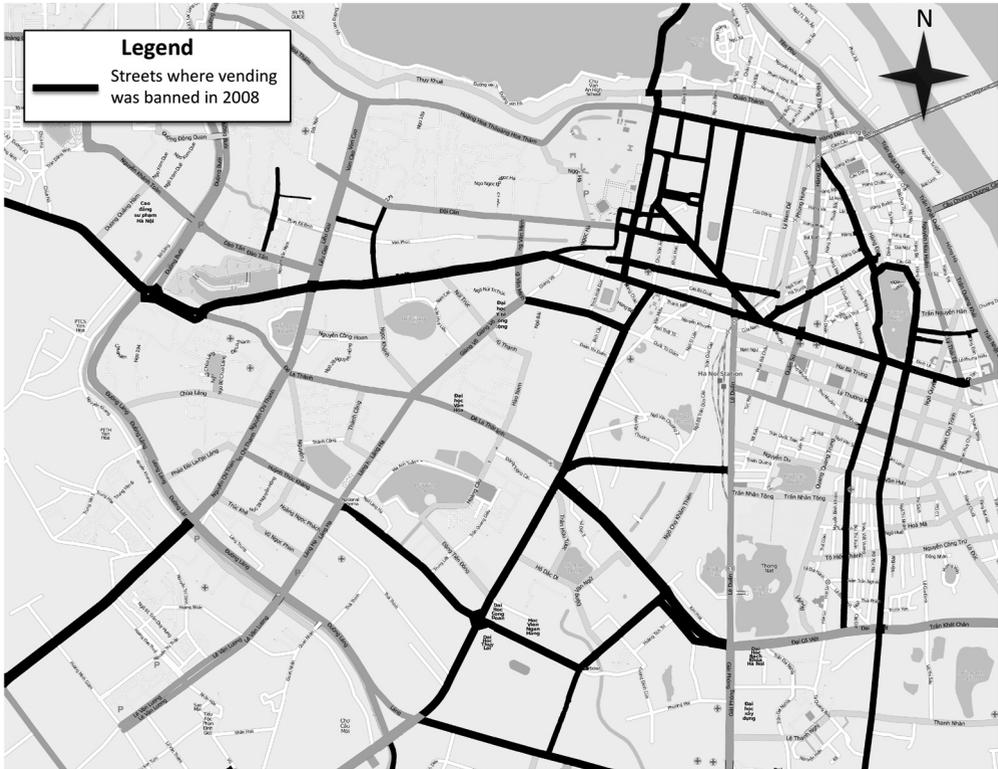


Figure 1. Central Hanoi: streets where vending was banned in 2008.
Source: adapted from VietnamNet (2009).

February and May 2009 with the help of a Vietnamese research assistant. These vendors included both long-term residents/fixed-stall sellers (12) and migrant workers/itinerant sellers (28). We did not sample to exclude men; rather, street vendors in Hanoi are overwhelmingly women (see Leshkovich, 2005). Our sampling strategy was based on locating vendors operating either on or within two street blocks of a banned vending street. These interviews are supported by observations and discussions with state researchers, local officials and residents regarding street vending laws and tactics by the first author since 1998.² While previous research on street vending in Hanoi has produced important insights into vendor livelihoods (Drummond, 1993;

DiGregorio, 1994; Tana, 1996; Higgs, 2003; Jensen and Peppard, 2003; Koh, 2008; Mitchell, 2008), the reactions of street vendors to the government's most recent modernisation drive have yet to be analysed, as is their potential alignment with diverse economies.

A Conceptual Framework that Gives Voice to Hanoi's Street Vendors

We draw on concepts from urban livelihood approaches, everyday politics and covert resistance literatures to gain a nuanced understanding of street vendors' everyday livelihood strategies, and give voice to the individuals making these

decisions. This framework allows us to deconstruct livelihoods made on Hanoi's streets, while searching for fissures where diverse economy approaches might appear.

Modernist and revanchist municipal policies in the global South often posit street vendors against state visions for urban development, leaving them with few rights and limited options for physical relocation and livelihood security (Bromley, 2000; Seligmann, 2001; Little, 2004; Bhowmik, 2006; Brown, 2006). Scholarship across the global South documents vendor livelihood strategies that organise street space as a 'weapon', such as vendors maintaining an on-going physical presence in the face of developers' plans (Cross, 2000; Seligmann, 2004). In Hanoi, traders deal with the 2008 ban—and others previously implemented—with their own 'take' on what forms of governmentality, legislation and control are fair and reasonable. Our interviews revealed that overt protest and resistance to restrictions on their livelihoods are usually considered futile in this socialist, semi-authoritarian state and that individuals use subtle, under-the-radar approaches either to comply with laws in a manner that suits them, or to work around regulations and their enforcement.

Conceptualising everyday politics thus helps us to explore the daily realities for Hanoi's street vendors and the relationships between them and the broader political-economic system of which they are a part. Kerkvliet defines 'everyday politics' as

people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct... Key to everyday politics' differences from official and advocacy politics is it involves little or no organisation, is usually low profile and

private behaviour, and is done by people who probably do not regard their actions as political (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 232).

He continues to suggest that everyday politics be divided into four categories—namely, "support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance" (p. 233). As we will see, street vendors in Hanoi are a composite group of actors whose actions stretch across this range.

With regard to resistance, the academic literature is extensive. Yet, while numerous works consider overt and collective action, ranging from protests and riots to transnational social movements, fewer examine the roles of domination, hegemony and the moral economy that often lead to more subvert forms of everyday resistance (Amoore, 2005). This latter school of thought is perhaps best represented by the writing of James C. Scott (1976, 1985, 1990) and, again, Ben Kerkvliet (1990, 2005). In a socialist country like Vietnam, these works help us to explore and explain the actions of non-élite individuals wanting to improve their lot, or just to be 'left alone' by the long arm of the state.

Everyday resistance measures include how

peasants (and others) who are subjected to social and cultural subordination create continuous, mundane and hidden ways of resisting oppression (inequality, hierarchy)—in effect, through avoidance, ridicule and acts of petty revenge (Bernstein and Byres, 2001, p. 33).

Similarly, Kerkvliet defines resistance, framed within his everyday politics approach, as

what people do that shows disgust, anger, indignation or opposition to what they regard as unjust, unfair, illegal claims on them by people in higher, more powerful

class and status positions or institutions. Stated positively, through their resistance, subordinate people struggle to affirm their claims to what they believe they are entitled to based on values and rights recognised by a significant proportion of other people similar to them (Kerkvliet, 2009: 233).

Kerkvliet continues

The concept of everyday resistance ... travels well when studying political behaviour and views of people in other sectors of society, not just peasants, who are in relatively weak and subordinate positions—office secretaries, factory workers, clerks, *street vendors*, and so on (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 234; emphasis added).

Drawing on such a framework, we argue that people in a subordinate position maintain some degree of decision-making power and agency. Unlike Gramsci's (1971) approach to hegemony and naturalisation of the domination of the elite, Scott and Kerkvliet argue that the subordinated *are* aware of their position in society and *vis-à-vis* the state and, through their everyday actions, work around and cautiously attempt to deflate the dominant ideology or hegemonic discourse. The results of such everyday procedures are often deemed more effective than more drastic, organised actions might be.

In Vietnam, open protest can indeed have disastrous consequences. As Kerkvliet (1995, 2005) has noted, peasant resistance to the Vietnamese state's rural land collectivisation in the 1960s and 1970s followed very subtle forms of everyday politics and covert resistance. Since the 1990s, interplays between state and society have become even more ambiguous, in part due to *Đổi mới* (economic renovation), officially introduced in 1986 and pursued via numerous reforms (DiGregorio, 1994;

Kerkvliet, 2003; Anh Nguyen Pham, 2005). A few open protests have resulted in change; the most well known being the 1997 unrest in Thái Bình where farmers openly, and at times violently, protested against the actions and corruption of local state cadres (Thomas 2002; Kerkvliet 2003; Tran Thi Thu Thang, 2009). Recently, campaigns against reducing the size of Thống Nhất Park (Lenin Park), one of Hanoi's largest green spaces, originally built with the help of local citizens' labour during 1958–61 have been permitted, albeit, in a constrained fashion. As Lisa Drummond and Nguyen Thi Lien note, the limited and decreasing public space in Hanoi, coupled with a high degree of state surveillance and intervention, leaves little room for discussion, let alone dissent. They observe

While the government structure reaches out and down to the street and neighborhood level, interaction is mainly in the form of delivery of top-down directives and allocation of responsibility for participation in government campaigns. Bottom-up delivery of desires, opinions, complaints is rarely effective unless or until there is a crisis (Drummond and Nguyen Thi Lien, 2008, p. 178).

This context, as we discuss further, contrasts sharply with most locales where diverse economies have been explored to date. For example, discussions of diverse economies in the US, the UK, Germany, Australia, Spain and the Philippines take place in democracies (however flawed these might be) (see Fuller *et al.*, 2010). In each, difference can be celebrated, open protest is tolerated and resistance and organising can be overt and noisy. Hence, to examine the 'on the ground' complexities surrounding the conflicting discourses of a Vietnamese city bent on modernisation, and the survival mechanisms of its poorest inhabitants who appear—to the state at least—to be

standing in the way, we consider it germane to draw directly from everyday politics and subaltern forms of resistance approaches to support a more nuanced analysis of everyday vendor livelihoods. From this analysis emerges a critique of the relevance of the diverse economies approach in the urban Vietnam context and, more generally, in non-democratic states in the global South.

Motivations and Hierarchies among Hanoi's Street Vendors

Legislation regarding Hanoi's street vending and its enforcement has oscillated over the past 25 years (see Koh, 2008, for a comprehensive review). Before the 2008 ban, it was estimated that there were about 5600 vegetable and 5900 fruit street vendors working in greater Hanoi (within the 2004 city limits). These figures include mobile street vendors and fixed vendors selling on pavements, as well as those trading in informal markets (M4P, 2007). The 2008 street vendor ban is implemented and enforced, like many Vietnamese state policies, at the lowest level of local urban administration, the ward (*phường*). Now, as in the past, ward officials adjust state policies to local conditions. The ward therefore becomes a social space where the state regime is mediated to align with the interests of local officials and, sometimes, the concerns and needs of residents. This hybridisation of socialist state–society relations means that ward officials are occasionally lenient due to the socioeconomic situation of residents in their jurisdiction, while also acting to uphold their own informal interests, most commonly via corrupt actions (Koh, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Lindell, 2010). Like Koh (2006, 2008), we found that often these elements blend, such as when a ward official tasked to clear

street vendors from sidewalks turns a blind eye and cites 'local economic conditions' as to why state policy has not been enforced, while concurrently accepting bribes.

To establish whether or not street vendors could potentially map onto a 'community economy', such as those discussed by Gibson-Graham (2003, 2005) in Jagna municipality, the Philippines, or in Mondragon, in the Basque region of Spain, we examined the motivations behind vendors' decisions to trade and their interactions with one another. During interviews with Hanoi street vendors, a number of differences quickly became apparent between itinerant street vendors and city residents operating small, 'fixed' pavement stalls. As noted earlier, the majority of itinerant traders are from peri-urban areas, particularly those merged with Hanoi in 2008 to form the Hanoi Capital Region.³ These vendors commonly share a rented room in the city with other street vendors, returning to their village to visit family on a monthly basis. Fixed street traders, however, are overwhelmingly long-term Hanoi residents who establish a small stall in front of their house or nearby.

Differing Motivations to Trade

The most pronounced demarcation regarding motivations to vend and the infrapolitics of street trading was by vendor type. Given this divide, it is interesting to note that all vendors interviewed typically earned VND35 000 (US\$2 in 2009) a day, roughly equating to VND10 million (US\$570) a year, depending on number of days worked, access to products and so on. These findings correlate with previous street vendor survey results in the city (M4P, 2007).

Seventy per cent of itinerant traders interviewed stated that their main trade motivation is the crucial need to gain funds for their children's school fees. Paralleling

the rolling-back of the welfare state in the global North, here too we see the state's withdrawal from social welfare provision. First introduced in 1989 (World Bank, 2009), monthly school fees can reach VND1–2 million (approximately US\$60–120).⁴ This is a crippling financial burden for street traders, most of whom have several school-aged children. Many obtain informal loans from individuals or bank loans with interest payments being a constant concern. Hoa,⁵ an itinerant vendor from Hưng Yên province selling fruit, was grim in her prognosis of the direct impacts of the street ban on rural children's education

If the government actually practises the ban strictly then people in the countryside will die and no children from the countryside will have a chance to get a complete education.

Second to school fees, an important causal factor for trading is the loss of other livelihood means in the peri-urban area. Hoa's comments here echo many street vendors' assessments of the factors pushing them to the city

Despite all the challenges of being a street vendor, I come to Hanoi to sell because my house is in a town that has recently been added to the city and so now there are urbanisation policies in place. The government took the land and sold it to builders so there is no more land to cultivate ... There are families with five to ten people, all of whom have mouths that wait for the food brought by the one member who sells in Hanoi's streets.

Hence, economic necessity is central to the livelihood motivations of itinerant vendors.

Fixed street vendors, however, tend to be long-term Hanoi residents selling to make some extra cash, often to supplement

pensions. For a number of elderly Hanoi residents, operating a teashop or selling fruit for family alters, helps them to pass the time and stay active. Often, fixed street vendors previously worked in state-owned factories or enterprises and were made redundant when the subsidised period ended in the late 1980s. By and large, their motivations for becoming a street vendor are different from those of itinerant traders, the only overlapping 'push factor' being illness or death of the family's main breadwinner.

Trader Hierarchies

Fixed vendors with whom we spoke overwhelmingly viewed itinerant vendors as 'outsiders', making disparaging comments about the latter and their lowly position in the social hierarchy. Ha, a fixed trader selling tea, candy and cigarettes, stressed these social distinctions

Hanoi is getting crowded because people are coming from the countryside more and more. No Hanoi resident does itinerant trading because they all have a stable place to sell from. The reason for the ban is to reduce the number of people coming from the countryside and to control the security of the population and the environment. The [itinerant] street vendors take up a lot of space and it's overpopulated already.

In comparison, itinerant street vendors expressed resentment towards the oft-favourable treatment received by Hanoi resident traders from local officials, commenting that fixed traders monopolised the best trading opportunities. Van, a female itinerant trader from Hưng Yên province who sold convenience items, explained this social hierarchy bluntly

Fixed street vendors think that temporary or wandering street vendors are nothing in comparison with themselves.

While some interviewed itinerant street vendors had been in Hanoi for upwards of 15 years, they nevertheless continue to feel excluded by Hanoians. Such social differentiation does not bode well for the development of more inclusive diverse economies. As we will see next, the impacts of this social hierarchy become even more pronounced when examining vendor interactions with state authorities, drawing upon everyday politics and resistance as conceptual entry-points.

Everyday Politics and Resistance

Through their quest for diverse economies, Gibson-Graham (2006, p. 79) worked to destabilise “the economy as it is usually known and performed”, attempting “to reveal a space of political decision”. However, in socialist Vietnam, overt political decisions and destabilisation projects can come with a high price-tag. After some deliberation among local Hanoi collaborators, we identified at least five branches of the state apparatus related to surveillance, crowd control, security and policing. These include the *Đội tự quản* (ward-level ‘self-management security’), *Công an* (public security), *Cảnh sát giao thông* (traffic police), *Thanh tra giao thông* (inspector) and *Cảnh sát cơ động* (mobile police, or ‘fast response’ team). It is the *Công an* who have the right to fine street vendors. Hence, while *Đội tự quản* will often be seen participating in raids, chasing after vendors alongside *Công an* (whom most vendors simply call ‘the police’), *Đội tự quản* cannot (theoretically) fine vendors.

In 2009, when fined by *Công an*, vendors were paying around VND75 000 (US\$4.50) to have their goods released—twice their average daily profit. This process varies: sometimes the transaction is conducted ‘on the spot’; other times vendors must report

to the local *Công an* station to pay and attempt to collect their confiscated goods (if not already eaten or stolen by officials). ‘Fines’ vary, often including ‘new fees’ as officials seek ways to supplement their income (see Leshkovich 2005).

Nevertheless, the division of responsibility and authority among state officials plays into the hands of street vendors, limiting the extent to which the state apparatus can control vending behaviour. For example, Hien, a migrant itinerant street vendor explained that

when the ban was first launched I thought I could be caught by any type of police. But then I found that the traffic police couldn’t harm me and have no authority when it comes to street vendors—they will even purchase goods from me! The only type of police I have to worry about is the *Công an* and *Đội tự quản* and when I see these police I run.

Paradoxically then, some branches of the policing apparatus economically support street vendors operating in banned locales, purchasing food and goods while in uniform, and government officials in general are sought-after customers. Indeed, Ha located her tea stall near government offices because “government officials are reliable customers with money in their pockets”.

Itinerant Trader Strategies

The everyday, covert resistance measures used by itinerant street vendors include understanding and interpreting the spatial surveillance gaps of the *Công an*. One of these interstices occurs along the borderlines where two municipal wards meet. Itinerant street vendors operating in these spaces have the advantage of quickly crossing ward boundaries if chased by the

police; police are (at least officially) unable to fine street vendors outside their jurisdiction. Itinerant traders also become acutely aware of which streets are less targeted by police. An, an itinerant trader selling pine-apples, explained

I move around but I never enter the Old Quarter and especially avoid Hàng Đào street since I have been caught by police whenever I enter that street.

These comments were echoed by Yen, itinerantly selling rice cakes, who steers clear of the Old Quarter north of Hoàn Kiếm lake, because she is

sure to be caught by the police because the police do their work there more seriously. Those streets have a lot of police.

Temporal strategies are also key to vendor livelihood survival and traders are quick to learn the routines and rhythms of those who police them. For example, Hanh operates one lane away from a banned street. Her stall nevertheless remains a police target and she knows to locate her tea and snacks fixed-stall on the pavement only on Sundays when local police are off-duty. On other days, she positions herself inside a doorway of a friend's home with whom she has a financial arrangement to use the space. Hanh notes that she would prefer to sell on the pavement because "I can earn more money since people sit down for tea more casually. My customers also prefer outside because it gives them more space", but she negotiates these temporal restrictions to make do as best she can. During week days, an important window of opportunity occurs around noon—lunch-break for the *Công an*. This allows traders to enter areas that are usually highly monitored, like the Old Quarter. Indeed, we spoke to 11 itinerant street vendors actively selling on banned streets, using the police

lunch-break to their advantage. As Kerkvliet (2005, p. x) noted *vis-à-vis* the everyday politics of Vietnamese peasant collective members in the 1960s–80s, street vendors are acting as they are "supposed to do some of the time but not all of the time".

Yet, while itinerant traders therefore negotiate state directives clandestinely through spatial and temporal avoidance and covert resistance strategies, we found that the infrapolitics of fixed traders also include tactical performances of 'compliance' and subtle adjustments in their negotiations with local state officials.

Fixed Trader Strategies

In 2004, prior to the most recent street vending legislation, Koh (2004b) reported that ward-level police found it difficult to fine locals with whom they met daily and had long-term relationships. Officials explained that

it is unrealistic to impose fines because offenders reject the summons by claiming they have no money ... People expect ward officials to 'look the other way' (*bo qua*) or be sympathetic (*thông cảm*) ... Basic-level officials cannot follow the law strictly when implementing policies, because they risk losing votes and their 'authority' (Koh, 2004b, p. 221).

We found similar, as well as novel, tactics being advanced after the 2008 ban, with fixed-stall vendors repeatedly performing their 'right' to vend. However, for others, simple avoidance techniques, carried out with the support of neighbours and customers via important social capital ties, help them to avoid the wrath of police.

Camaraderie and a degree of solidarity among vendors and customers—what could be considered bonding and bridging

social capital⁶—play an essential role in vendor livelihood strategies. The majority of street vendors interviewed, both itinerant and fixed, said that informing each other verbally of the police's presence was critical to avoiding fines, reiterating strategies noted by Drummond (1993) in the early 1990s. One fixed street vendor, Thao, a retired factory worker now selling tea, explained that she must react quickly whenever police approach. Thao has help from both customers and other traders selling lottery tickets nearby to move her goods to an adjacent shop doorway, out of 'harm's way' on the pavement. Solidarity among itinerant traders also occurs, supported by the fact that many rent rooms together. They exchange precise information on police enforcement that can be used for avoidance strategies, reflecting the important role of bonding social capital within their infrapolitics.

However, Hanoi resident, fixed-stall operators are far more likely to subvert discourses around vending to enable their livelihoods. Their tactics include a reiteration of tales of war-time casualty and loss, drawing upon discourses of heroics and loyal citizenship to redraw their rights to trade. For instance, Linh, a woman operating a tea stall, embraces her identity as a war veteran to openly and repeatedly resist *Công an* officials. Linh does not hide her disapproval of the new street vending ban and related police activities, perceiving them to be "daily robbery". She commented critically that

the police take any means available for them to get money. The street vendors are forced to pay the police some money and in some wards they pay them a monthly fee just to sit on the streets.

She explained that she continually reacts by shouting at the police

I had to give my blood in the war for you to have the life you have today! Why don't you understand my situation? Why do you take my things?

Well aware of her elevated status as a war veteran, she explained that

among the street vendors who sell here I am the only one who can shout at the police because I am a veteran. The others don't dare to shout because if they did they would be arrested. In my case, if I shout they can only hate me, they cannot arrest me.

Linh hence plays upon dominant historical discourses to help meet her economic needs.

Likewise, street vendor Giang's husband, now deceased, had been a deputy government minister while she herself had worked at the same ministry and drew a monthly state pension of VND1.8 million. Ironically, her regular customers are mainly ward officials and she defiantly operates her tea stall directly across the street from a *Công an* station, on a street, no less, with the ban in effect. Giang's tight government connections—she noted that the President and Secretary General of the Communist Party had attended her husband's funeral—mean that she is largely beyond police reach. In fact, she explained that, when poorly-informed patrolling police take her plastic stools, those at the local station routinely locate and return them personally. Keen to discuss her position *vis-à-vis* the local police, Giang offered the following *vignette*

Once a customer at my stall asked for the name of the police chief. I responded by giving him the name, but I didn't include a respectful pronoun. The policemen who were also my customers at the time asked, "why did you just give the name of the police chief like that, why didn't you show

your respect?." I responded, "he's not my boss, I don't need to kiss his arse for a promotion". Later that day, the story made its way to the ears of the police chief, who remarked "that's fine, that old lady can even swear at me. She's old and her husband was an important man who contributed a lot to the country".

Less demonstratively, long-term fixed-stall operators internalise and perform specific socio-spatial power relations. They understand to move aside or retreat from view when police come by. Capturing how their status is constantly shaped through specific mediations with dominant discursive constructions, Be, a woman selling on the same corner for over a decade, explained that "we know the police won't catch us. We simply move aside to show our respect". In particular, Be noted the importance of demonstrating that she does not look down on the police—"we must pretend to be afraid, to show respect"—a manoeuvre highlighting a clear differentiation between public and private transcripts (Scott, 1990). Yet, do such compliance, adjustment and resistance practices mean that these street vendors emerge as "complex economic subjects, capable of diverse desires and novel economic positionings" (CEC, 2001, p. 107)?

Street Vending as Diverse Economies in Hanoi?

In 2005 Samers cautioned that

We need a more analytical treatment of informal or diverse economies by distinguishing between their more mundane but dyspeptic varieties (that is, large swathes of informal employment) and those with a seemingly more 'progressive' production, extraction, and redistribution of the surplus.

Recognising this might steer us away from a myopic exuberance of both informal and diverse economies. Let us have no illusions then, as Marcuse remarked, but certainly no defeatism either (Samers, 2005, p. 883).

The complex range of street vendor survival strategies and the heterogeneous nature of infrapolitics on the streets of Hanoi sit on a continuum between these two extremes (see Jonas, 2010). As Vietnam's capital city modernises rapidly, vendors are being targeted by a state apparatus quick to label the informal economy as old-fashioned and obsolete, and street vendors especially, as a traffic hazard. Yet these vendors remain a favourite source of daily necessities for a large proportion of the urban population and, for many traders themselves—especially rural–urban migrants—vending remains a core livelihood strategy. It is difficult though, to celebrate street vending as a potential 'community economy'. First, there is no obvious community here, unlike that described by Gibson-Graham (2003, 2005) in Jagna municipality, in the Philippines, or in Mondragon, in the Basque region of Spain. In Hanoi, street vendors differentiate sharply by residential status: long-term city residents operating fixed stalls, or migrant itinerant traders. While groups of itinerant migrant workers do share accommodation and support each other, there is currently little space in Hanoi for democratic participation and we have found no evidence of vendors organising beyond immediate bonding and bridging social capital ties and networks among neighbours and friends; albeit these remain crucial.

As Michael Kaufman (1997, p. 8) observed regarding broader empowerment debates, when low-income groups are driven by a clear need for work—and Hanoi's itinerant traders are unambiguous

in their comments that this is the case—then it is not a question of whether a “population can influence and indeed control the processes of both decision-making and implementation”, but more to what extent “the mass of the population has the means to define the terms and nature of its participation”. Hanoi’s street vendors are located within a political and economic space where there are few legal means for ordinary citizens to influence decision-making and where the media are tightly controlled (Kerkvliet, 2003). While ‘non-governmental organisations’ are permitted in Vietnam, these are often loosely connected to the party-state structure, with the state keeping a close eye on activities (Vasavakul, 2003).⁷ Hence, the ‘disenfranchised’ have few avenues for official recourse (see Samers, 2005). With Hanoi’s municipal government pushing a specific discourse of modernisation and social control, including revanchist urban policies that banish street vendors from core vending sites, we are yet to see overt resistance by vendors or their supporters against such state directives, beyond individual, daily actions. Certainly, organising attempts as identified among diverse economies in democracies in the global North and South have yet to emerge.

The central state apparatus of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is embracing capitalism and neo-liberal reforms, while firmly turning its back on the socialist co-operative system that failed in the country’s past. While espousing economic capitalism so thoroughly, other approaches are increasingly considered dangerous and often subversive. Certainly in some mountainous, rural areas of Vietnam, such as the northern highlands, we would argue that alternative economies *are* at play, as upland minorities continue to barter, forage and maintain semi-subsistence livelihoods while frequently maintaining a resolute aim to avoid the state’s gaze. In turn, the state is

implementing a number of reforms and policies to reduce the ‘friction of distance’ between the Vietnam uplands and lowland authorities, while expanding ‘state space’ (see Scott, 2009; Michaud, 2010; Turner, 2010). Back in the capital Hanoi, however, showcased as a vanguard of modernity, such disruption of “the performative effects of capitalist representation” is treated with heightened wariness by central and municipal state authorities (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 615). Capitalism is being strengthened, its dominance performed and other approaches (NGOs, Internet-based social networking, different religious groups, upland ethnic minorities) are treated with distinct suspicion (World Bank, 2009).

Despite this political and economic context, however, we argue—through the voices of Hanoi’s street vendors—that there is little defeatism here either. These vendors exhibit tenacity and resourcefulness. Covert resistance measures and a reliance on specific tactics and performances subtly unbalance the dominant discourses at play. Over time, residents operating fixed-stalls manoeuvre themselves into working relationships with officials that appear to be tenable and resilient. While itinerant street vendors are in a far more precarious position, they quickly learn the rules of the game, shifting between a number of interstices in state surveillance and control. A combination of ingenious infrapolitics, including carefully designed covert and overt resistance, coupled with local officials who often succumb to emotional guilt when negotiating locals performing their livelihood tribulations, allow street vendors particular ways to exercise power while roving and sitting on the city’s streets.

Instead of writing off Hanoi’s street vendors as a residual, non-productive feature of the past—as the central and municipal governments wish us to do—this analysis has shown that the picture, while not rosy,

and certainly not romantic, is not entirely bleak. Such narratives reveal that vendors clearly comprehend the precise boundaries and limits of those who constrain them, and draw upon everyday politics and resistance measures to survive and build resilient livelihoods. Yet, in sum, the suggestion that street vendor livelihoods are “not being fully captured by dominant forms of economic subjection” (CEC, 2001, p. 107) is not convincing in the Hanoi case. While these street vendors do, on a day-to-day basis, redefine and resist political efforts to constrain their livelihoods, their reactions and solutions are not those of “economic autonomy and experimentation” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 614); rather, they remain embedded in the dominant, increasingly neo-liberal capitalist framework that characterises modern-day Vietnam.

Are we missing the ‘diverse economy’ point? Are we confirming what we already know regarding domination rather than “asking theory instead to help us see openings, to provide a space of freedom and possibility” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 619)? Are we at fault for assessing existing objects instead of being part of “bringing new economies into being” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 616)? Perhaps. Yet we have not been convinced otherwise in this socio-political setting, one far removed from the democracies that underpin the diverse economic success stories to date. In Jonas’ review of alternative economic spaces he argues that the work of Gibson-Graham has not been built around a theory of the state, but yet that

geographies of the state can play an important role of framing the tactics and strategies of alternative social and political movements (Jonas, 2010, p. 18).

In a politically socialist state like Vietnam, this framing is critical. Street vendors’ ways

of making a living and pursuing social well-being in Hanoi are grounded in their nuanced, endogenous understandings of local political, social, economic and historical contexts. A locally rooted analysis of people’s everyday decision-making in economic *and* political space is thus essential to understand how contemporary livelihoods are created and sustained. Without these understandings, there is little hope that academics can play a productive role in supporting those struggling to make a living in non-democratic locales in the global South.

Notes

1. Scholarship on the organisation of cities in the global South demonstrates that urban planners often privilege a Northern normative vision of public order favouring tidy and controlled urban spaces, while promoting mainstream public services and formal-sector businesses (Scott, 1990; Edensor, 1998; Miao, 2001; Anjaria, 2006; Milgram, 2009). The recent plans for Hanoi are no exception.
2. For this project, we did not explicitly set out to interview ward officials or customers; however, previous research undertaken by the first author has included conversational interviews with both.
3. Prime Minister’s Decision 490/QĐ-TTg (2008) created the ‘Hanoi Capital Region’ or ‘Hanoi Metropolitan Area’. The decision merges Hanoi with communes from seven surrounding provinces, while Hà Tĩnh province has been fully incorporated.
4. These fees include officials fees as well as ‘supplementary’ or ‘voluntary’ fees that can include paying for new buildings, equipment, repairs and teacher gifts (VietnamNet, 2010).
5. Pseudonyms are used throughout.
6. Putnam (2000) defines bonding social capital as closed networks of family and friends. This includes networks that rely upon relations within homogeneous groups such as certain business organisations, ethnic enclaves or, indeed, street vendors. Putnam suggests

that such social capital helps people ‘get by’ on a day-to-day basis. In contrast, bridging social capital refers to more open and heterogeneous networks bridging different communities, such as between vendors and customers. Other scholars have utilised ‘linking’ social capital to refer to ties between those from more distinct economic classes and social status again (Woolcock, 2001; Turner and Nguyen An Phuong, 2005). Debates concerning the capture of social capital as a policy tool for neo-liberal governance are certainly relevant in this context, albeit not our direct focus (see Holt 2008).

7. An important literature exists on state–society relations in Vietnam that we lack space to summarise (see Kerkvliet *et al.*, 2003). Regardless of one’s conceptual approach to whether there is an emergent civil society or not, no NGOs or local support groups have emerged focusing on Hanoi’s street vendors (while street children are supported by overseas initiatives like *KOTO: Know One, Teach One* and the *Blue Dragon Children’s Foundation*). Vasavakul (2003, p. 35) provides an overview of the management restrictions that Vietnam NGOs must negotiate, including expected “alliances with the party and state leadership”. Intriguingly, the state-sponsored Hanoi Women’s Museum organised an exhibition regarding the impacts of the 2008 ban on street vendors which was fairly even-handed, but no action to support vendors emerged.

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