

# 8

## **Appropriate Space?**

### *An Everyday Politics of Street Vendor Negotiations in Hanoi, Vietnam*

**Sarah Turner**

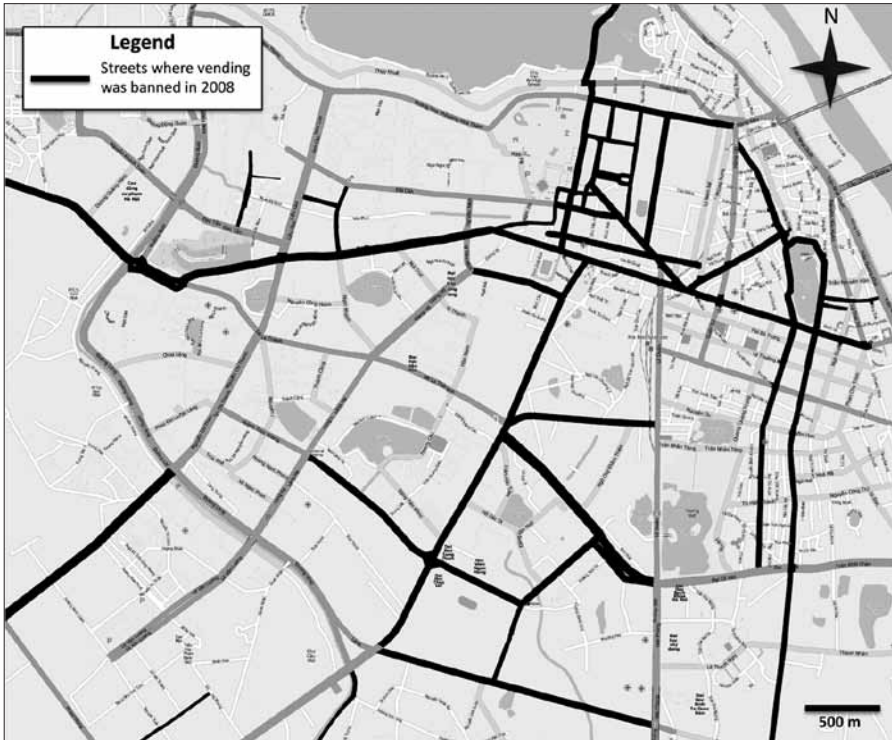
In 2008, the People's Committee of Hanoi, capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, introduced a decision "promulgating regulation on management of street-selling activities in Hanoi." Consequently, since July 2008, street vending has been banned from sixty-two selected streets and forty-eight public spaces in the city's urban core (figure 8.1; People's Committee of Hanoi 2008; Vietnam News 2008). The vast majority of street vendors targeted are from the neighboring countryside, which is experiencing urban encroachment at a rapid pace. Many inhabitants are being pushed off their land and consider street vending one of their few remaining livelihood options. Also pursuing a living via vending are long-time Hanoi residents, who feel fully entitled to their small slice of public space. Thus, despite the ban, vendors still ply these urban streets. This chapter takes up their story, investigating the everyday politics and negotiations regarding access to space among itinerant and fixed-stall street vendors in Hanoi. Drawing on a conceptual framework bringing together Henri Lefebvre's triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space with literatures on everyday politics and covert resistance, I want to better understand how street vendors make a living in a politically socialist yet increasingly neoliberal economic context. By carefully organizing spatial routines, building upon social capital, and negotiating power relations with state officials, Hanoi's street vendors continue to defend their lived spaces and "counter-spaces."

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Modernization efforts often pit street vendors against state visions for city development, leaving vendors with few rights and limited options for physical relocation (Bromley 2000; Brown 2006c). Scholarship across the Global South documents the measures that street vendors use to organize street space as their “weapon,” including maintaining an ongoing 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 legislation and control are fair and reasonable. Because overt protest and resistance to restrictions on their livelihoods are usually considered futile in this semi-authoritarian, socialist state, many individuals use subtle, under-the-radar approaches to either comply with the law in a manner that suits them or work around regulations and their enforcement. I examine these approaches by drawing on the works of Ben Kerkvliet (2005, 2009) on everyday politics and James C. Scott (1976, 1985, 1990) on everyday forms of resistance. Furthermore, I analyze what Henri Lefebvre (1991) would term the conceived spaces of a city bent on modernization and the means by which its poorest inhabitants, who appear—to the state at least—to be standing in the way, draw together perceived and lived spaces to enact survival mechanisms in this complex social environment.

In socialist Vietnam, open protest is still rare. Yet, since the 1990s, in part due to *Đổi mới* (economic renovation), officially introduced in 1986 and pursued via numerous reforms, interplays between state and society have become more ambiguous (DiGregorio 1994). Lisa Drummond and Nguyen Thi Lien (2008:178) have noted that 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: “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, and complaints is rarely effective unless or until there is a crisis.” Indeed, something of a crisis regarding land seizures in peri-urban zones around Hanoi, where many itinerant street vendors originate, occurred in 2012, with far more numerous and widely reported protests than in recent years. Nevertheless, the government still clamped down quickly on these outpourings of public discontent (BBC 2012).

Previous research on street vending in Hanoi has produced important insights into how vendors make a livelihood (DiGregorio 1994; Drummond 1993; Higgs 2003; Jensen and Peppard 2003; Koh 2008; Li 1996; Mitchell



**FIGURE 8.1**

*Areas declared off-limits for vending following the 2008 Hanoi street vending ban. Map: Sarah Turner.*

2008). However, the everyday politics and resistance tactics of street vendors to the 2008 street trading legislation and the government's most recent modernization drive, as well as how these actions shape specific social spaces, have yet to be analyzed, aside from initial findings in Turner and Schoenberger 2011. As such, in the following chapter, I ask, What does Hanoi's modernity drive mean for those whose livelihoods depend on street vending? How do the everyday politics of street vendors play out on Hanoi's streets? And how do these actions form specific lived and social spaces? This analysis builds upon semistructured interviews undertaken in 2009 with forty street traders, thirty-eight of whom were women (we did not sample to exclude men; rather, street vendors in Hanoi are overwhelmingly women). Both long-term resident and migrant vendors, aged from their late twenties to seventies, were interviewed. The sampling strategy was based on locating vendors operating on or within two street blocks

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of a banned street. These interviews were completed with the help of two research assistants, one Vietnamese and one Canadian, and build upon my observations of street vendor livelihoods and trading tactics throughout the city since 1999.<sup>1</sup>

Before turning to explore these vendors' livelihoods, I outline the conceptual framework for this analysis. Then I interpret the situation for street vendors in Hanoi, putting the conceptual tools of social space, everyday politics, and everyday resistance to task. I examine how perceived and lived spaces are intertwined through the experiences of street vendor practice, focusing on vendors' differing motivations to trade, the hierarchies that exist between fixed-stall and itinerant vendors, and their everyday politics and resistance measures. I conclude by arguing that a complex range of street vendor survival tactics is at play on the streets of Hanoi. These tactics highlight the heterogeneous nature of vendor infrapolitics in their defense of lived spaces and the creation of new ones.

### **SOCIAL SPACE, EVERYDAY POLITICS, AND RESISTANCE**

Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of social space is useful to this investigation (notwithstanding concerns from human geographers, for example, Dear 1997; Merrifield 1997; Unwin 2000). Simplistically put—since his work is “not reducible to a simple set of parameters” (Unwin 2000:13)—Lefebvre (1991) adopted the concepts of conceived, perceived, and lived space as a conceptual triad of “moments” to argue that space is an ongoing production of spatial relations. Briefly, conceived space, also known as representations of space, is “tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations” (Lefebvre 1991:33). Conceived space is that imagined or envisioned by planners, bureaucrats, architects, and officials, with governmental and institutional discourses and their products, such as decrees, maps, and development plans, being fundamental (Elden 2001). Lefebvre (1991) considers this the dominant space in society because the state—responsible for the cultivation of this space—can influence the population as a whole to accept a particular interpretation of the meaning of a space. Hence, these “representations of space” are intimately tied to ideology and societal power relations (Merrifield 2006). The clearest example relevant to our case here is the 2008 People's Committee of Hanoi decision prohibiting street vending on specific streets and locales. This imposes an image of what “should be” over perceived space. The landscape becomes dominated by what state planners and municipal authority officials argue to be its correct usage and form.

Perceived space (also known as spatial practice) includes “production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation” (Lefebvre 1991:33). In other words, perceived space relates to the physical framework of a place or the routes, networks, and concrete features that constrain daily activities (Merrifield 2006). It is both the “medium and outcome of human activity, behavior, and experience” (Lefebvre 1991:66). In Hanoi, this includes the narrow lanes that street vendors use in their everyday routines to hide from authorities and the wider avenues that they often avoid. Such spatial practices structure vendors’ daily lives.

Lived space or representational space is the everyday space in which people live and operate, including the meaning we give to such space. It is “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre 1991:39). This space is the dominated space—the space that “the conceived, ordered hegemonic space will intervene in, codify, rationalize and ultimately attempt to usurp” (Merrifield 1993:523). It includes “complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life” (Lefebvre 1991:33). This representational space is rooted in the histories of specific groups and in those of individual members (Soja 1996). For street vendors, their narratives reveal the everyday practices of making a livelihood on Hanoi’s streets and the tensions and everyday politics that emerge to produce meaning in these representational spaces.

Although Lefebvre remained vague regarding how various components of space interact and connect in dynamic ways, he stressed that the production of social space inevitably includes unequal power relations and social control (Stillerman 2006). He argued that under capitalism, conceived space is dominant, overpowering perceived and lived space. Conceived space becomes central to the production of abstract space. Abstract space is “space represented by elite social groups as homogenous, instrumental, and ahistorical in order to facilitate the exercise of state power and the free flow of capital” (McCann 1999:164). Nevertheless, Lefebvre sees the possibilities for emerging new spaces—a differential space—to serve as resistance to the forces of homogenization present in abstract space. While abstract space seeks to deny the possibilities of differential space, class and social struggle “prevents abstract space from taking over the whole planet and papering over all differences” (Lefebvre 1991:55; see also Merrifield 1993:524). Interestingly, Lefebvre turned his attention specifically to modern-day “socialist space” in Cuba, Moscow, and Beijing, asking, “How is the total space of a ‘socialist’ society to be conceived of? How is it to

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be appropriated?” (Lefebvre 1991:54). He argued that there are probably two possible ways forward: one opts for accelerated growth with state socialism, aiming to “do no more than perfect capitalist strategies of growth” (Lefebvre 1991:55); the other is founded on small- and medium-sized businesses and like-sized towns. It is increasingly apparent that Hanoi’s authorities, with the central state’s blessing, are pursuing the former.

### **Everyday Politics and Resistance**

It is useful at this stage to consider the concepts of everyday politics and everyday resistance in order to unravel how street vendors might push toward a differential space. Ben Kerkvliet’s (2009) work on everyday politics helps us explore the daily realities for Hanoi’s street vendors and the relationships between them and the broader political system of which they are a part, including Hanoi’s municipal authorities, the police, and the Vietnam state. Kerkvliet (2009:232) defines “everyday politics” as involving “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 organized or direct.... Key to everyday politics’ differences from official and advocacy politics is [that] it involves little or no organization, is usually low profile and private behavior, and is done by people who probably do not regard their actions as political.” Kerkvliet (2009:233) divides everyday politics into four further categorizations, namely, “support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance.” As we will see, street vendors in Hanoi are a composite group of actors whose actions stretch across this range.

Although there are numerous works on overt and collective action and resistance, ranging from protests and riots to transnational social movements, few examine more subversive forms of daily resistance. This latter school of thought is perhaps best represented by the writing of James C. Scott (1976, 1985, 1990) and, again, Ben Kerkvliet (2005). In a socialist country such as Vietnam, these authors help us to interpret the actions of non-elite individuals who are wanting to improve their lot or just survive on a day-to-day basis, wishing to be “left alone” by the long arm of the state.

Everyday forms of resistance 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 2001:33). Similarly, Kerkvliet (2009:233) defines resistance, framed within his four approaches to everyday politics, 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 recognized by a significant proportion of other people similar to them.” Kerkvliet (2009:234) proposes that “the concept of everyday resistance...travels well when studying political behavior 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.” Drawing on such a framework, I argue that people in a subordinate position maintain some degree of decision-making power and agency. Unlike Gramsci’s (1971) approach to hegemony and naturalization of elite domination, 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 other, more drastic, organized actions might be.

### **THE CONCEIVED SPACES OF HANOI**

On August 1, 2008, the Vietnam state expanded the official area of Hanoi city from 920 to 3,345 square kilometers, resulting in an overnight expansion of the city’s population from approximately 3.5 to 6.23 million inhabitants (Prime Minister of Vietnam 2008; Vietnam News 2009a). Because Vietnam is a socialist state, this occurred with little public input. The government aims to create an economic superhub, rapidly modernizing the country’s capital and generating a metropolis more populous than Singapore or Kuala Lumpur and rivaling Ho Chi Minh City (Straits Times 2008). The following year, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nông Đức Mạnh, urged Hanoi authorities to “focus on developing a more modern and civilized capital city” (Vietnam News 2009b). Hanoi and its hinterlands are transforming at breakneck pace. Not only are the city limits expanding, engulfing peri-urban regions and opening them up to private investment for high-rise office and apartment towers, but also internal neighborhoods are being razed in order to widen streets and create new transport thoroughways while city markets are being renovated or demolished entirely.<sup>2</sup> A sharp increase in unregulated and illegal building activities has also occurred, and land prices have skyrocketed.<sup>3</sup> Guiding the city’s development is the Hanoi Capital Construction Master



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Plan to 2030 and Vision to 2050, aiming to make Hanoi the world's "first sustainable city" (Turner 2009; VietnamNet 2009). Such growth has not been without its downside, and intra-urban social disparities have been rising (Van Horen 2005), as well as mounting discontent over land seizures, noted earlier.

Before the 2008 ban, approximately 5,600 vegetable and 5,900 fruit vendors worked in greater Hanoi (using the 2004 city limits). These figures include mobile street vendors, fixed vendors selling on pavements, and vendors trading in informal markets (M4P 2007). Legislation regarding street vendor trade and its enforcement has oscillated over the past twenty-five years. Before this time, stricter socialist period rule had attempted to eliminate street vending and small-scale trade activities that were not merged into cooperatives, albeit with haphazard enforcement and limited success. In 1984, city authorities specifically declared that pavements were only for walking on and that other activities would be charged a fee (Koh 2008). Following a series of traffic and order legislations, in 1991 a nationwide traffic and pavement order campaign was implemented in Hanoi (Decree 135/CT). Drummond (1993) details how police would subsequently "swoop down" on inner city areas, demanding fines from street vendors, who relied on word-of-mouth warnings that police were nearby. The 1995 nationwide Decree 36/CP similarly attempted to clear pavements and improve transport flows (Leshkovich 2005). Again, over time, street vendors returned, and Hanoi ward officials complained that enforcing such regulations was impossible. Five months after Decree 36/CP, some leniency was provided for vendor trading along fifty-seven specific Hanoi streets, and retirees were permitted to sell lottery tickets on pavements (Koh 2008). Eight years later, Decree 15/2003 was enacted by Hanoi authorities to "re-establish order" on the streets and to "build up civilized lifestyle" in preparation for hosting the December 2003 Southeast Asia Games (Cohen 2003; Koh 2008). Although this nine-month campaign was characterized by stiffer fines and the confiscation of trade tools (baskets, scales), enforcement remained uneven because ward officials were accustomed by then to a steady flow of pay offs (Cohen 2003; Jensen and Peppard 2003). A similar crackdown occurred prior to the 2006 APEC summit held in Hanoi (Koh 2008; see also Lindell, Hedman, and Verboomen, chapter 10, this volume). The 2008 street vendor ban is a specific effort by Hanoi's municipal government to create a dominant conceived space by defining "the appropriate meaning of, and suitable activities that can take place within, abstract space" (McCann 1999:169).

Importantly, the 2008 ban is implemented and enforced, like many



Vietnamese state policies, at the lowest level of local urban administration—the ward (*phường*). Here, ward officials often adjust state policies to local conditions, and the conceived space of the state regime is mediated to fit the interests of local officials and sometimes the concerns and needs of residents. This hybridization of state-society relations—or the interactions between conceived and lived spaces—means that ward officials are occasionally lenient due to the socioeconomic situation of residents in their jurisdiction but also act to uphold their own informal interests, such as partaking in corrupt actions (Koh 2004b, 2006). Often, these elements blend, such as when a ward official tasked to clear street vendors from sidewalks decides to turn a blind eye, citing “local economic conditions” for why state policy has not been enforced and concurrently taking bribes (Koh 2004a). At specific holiday periods, however, as discussed below, ward officials often receive instructions to take a stricter approach to vending before the usual negotiations soon reappear. Vendors are well aware of this temporal adjustment. As Lindell (2010a:17) notes regarding informal workers in the Global South more broadly, “the various—and apparently contradictory—modalities of power used by the state [vis-à-vis informality] may coexist and be combined. They may also change over time and be deployed selectively upon particular groups of informals.” With this in mind, let us examine the ways in which Hanoi’s vendors regard, negotiate, and transform conceived space.

### **STREET VENDOR LIVELIHOODS: MOTIVATIONS AND TRADER HIERARCHIES**

In response to state-conceived and state-constructed spaces, street vendor livelihood tactics in Hanoi draw upon spatial routines and social networks—embedded in perceived space—to protect existing lived spaces as much as possible (see Stillerman 2006).<sup>4</sup> Yet, during interviews with such vendors, a number of differences quickly became apparent between itinerant street traders, on the one hand, and city residents operating small, “fixed” pavement stalls, on the other, highlighting a lack of uniformity across lived spaces. The majority of itinerant traders are from peri-urban areas, particularly those merged in 2008 to form the Hanoi Capital Region.<sup>5</sup> These vendors commonly rent a room shared with other street vendors, returning to their village to visit family on a monthly basis. Alternatively, fixed street traders often see vending as a means to supplement their household income, establishing a small stall in front of their house or nearby.

Correspondingly, the most pronounced demarcation regarding motivations to vend and the infrapolitics of street trading is by vendor type.

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Given this divide, it is interesting to note that all vendor interviewees typically earned 35,000 VND (\$US2.00 in 2009) a day, equating roughly to ten million VND (\$US570.00) a year, depending on the number of days worked, other commitments, and access to products. These findings correlate with previous surveys of street vendors in the city (M4P 2007).

Seventy percent of itinerant traders interviewed stated that their main motivation to trade on Hanoi's streets is the need to gain funds for their children's school fees. Because *đổi mới* has instigated user-pay services, school fees can reach as high as one to two million VND (\$US60.00–\$120.00) each month. Street vendors consider this a crippling financial burden as many vendors have two or more school-aged children. Hoa,<sup>6</sup> an itinerant fruit vendor from Hưng Yên province, was grim in her prognosis of the direct impacts of the street ban on rural children's education, noting, "If the government were to actually practice the ban strictly, then the 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, a core motivation for trading is the loss of livelihood means in peri-urban areas. Hoa's continuing comments echoed 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's recently been added to the city, so now there are urbanization policies in place. The government has taken the land and sold it to builders, so there's no more land to cultivate.... There are families with five to ten people, all of whom have mouths that wait for food brought by the one member who sells in the streets of Hanoi."

For one-third of interviewees, both itinerant and fixed, street vending is their only source of income to meet their family's basic needs. Vendor Nhu highlighted the precariousness of these livelihoods when he noted, "My savings are very small and are just enough to pay for food and my room on days that it rains and I can't sell."

Fixed-stall street vendors 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 altars helps them pass the time, "get out of the house," and stay active in old age. Often, fixed street vendors have previously worked in state-owned factories or enterprises, finding themselves unemployed when the subsidized period ended in the late 1980s, albeit with a small pension. These traders generally have higher levels of training and education than itinerant street vendors, and by and large, their motivations for becoming a street vendor are radically different from itinerant traders'. The only overlapping "push factor"

we found is illness or death of the family's main breadwinner, often the vendor's husband.

Fixed vendors overwhelmingly view itinerant vendors as "outsiders," making disparaging comments about them 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. No Hanoi resident does the 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 is overpopulated already.

In comparison, itinerant street vendors express resentment toward the often favorable treatment received by Hanoi resident traders from local officials, commenting that fixed traders monopolize the best trading opportunities. Van, selling convenience items itinerantly from a carrying pole, bluntly explained the social distinction: "The fixed street vendors think that the temporary or wandering street vendors are nothing in comparison with themselves." Although many itinerant street vendors interviewed had been in Hanoi for upwards of fifteen years, they nevertheless continue to feel excluded by Hanoians. The impacts of this social hierarchy become even more pronounced when we examine vendor interactions with the authorities.

### **EVERYDAY POLITICS OF HANOI STREET VENDING**

In urban Hanoi, there are 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/team"), *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, although the *Đội tự quản* will often be seen participating in raids and chasing after vendors alongside the *Công an* (whom most vendors simply call "the police"), *Đội tự quản* cannot (theoretically) fine vendors.

This division of responsibility and authority among state officials plays into the hands of street vendors and limits the extent to which the state apparatus can control vending behavior, thereby extending the degree to which vendors can defend and reconstruct their lived spaces. For example,

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Hien, a migrant itinerant street vendor, explained, “When the ban was first launched, I thought I could be caught by any type of police. But then I found out 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 that I have to worry about is the *Công an* and *Đội tự quản*, and when I see these police, I run.” Other branches of the policing apparatus even support street vendors economically by purchasing food and goods while in uniform, and government officials in general are sought-after customers. Paradoxically, Ha locates her tea stall near government offices because the “government officials are reliable customers with money in their pockets.”

Despite the codification of fines and permissible street vending activities outlined in the 2008 legislation, the behavior of *Công an* officials remains erratic and lacks coordination. One Hanoi resident, Ly, a fixed vendor, explained, “Some days the police [*Công an*] take your goods, and the next day the same person will walk by, smile at you, and not do anything. For example, yesterday they confiscated my goods and fined me, but today they are smiling at me like nothing happened.” In 2009, when fined by the *Công an*, vendors were paying in the vicinity of 75,000 VND (\$US4.50) to have their goods released—a fine twice their average daily profit. The process by which this fine is paid varies. Sometimes the transaction is conducted “on the spot,” but at 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 among neighborhoods and between fixed and itinerant sellers. For instance, Huong, selling fruit from a carrying pole, noted that she pays between 25,000 and 75,000 VND each time she is fined. Another itinerant vendor, Lan, added, “Every police station has a different fee that ranges from 20,000–75,000 VND, and so the fee that street vendors pay is dependent on which officials catch them.” In particular, she remarked that “the *Hàng Đào* police station [*Công an*] near *Đống Xuân* market is the most expensive. As for the cheapest, that’s harder to say since it depends more on the feelings of the policeman at the time.”

An, an itinerant trader selling pineapples and pomelos (citrus fruit), explained that if she is able to settle the fine on the spot, then she usually has to pay only 40,000 VND. Yet, if the police decide to take her goods to the station, she can recover them only in the late afternoon, when they will have spoiled, and has to pay 75,000 VND. She added, “When the police confiscate my goods, they almost always eat the pieces of pineapple that are already cut. With the pomelo, I count how many pieces there are before the police take it, and I put it in a bag that I tie tight to prevent them from

taking it.” Frequently, officials also confiscate traders’ implements, such as baskets, bicycles, stools, cups, or teapots, and in a few cases sell these items back to their owners “below market price.”

### **Itinerant Traders’ Resistance: Spatial and Temporal Tricks of the Trade**

Part of the everyday, covert resistance measures used by itinerant street vendors includes understanding and interpreting the spatial practices and surveillance gaps of the *Công an*. One such gap occurs along the borderlines where two wards meet. Itinerant street vendors operating here have the advantage that if they are chased by police, they can quickly cross the ward boundary to escape capture, because police are unable to fine street vendors outside their jurisdiction. Itinerant traders also become acutely aware of which streets are less targeted by police. An itinerant trader selling pineapples 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 *Yên*, an itinerant trader selling rice cakes, who never goes near the Old Quarter: “I am sure to be caught by the police, because the police do their work there more seriously. Those streets have a lot of police.”

Not surprisingly, in response to police spatial practices, those of vendors have been modified. Routes chosen by itinerant street vendors have shifted to small streets and alleys that are relatively more appealing for police avoidance than larger, busier roads. Also bound up in this decision making are the different tools of itinerant trade, namely, baskets, baskets suspended from a bamboo carrying pole, or bicycles. *Huong*, a woman selling fruit, explained that a shoulder pole, though heavy, gives her the flexibility to navigate her goods down narrow alleys directly to the homes of her customers and to move quickly if she hears mobile *Công an* units approaching. Bicycles are viewed as advantageous because they allow the seller to move large quantities, but also risky because they are far more expensive to replace if confiscated (figure 8.2).

Temporal tactics are also key to vendor livelihood survival, and traders are quick to learn police routines and rhythms. For example, *Hanh* operates her fixed stall with tea and snacks one lane away from a banned street. Her stall nevertheless remains a target for police, and she knows to locate it on the pavement only on Sundays, when local police are off duty. On other days, she locates herself inside the doorway of a friend with whom she has made financial arrangements to use this space. *Hanh* explained that she would prefer to sell on the pavement: “I can earn more money since people sit down for tea more casually. My customers also prefer outside

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**FIGURE 8.2**

*An itinerant bread vendor selling from her bicycle, Hanoi. Photo: Sarah Turner, Hanoi, VN, 2011.*

because it gives them more space.” But she negotiates her temporal restrictions to make do as best she can (figure 8.3). During weekdays, an important window of opportunity occurs around noon—lunch break for the *Công an*. This window allows traders to enter areas that are usually highly monitored, like the Old Quarter. Indeed, eleven itinerant street vendors we interviewed were actively selling on banned streets, using the police lunch break to their advantage.

As well as daily temporal routines, the police presence routinely increases around important national holidays, and the chances of street vendors being fined and their goods confiscated rise accordingly. Police control is more intense during Tết (the Vietnamese New Year period) and, as Ly noted, “other times of the year when the government wants the police to work strictly” or, indeed, police want extra cash. Vendor Lien interpreted these escalations of surveillance in cyclical terms, explaining, “Usually, I get fined one time each month. During a big event like Tết, Christmas, International New Year, or when an international state leader comes to Hanoi, at those occasions I will be fined about four times.”

Itinerant traders negotiate state directives either clandestinely through spatial and temporal avoidance tactics or via covert resistance measures in





**FIGURE 8.3**

*A Hanoi resident fixed-stall tea seller and her customers, negotiating their rights to pavement “time.” Photo: Sarah Turner, Hanoi, VN, 2011.*

efforts to defend and expand their lived spaces. The infrapolitics of fixed traders, discussed next, also include compliance and overt adjustments in their negotiations with local-level state officials.

### **Fixed Trader Negotiations: Social Capital, Bribes, and Identity Management**

Prior to the most recent street vending legislation, Koh (2004a) reported that police active at the ward level found it difficult to fine local traders with whom they had a long-term relationship and met on a daily basis. Officials explained, “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’ [*bỏ 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 2004a:221). Similar, as well as novel, tactics are being advanced since the 2008 ban, with fixed-stall vendors negotiating their “right” to vend via bribes and payments or through what I call “identity management” techniques as they play upon specific identities to uphold their right to trade.



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For others, simple avoidance techniques, through the support of neighbors and customers via important social capital ties, help them escape the wrath of police.

Camaraderie and a degree of solidarity among vendors and customers play an essential role in vendor livelihoods and in defending existing lived spaces. The majority of street vendors interviewed, both itinerant and fixed, said that informing one another verbally of a police presence was critical to avoiding fines. One fixed street vendor, Thao, a retired factory worker now selling tea, explained that since the 2008 ban, she must react quickly whenever police approach. Thao obtains help from both customers and traders selling lottery tickets nearby to move her goods to a nearby shop doorway, out of “harm’s way” on the pavement. Solidarity is also shared among itinerant traders, and since many rent rooms with others in the same vocation, they exchange precise information on police enforcement that can be used for avoidance tactics, reflecting the important role of social capital within their everyday politics.

The spatial tactics of Hanoi’s resident, fixed-stall operators highlight nuanced negotiations between conceived and lived space as vendors claim their right to trade. Fixed-stall operators are far more likely to broker an arrangement with local ward officials than are itinerant traders. Trang, a fixed-stall tea trader, explained that in her local ward, “the head of the local police station is an older policeman who has decided not to confiscate the goods from the local street vendors.” “Instead,” noted Dao, another trader, “we have to pay an annual *thuế môn bài* [business tax/excise tax]” of about 100,000 VND (\$US5.70). Trang and Dao believe that this is because the fixed traders are all local residents, reflecting the mediation of state-society relations noted by Koh (2006). In this same area, police confiscate goods from itinerant traders, who now tend to avoid the area; resident vendors thus benefit further, through the exclusion of potential competition.

Sometimes, as part of their negotiated relationships to settle upon bribes or “taxes” with local police or to avoid such payments, a number of fixed-stall traders use “identity management” techniques to secure a trading spot. For instance, Linh exploits her status and partial identity as a war veteran to openly resist Công an officials while operating her tea stall. She does not hide her disapproval of the new street vending ban and related police activities, perceiving them to be “daily robbery.... The police take any means available to get money. The street vendors are forced to pay the police money, and in some wards, they pay a monthly fee just to sit on the streets.” She explained that she is not frightened to shout 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 explains, "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."

In other cases, long-term fixed-stall operators understand when to move aside or retreat from view when police come by. Be, a woman selling on the same street corner for more than a decade, explained, "We know the police will not catch us. We simply move aside to show our respect to the police." In particular, Be noted the importance of demonstrating that she does not look down on the law and police: "We must pretend to be afraid, to show respect." Such quotidian acts manipulate the mechanisms of state discipline and conceived space so as to "conform to them only in order to evade them" (de Certeau 1984:xiv).

### **CONCLUSIONS: COUNTER-SPACES**

"The rationality of the state, of its techniques, plans and programmes, provokes opposition" (Lefebvre 1991:23). As Vietnam's capital city rapidly modernizes, vendors are targeted by the state apparatus as old-fashioned, obsolete, and a traffic hazard. Yet, they remain a favorite source of daily necessities for a large proportion of the urban population, and for many traders themselves—especially, rural migrants—vending remains a core livelihood strategy. Prior to the 2008 ban on street selling and ever since, vendors have faced erratic behavior from ward-level officials. The ban's implementation is fractured due to enforcers' limited geographical jurisdiction and disjointed surveillance, both grounded in temporal routines and/or in interpersonal relationships. To survive, street vendors move within these different fissures on a daily basis. Taking note of the spatial practices and jurisdictions of specific officials and the timing of their operations, itinerant vendors carve a niche both spatially and temporally to continue their work with the least possible harassment. In comparison, fixed street vendors more often engage in direct power struggles and negotiations at the local level, paying bribes and/or leveraging their personal identity as individuals who are elderly, retired, educated, war veterans, well-connected, and so on. Police are less threatening to residents and more easily dismissed. Here, we witness the fashioning of discrete public and private transcripts (Scott 1990). On the one hand, street vendors publicly appear submissive to local police and try to hurriedly move aside or out of sight. On the other hand, interviewees frequently express their distaste

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and disrespect for these uniformed officials, uncovering covert or, at times, more overt resistance tactics.

Political and cultural conflicts over the use of space on Hanoi's streets and pavements are ongoing as the state works to reshape all space as abstract—that space which facilitates the state's exercise of power and the flow of capital (McCann 1999)—via its management and control of citizens. The municipal authorities, strongly supported by the central state in its quest for modernity, conceive this urban space so as to privilege the wealthy, especially those owning motorized transportation, with pavements becoming legitimate parking lots for thousands of motorbikes rather than vendor sites and pedestrian right-of-ways. The state's plans to preside over lived space through its modernization drive—including, among other strategies, its city planning rules, urban renewal projects, encouragement of high-rise development, and large residential gated communities—have resulted in a range of (usually) covert resistance strategies from the “other,” those marginalized groups who are constantly made to feel out of place. Through reappropriation and struggle, these groups create “counter-spaces” in an attempt to preserve their livelihoods and a livable environment (Lefebvre 1991:381; Stillerman 2006). These differential spaces, as Stewart (1995:615) notes, “endure or arise on the margins of the homogenized realm, through resistances to the agendas of land developers, urban planners, and the State.”

It is important to remember, though, that when operating in the current political climate of socialist Vietnam, those opposing the formation of abstract space are not necessarily going to mount all-out “counterattacks” (Lefebvre 1991:373) overtly and directly challenging the state. Here we have a situation quite different from that noted by Mitchell (1995) regarding riots in Berkeley in 1991 and by McCann (1999) regarding radicalized street protests in Lexington, Kentucky in 1994, where the authors examine the restructuring of public space as “spaces for representation” by marginal groups (Mitchell 1995:115), and likewise the recent Occupy Movement (see Bromley, chapter 2, this volume). In Hanoi, as noted in the introduction, a high degree of state surveillance and intervention leaves little room for discussion, let alone dissent, and new spaces must be produced through subtle means and judicious negotiations.

Hanoi's street vendors are responding to the abstract space of the central and local municipal governments by drawing on a range of careful, everyday tactics to defend existing lived spaces and create new ones (Stillerman 2006). Itinerant traders utilize their understandings of officials' spatial and temporal routines in order to circumnavigate the rule of

law. They also draw on spatial practices that reinforce their identity, such as maintaining regular routes for customers, formulating daily interactions, and maintaining social capital ties and networks within neighborhoods and vendor communities. Fixed-stall operators attempt to preserve existing living spaces and also create new spaces, drawing on place-based identities and forging alliances. These lived spaces that vendors seek to create are necessarily selective and at times contradictory in the face of the power of abstract space. These multi-use, lived spaces are a political and ideological challenge—albeit frequently a covert one—to the urban spaces conceived under socialist rule and (carefully sanctioned) free market capitalism. This results in an ongoing conflict between lived and abstract spaces, between actual use and regulation.

Within a political system in which the state continues to have a strong hand in organizing social space and people's livelihoods, especially on Hanoi's streets, these interviews have shown that the picture, though not that bright, is not entirely bleak either. The simultaneous defense of lived spaces and the creation of new ones are allowing subordinated actors to contest abstract space, reconstruct lived spaces, and create counter-space. Hanoi's street vendors are actors with agency and resourcefulness, reflecting a spatial politics with which marginalized groups seek to build and maintain livelihoods and represent themselves in specific ways, be it to officials or customers. A combination of ingenious everyday politics, including carefully designed covert and overt resistance tactics, might just enable vendors to continue to appropriate and rove these streets a little longer.

### **Notes**

1. My thanks to Karen Tranberg Hansen, Walter Little, and B. Lynne Milgram for organizing the seminar at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and to the participants for their suggestions on this chapter. This research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, Canada.

2. The municipal People's Committee has renovated a number of city markets, including Chợ Mơ and Chợ Hàng Da, and the 19/12 Market, active since the 1940s, has been closed to make way for an office complex (Vietnam News 2008). Renovated markets have comparatively high fees, so relocation is not an option for street vendors, in comparison with the cases made by Milgram (chapter 5, this volume) and Seligmann (chapter 7, this volume).

3. All land in Vietnam is owned by the state. Individuals cannot buy or sell land but, since the 1993 Land Law of Vietnam, can "exchange, transfer, lease, inherit and mortgage the rights for land use." As such, land has gained a commercial value, one that is rapidly rising in Hanoi.

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4. Although I use the word “tactic” loosely here, it could be considered to relate to de Certeau’s (1984:xix) more specific term, referring to an action that does not have the formal legitimacy of a “strategy” and that belongs to the less powerful “other.”

5. The 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, and Hà Tây province has been fully merged with Hanoi.

6. Pseudonyms are used throughout.