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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kurfürst, S. (2023). Shared Streets: Choreographed Disorder in the Late Socialist City. *Politics and Governance*, 11(2), 305-314. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i2.6466>

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Article

# Shared Streets: Choreographed Disorder in the Late Socialist City

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Submitted: 8 November 2022 | Accepted: 23 February 2023 | Published: 15 June 2023

## Abstract

This article examines the local self-governance of streets and sidewalks in Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Streets and sidewalks are shared among diverse actors for various activities while being formally managed by the state. Since the passing of the *Đổi Mới* economic reform program in 1986, which paved the way for the development of a private sector economy, street trade has been flourishing in Hanoi. Private individuals, mostly women, temporarily occupy sidewalks and streets to sell their goods. This form of petty trade caters to urbanites' everyday demand for fresh products and food. While many Hanoians are actually in favor of street trade, the municipality seeks to undermine and regulate street trade, as it contradicts some state administrators' vision of a modern and civilized city. Drawing inspiration from Jacobs' (1961) "sidewalk ballet," this article particularly examines the social norms governing public space. As they constantly need to negotiate their right to the city, street traders develop tactics to circumvent the municipal sidewalk order. Following the rhythms of regular crackdowns on street trade, the emergence and vanishing of mediation spaces, and urbanites' tactics, this contribution seeks to understand modes of urban governance over these shared spaces. This study draws on ethnographic data collected during one year of fieldwork, local newspaper analysis, and secondary literature.

## Keywords

Hanoi; post-socialism; street trade; urban governance; Vietnam

## Issue

This article is part of the issue "Local Self-Governance and Weak Statehood: A Convincing Liaison?" edited by Antje Daniel (University of Vienna), Hans-Joachim Lauth (Würzburg University), and Eberhard Rothfuß (University of Bayreuth).

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## 1. Introduction

Anybody who has visited Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, or any medium-sized town in Vietnam will have noticed the bustling street life. Mobile vendors sell various foods, drinks, and fresh produce, while permanent food and vending stalls occupy the sidewalks and street corners of Vietnamese cities. The occupation of public space for private economic activities has increased extensively since the introduction of the *Đổi Mới* economic reform policy (Schoenberger & Turner, 2012; Turner, 2009). In 1986, this reform program was passed during the VI Party Congress, paving the way for the development of a private economic sector and the country's integration into the global economy. However, these economic reforms were not accompanied by parallel political reforms. To date, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a one-party state ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Vietnam—like many other states in Southeast Asia during the second half of the 20th century—has been dubbed a strong state due to its structural dominance over society. Features of the Vietnamese strong state comprehend its administrative penetration into society, including the provision of national security and other public goods, such as infrastructures. Some of these public goods, like public transport or medical care, are still in the making (London, 2022; Rotberg, 2003). However, some scholars of Vietnam's political economy, who have examined the efficiency of state regulations and the degree to which they are enforced, challenge the idea that Vietnam is a strong state (Kerkvliet, 2001; Koh, 2006).

Koh (2001) suggests that neither the labels strong nor weak fit the reality of Vietnam's state. One reason for this view is the existence of institutional gaps between "the institutional designs that define the party-state's

formal organization and the (informal) institutionalized practices that characterize its actual operations and their effects” (London, 2022, p. 26). In other words, although the party-state might be active in enforcing rules, many of its activities are determined by informal practices that become institutionalized rules (Kerkvliet, 2001; London, 2022). The sharing of sidewalks in Hanoi for private economic activities provides an excellent case for examining the interplay between formal regulations and informal practices at the local level. In this site, actors not only engage with the legal context but also with social norms and values that implicitly govern these spaces of interaction.

Since the late 1980s, the municipality has continuously passed regulations to prohibit trade on the sidewalks and municipal authorities regularly conduct crackdowns on street vendors. Yet, notwithstanding these municipal campaigns to re-establish “urban order” (*trật tự đô thị*), migrants and urban residents alike continue to exploit the sidewalks for private business activities. Through Kim’s (2015) work, I understand the sidewalks of Hanoi as spaces of opportunity. The sidewalk provides socio-political and economic possibilities and is a space shared among various actors (Nguyen, 2022, p. 4). The exploitation of the public good of the sidewalk occurs based on local forms of self-organization. Pfeilschifter et al. (2020, p. 10) describe such self-organization as an open process of collaboration “through which common interests and positions are stabilized in social relationships, networks, and often in a shared real-life ‘locality,’ while groups are institutionalized through the mechanisms of solidarity and/or hierarchy.” Accordingly, this article seeks to answer the following research questions: How do urbanites’ local self-organizations interact with state regulations? And, which social norms, values, or moralities do self-regulations imply?

To answer these questions, I will trace the major regulative changes that occurred between 2007 and 2008 in the municipality of Hanoi. Seeking inspiration from Jacobs’ (1961) *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, I discuss the social norms governing the self-organized spaces of Hanoi, as well as the sharing activity (Widlok, 2017).

Overall, this article contributes to research on local self-organization under authoritarian regimes. Pfeilschifter et al. (2020, p. 4) suggest a correlation between weak statehood and local self-organization, claiming that “the weaker the state’s impact on society is, the more important local self-governance becomes.” However, in Vietnam, the state’s impact on society is actually quite strong, but there are policy arenas, like the provision of public infrastructure, in which the state does not fully enforce regulations or fails to provide public goods, such as vendors’ access to the city to generate income. In these cases, access to urban space is self-organized based on social capital, which is comprised of personal relationships and trust among vendors, local officials, and residents. Self-organization does not typ-

ically scale up beyond the local level, except on rare occasions, such as the protest of women vendors organized in Hanoi in 2008. Thus, I pay particular attention to the gendered dimension of the local self-organization, as most actors involved in street trade are women who live on the urban fringes or temporarily migrate to the city to earn an income for their families (Nguyen, 2022).

The material presented in this contribution is based on two research projects. One on public space development and the other on urban gardening in Vietnam. For these projects, I conducted one year of field research in Hanoi (from September 2007 to August 2008) and various research stays ranging from three to six weeks between 2010 and 2018. The year 2008 marked the beginning of a ban on street trade in 62 major streets in the city center. On this occasion, the main newspapers and internet fora in Hanoi invited citizens’ opinions on these municipal planning measures. Accordingly, I retrieved information on sidewalk regulations from Vietnamese newspaper articles and municipal government documents.

Through participant observation, and informal conversations in Vietnamese with residents and street vendors in the urban markets of the Ngoc Ha and Tay Ho wards, I was able to document street vendors’ everyday practices. I recorded these materials and conversations in semi-structured observation memos (Diekmann, 1995), noting information on the time, location, number, and gender of actors, as well as the kinds of activities they carried out.

Through photo documentation, I was also able to track the (non-)compliance with sidewalk regulations in the locality. White lines drawn on the inner-city sidewalks, as well as municipal signs, are constant reminders of the prohibition of using sidewalks for parking or trading. Nevertheless, photos reveal that most residents ignored the signs and marks on the ground. For the coding and analysis of the material, I used the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti. In the next section, I introduce the main concepts used to analyze the self-organization of urban residents and vendors. In Section 3, I offer a short overview of the development of street trade. In Section 4, I will introduce the reader to municipal governance and sidewalk regulations in Hanoi, while Section 5 discusses the sidewalks as shared spaces. In Section 6, I conclude with a summary of social norms governing the shared space.

## 2. Conceptualizing Weak Statehood vs. Urban Self-Organization in Vietnam

Weak statehood is often associated with states in the so-called Global South and implies that the state is not able to provide all the necessary public goods (Draude et al., 2012; Pfeilschifter et al., 2020). In addition, the state’s power to enforce rules is viewed as limited within particular regions, social groups, and policy arenas (Rotberg, 2003).

In the literature, Vietnam's current political economy is referred to as "late socialist" or "market-Leninist," denoting the economic transformation from a planned to a market economy in combination with an authoritarian rule (Harms, 2011; London, 2022; Tai, 2001). Although the revised Constitution of 1992 formally grants the right to demonstrate, public space remains highly controlled by the state and public protests remain rare. In the 2010s, political observers saw a small opening for political change with an active online community advocating party plurality and people's participation. Moreover, citizens began to demand state accountability regarding the privatization of state-owned enterprises, the awarding of public contracts, and the issuing of licenses to foreign companies (e.g., for mining). However, the party-state soon started to repress such civil society actions, and now eagerly monitors digital space, such as social media and blogs (Duong, 2017; Kerkvliet, 2022; London, 2022). Consequently, advocates of a strong state point to the state's structural dominance of society and its making of policies that are quietly accepted by society (Koh, 2001). However, this view of Vietnam as a strong state is increasingly contested, especially when inquiring into the effectiveness of such domination. Effectiveness is measured by the extent to which adopted measures are fully implemented and the extent to which their implementation is monitored by the state. Another idea that challenges the perception of a strong state is that the reforms introduced in 1986 were actually a response of the Communist Party to people's demand for change, adapting policies to what was already going on the ground (Kerkvliet, 2001; Koh, 2006).

Accordingly, Kerkvliet (2001, p. 245) proposes to rethink the relationship between the state and society in Vietnam in terms of a dialogue, "which incorporates communication of contentious ideas and preferences in ways that, in Vietnam, are often indirect and non-verbal." He suggests that analysts assess "arenas in which boundaries, rights, jurisdictions, and power distribution between state and societal agencies are debated, contested, and resolved (at least temporarily)" (Kerkvliet, 2001, p. 240). He also highlights society's room for maneuver, suggesting that state agencies do not completely control policy-making and implementation.

On an everyday basis, Vietnamese citizens can ignore the state's rules on some matters, while making their voices heard by going beyond official channels. In his research on the political participation of subordinate groups in Southeast Asia, James Scott characterizes such phenomenon according to what he calls "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990). According to him, "hidden transcripts" consist of heterodox discourses taking place "offstage," beyond the control and observation of those in power (Scott, 1990, p. 4). Such discourse can comprise, for instance, gossip, rumors, folk tales, and songs. For Scott, relations of power are intimately bound up with relations of resistance: Once established, relations of domination do not merely persist through their own

inertia. Since such relations involve the use of power to extract work, production, services, and taxes against the will of the dominated, these relations generate considerable friction and can only be sustained by continuous efforts at reinforcement (Scott, 1990). His understanding of power and resistance helps to analyze the rhythms of street trade in Hanoi, which are characterized by continuous crackdowns initiated by municipal agents and street vendors' self-organized practices of resistance, which include vendors' circumvention of regulations, the negotiation of their presence with local officials, identifying loopholes in the regulation, and, finally, their orchestrated collective actions.

Previous studies of public space in Hanoi have focused on authorities' repression of self-organized activities and urbanites' practices of resistance. These various forms of subversion have been discussed as tactics in the sense developed by de Certeau (Barthelmes, 2018; Geertman et al., 2016). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau argues that everyday practices have a tactical character that continuously manipulates events to transform them into "opportunities" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). For de Certeau, everyday practices are "clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiv). Along similar lines, Bayat outlines the relevance of everyday practices for inducing social and political change. In his research with urban subaltern groups in Middle Eastern cities, he defines their individual, ongoing efforts to make a living in the city as a "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (Bayat, 2004, p. 90). This quiet encroachment of the ordinary connotes the gradual expansion of their space in the city by winning new positions for movement. The occupation of public space for economic activities is one example of the winning over of urban space (Boudreau & Geertman, 2018). These everyday struggles are not carried out at the expense of themselves or of other urban poor people, but rather at the cost of dominant groups, the rich, and municipal and state governments. Bayat argues that "this type of quiet and gradual grassroots activism tends to contest many fundamental aspects of state prerogatives, including the meaning of order, the control of public space, access to public and private goods, and the relevance of modernity" (Bayat, 2004, p. 91). Bayat (2004, p. 81) particularly focuses on small-scale direct actions carried out by individuals and families. While this is certainly the case in Hanoi, I would also like to draw attention to residents' and vendors' collaborative and self-organized actions for contesting the urban order.

In the case presented here, self-organization is important as it produces benefits, including a daily income as well as a reduction of costs for the people and the administration. Self-organization is intimately linked to a locality—meaning a spatially demarcated collective defined by a common infrastructure, as well as social norms and values. In the locality, self-regulation occurs

based on social control, rather than external control, such as by municipal agents (Korff & Rothfuß, 2009; Pfeilschifter et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Jane Jacobs, an early advocate of research on urban self-organization, points out that public order is not primarily maintained by the police, but rather by “an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 32). It is here that the activity of “sharing in” becomes important, which means “extending the circle of people who can enjoy the benefits of the shared resource” (Widlok, 2004, p. 61). The concept of “sharing in” is important to understand how the maintenance of street trade is justified by appealing to a narrative of itinerant traders as being in need.

### 3. Street Trade in Hanoi

Before the city transitioned to socialism, street trade used to be a vibrant part of Hanoi’s urban space. At the end of the 1950s, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam gradually curtailed all private sector activities. However, during the years of the Second Indochina War (1965–1975) and the so-called subsidy era (*thời bao cấp*; 1975–1986), private trade with illegally imported goods was resurrected. Goods that were not available through the subsidy system were informally traded among neighbors, kin, and friends (Turner, 2009). However, it was only with the liberalization of the agriculture procurement system, after 1988, that the influx of itinerant street traders from surrounding villages into the city increased (Koh, 2006; Li, 1996). Forbes characterized this development as the emergence of a “pavement economy” in Vietnam (Forbes, 1996, p. 62).

Sidewalks in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are material witnesses of the colonial past. French colonial urbanism introduced broad tree-lined avenues with wide sidewalks as well as public parks and gardens to the city of Hanoi. Since the end of the subsidy era, sidewalks have become important sites of production and consumption in the city, offering space for commerce and trading by those who do not own private property. Li (1996) has discussed the extensive chain migration from rural areas to the city that fueled urbanization in the 1990s. However, apart from migration resulting in settling in the city, the temporary rural-to-urban migration of mobile vendors was another effect of the transition from a planned to a market economy. Streams of mostly women, riding on bicycles and trucks at the break of dawn, would enter the city to sell their fresh produce on markets and streets. In 2009, 31.6% of the workforce in urban areas was employed in the informal sector—which means that despite long working hours, earnings are low and social security coverage is missing—as compared to 20.7% of workers in rural areas. This means that informality is highest in the urban employment market (Chi et al., 2010).

The influx of petty traders from rural areas to the city posed a challenge to the municipality’s ordering of space. Several municipalities in Vietnam seek to create a modern and civilized urban landscape (Harms, 2011; Schwenkel, 2012), following the examples of other Southeast and East Asian cities, such as Singapore and Seoul. This striving for a modern and civilized urban landscape is particularly relevant for Hanoi, since it is the capital of Vietnam and one of the five cities categorized as first-class cities (*thành phố trực thuộc trung ương*). These cities are viewed by the state as being of significant importance in terms of politics, economy, and culture, therefore, they are kept under the direct control of the Vietnamese government. In the context of urban planning, street trade is considered an obstacle to modernization, a relic “of an undesirable past” that needs to be abolished (Leshkowich, 2005, p. 188; see also Kurfürst, 2012). Such statements are not different from many other cities around the globe, where the purification and literal cleansing of urban landscapes is seen as a major tool for establishing civil order, which in turn is viewed as necessary for attracting foreign direct investment. For this purpose, actors and practices deemed disturbing to public order, such as homeless people, street hawkers, drug addicts, and so forth, are pushed out of inner-city districts (Herzfeld, 2006). In Hanoi, the purification of public space clearly targets the “unmanaged, mobile bodies” of women petty traders (Schwenkel, 2012, p. 461; see also Harms, 2011). Many women coming from Hanoi’s hinterland were forced into street vending through increased urbanization and municipal policies that turned their land into spaces for urban real estate development. Middle-aged women, in particular, depend on petty trade as a source of income to provide for their families (Nguyen, 2018). That is why Leshkowich (2005, p. 187) fittingly refers to the perceived disorder of sidewalks as a “feminine disorder.”

### 4. Municipal Governance and Sidewalk Regulations

In Vietnam, urban planning is mostly conducted in a top-down manner. Although the government increasingly recognizes the need for more bottom-up initiatives in urban development, attempts at integrating public opinion are still limited. A common way of doing this is to present a draft plan to the public and then invite comments on the plan (Nguyen Lan interview on March 5, 2008). However, the extent to which such feedback is integrated into the finalization of the plan remains undisclosed. In 2009, the government departed from its original top-down approach to urban planning by implementing the Law on Urban Planning. In general, the law acknowledges the right of public comment, but it neither obliges municipal authorities to consult nor to consider public comments in urban policy-making (Gillespie & Nguyen, 2019).

The People’s Committee governs the municipality of Hanoi with different branches at each administrative



level. While regulations are passed at the municipal level, they are implemented and enforced on the local levels of the ward and district. Schoenberger and Turner (2012) identify at least five branches of the state apparatus that conduct surveillance, crowd control, security, and policing in Hanoi. These are *đội tự quản* (ward-level self-management security), *công an* (public security), *cảnh sát giao thông* (traffic police), *thanh tra giao thông* (traffic inspectors), and *cảnh sát cơ động* (mobile police, or “fast response” teams). This variety of actors already indicates that neither the state nor the municipality are monolithic entities, but rather groups of actors engaged in practices aimed at the implementation and enforcement of rules. Adopting Kerkvliet’s dialogical approach to state-society relations, Koh shows how urban residents constantly negotiate with local officials at the ward level concerning the implementation of regulations for creating a “mediation space” (Koh, 2006, p. 15). He argues that local officials have social obligations and responsibilities to their fellow neighbors and citizens besides being municipal organs (Koh, 2006). Accordingly, they are socially embedded in the community. Empirically, their familiarity with fellow residents showed that when local police officers patrolling the streets greeted residents by either nodding or saying “hello,” they used the proper form of address in Vietnamese, which presupposes the speakers’ awareness of the addressee’s age, gender, and social status (participant observation from May 2008 to July 2008). Due to their social embeddedness in the locality, such officials sometimes find it difficult to enforce rules. Showing empathy (*tình cảm*) to avoid causing people hardship is a long-standing regulatory practice, which requires local government officials to adapt policies accordingly (Endres, 2014; Gillespie & Nguyen, 2019; Koh, 2006; Nguyen, 2022). In interviews and newspaper articles, urban residents would also appeal to authorities’ compassion (*thông cảm*) to justify and legitimize street vending as a means to make a living in the city. However, while this mediation space opens up at the local level of the urban ward, regulations on the use of sidewalks are passed at the municipal level.

Since 1986, the city of Hanoi has conducted several anti-street trade campaigns (Cohen, 2003; Koh, 2006; Quân, 2008b). Particularly over the last 15 years, the People’s Committee of Hanoi has designed a comprehensive, but sometimes contradictory, legal framework addressing the use of sidewalks in Hanoi. In 2006, the People’s Committee of Hanoi passed the Decision (*quyết định*) no. 227/2006/QĐ-UB. The Decision was a first step in the decentralization of urban management, transferring responsibility for public space management from the municipality to the district. In 2007 and 2008, during my year of field research in Hanoi, two further Decisions were implemented. Decision no. 148, which became effective on January 8, 2008, permits the “provisional usage” of the sidewalks by private individuals for a fee (Quân, 2008a). The possibility of using sidewalks for individual purposes is confusing, however, since the

municipality’s official documents state that “the sidewalks and roadsides are all part of the basic system of the urban technical infrastructure belonging to the state. The sidewalks should basically be used by pedestrians” (Quân, 2008c; translated from Vietnamese by the author). Decision no. 148 obviously challenges this understanding of the function of sidewalks, rendering it legal for private businesses to utilize sidewalks, and roadsides for a fee (“Từ 8.1. thu Phí,” 2008). Upon paying the fee, organizations and individuals receive permission from the jurisdictional organ for the provisional usage of public utilities, such as public space.

The renting out of public space for private business, at first sight, seems to be part of the ongoing privatization of cities. Yet, this privatization is different from how many cities around the world strive to attract foreign direct investment to fill leaking state budgets. Rather different districts (in a more localized sense) benefit from this form of privatization by encouraging the density of shops and street vendors within their administrative boundaries. In an expert interview, a sociologist referred to this process as “*hành chính hóa*” (“administrativeization”) of urban space in Hanoi (interview performed while doing a workshop during the time of the field research on July 24, 2008). This term refers to the increasing colonization of common public goods by the state. Moreover, it also signifies administrative chaos, since each district handles municipal decisions differently (Kurfürst, 2012). Furthermore, it also points to the ambiguous role of the municipality. In India, Roy (2009) has shown how the state and municipality are active producers of informality, deeming certain practices, spaces, and actors “formal,” whereas others are pushed into the realm of informality. The production of informality through municipal decisions becomes most obvious when looking closely at Decision no. 148 and no. 227 together, as they actually contradict each other. While Decision no. 227 clearly prohibits doing business on the sidewalks, Decision no. 148 explicitly permits such uses for payment (Kurfürst, 2012). Consequently, even those citizens who want to comply with the law find themselves confronted with conflicting information. Mrs. Mai, a woman selling noodle soup from her mobile food stall at Hang Dieu Street, explained this to a journalist in the following way: “Tomorrow I go to the ward to ask to cut the fee on the usage of the sidewalk; it seems that doing business is legal” (Quân, 2008a). Not only Mrs. Mai, but many other people involved in the pavement economy, think that Decision no. 148 permits them to use the sidewalk for business activities, if they pay the monthly fee ranging between 35,000 and 45,000 VND per square meter, depending on the location in the district.

The foregoing account of different directives on the utilization of sidewalks for private economic activities demonstrates the legislation’s continuous modification and redefinition. Therefore, citizens in general, and street vendors in particular, constantly face insecurity about their status in the city (Barthelmes, 2018;

Kurfürst, 2012). What is more, these decisions do not provide street vendors with the opportunity to formalize their presence in the city. Above all, the regulation provides opportunities for business and restaurant owners, while the district administration gets to supplement its budget. However, shortly after these initial directives, the People's Committee of Hanoi published another decision that directly and primarily targeted street traders. Decision no. 02/2008/QĐ/UB was passed on January 9, 2008 (Quân, 2008a). Subsequently, the municipality banned street trade on 62 streets as well as at 48 historic sites in the urban core of the city. Hawkers must pay fines ranging from 40,000 to 100,000 VND if they illegally appropriate the sidewalk on these proscribed streets (Khánh, 2008; Nam, 2008; Schoenberger & Turner, 2012). Already in May 2008, two months before the decision came into effect, campaigns to re-establish urban order picked up the pace again. The police regularly patrolled inner-city streets in vans, confiscating vendors' equipment for food stalls, such as small plastic tables and stools, as well as their merchandise (participant observation in May 2008).

When Decision no. 02 finally became effective on July 1, 2008, the municipality mobilized 2,000 cadres to supervise the regulation's correct implementation and enforcement ("Hà Nội đẹp," 2008). Already in the first week of July, police forces erected checkpoints at Hanoi's major crossroads to deny mobile vendors access to the city center. During that time, I witnessed various instances of women, who were carrying rods on their shoulders or riding on bicycles from which they sold their goods, running away to hide in small alleys to avoid official patrols ("Hà Nội đẹp," 2008; participant observation in July 2008). However, Koh (2006) remarks that although these campaigns to restore urban order usually started well, whenever supervision from a higher-level authority was strong, after a few months these campaigns would fade out again, thus lacking persistence and consistency. This was also the case in 2008. To this day, municipal campaigns of this kind are initiated time and again, which often begin with intense phases when regulations are strongly enforced. This enforcement is most obvious in periods of important state celebrations or international events that attract a global public to the city.

## 5. Shared Streets: Orderly Disorder

I use the term orderly disorder to refer to what urban planners and city authorities might view, at first sight, as chaos and disruptions of daily routines caused by people occupying inner city streets, sidewalks, and public spaces. However, taking a second look, these authorities find that street vending is a highly organized and regulated economic activity (Korff, 1988). Street trade is dependent on supply, production chains, and social networks. Jane Jacobs explains that "to see complex systems of functional order as order, and not as chaos, takes understanding" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 376). In other words, understand-

ing the order of street trade requires knowledge of the city. Moreover, it also requires watchful eyes and shared responsibility among those who are co-present in the city. These forms of voluntary control are incremental to the organization of the sidewalks in Hanoi. Wherever there is space, people would squat on the sidewalks, either alone or chatting with friends, neighbors, or customers, as they watch what is going on. It is their watchful eyes that Jacobs (1961) alludes to when talking about the safety and order of cities. As a major prerequisite for safe and convivial streets, Jacobs mentions the "natural proprietors of the street," which are people who inhabit buildings oriented toward the street (Jacobs, 1961, p. 35). From their buildings, the neighbors can watch over the streets and sidewalks. In Hanoi, the owners of these buildings regard themselves as natural proprietors of the street. Although the sidewalk is formally state property, families think that they have the right to use the sidewalk in front of their buildings for private activities, such as trading or urban gardening (Nguyen, 2022; interview performed while doing field research in October 2015).

Jacobs (1961) cites the presence of users on the sidewalks as a further prerequisite for voluntary controls. In fact, the sidewalk users organize themselves, as they monitor who is allowed to occupy which spaces at what times. Although in Hanoi, formal responsibility lies with the municipality, and the enforcement of regulations with the police, the residents and sidewalk users implement their own order on the sidewalks. The discourse that takes place offstage, yet out of view of municipal authorities, is what Scott (1990, p. 4) refers to as "hidden transcripts." In the urban ward of Ngoc Ha, house owners rented out the space in front of their houses to street vendors, providing them with a space from which to sell their goods. In these cases, street vendors are not occupying public space, but rather private space owned by the property owner (participant observation in June 2008).

At other times, house owners rented the sidewalk in front of their houses from the district and then sublet it to various vendors (Nguyen, 2022). Other vendors ask for permission to set up stands at a temporary market. Oftentimes, the organization of these temporary markets lies within the locality (Nguyen, 2018). Ward officials tend to transfer management of these local markets to leaders of the residential group (*tổ trưởng tổ dân phố*). According to Koh (2006), neighbors annually elect the residential group leader. Ties between the residential group leader and their fellow residents are horizontal, in contrast to state-society relations that are organized vertically. Nonetheless, street vendors, who are frequently newcomers to the locality and cannot draw on existing social relationships, need to approach the residential group leaders for permission to do business. If permission is granted, they need to pay a daily market fee of 10,000 VND (Nguyen, 2018). Some vendors occupy the same spot at different times of the day, sharing the fee for the temporary usage of the sidewalk (Nguyen,

2022). Another more direct way of securing a spot is by presenting gifts to local authorities. The activity of gift-giving is an orchestrated and shared activity. Barthelmes (2018) reports that one vendor, often with close ties to the police, would gather money from the other vendors and present it to an officer. As this exchange occurs in an asymmetric relationship of power, it can be considered a form of patron-clientelism. Nguyen (2022, p. 10) fittingly refers to urbanites' ability to "dodge the rules," by giving gifts or other occasional monetary contributions to inspectors, as "making law" (*làm luật*).

Another longstanding tactic that de Certeau (1984) describes is the knowing violation of municipal regulations by trading on the sidewalks, so long as no police patrols occur with the help of other traders. In Ngoc Ha ward, I regularly encountered women selling fruits and vegetables while sitting beneath a sign saying "prohibition of markets" (*cấm họp chợ*). However, their presence was tolerated until police inspections began. Street vendors would then run away from police, and hide their goods at other market stalls where they have social relationships with the owners (participant observation in March and April 2008). In fact, women violate these orders out of the necessity of daily life (Bayat, 2004; Chatterjee, 2007). Once, when I bought bananas from a woman who was around 40 years old, I asked her whether she owned the house in front of which she was selling her goods. She answered: "If this was my house, I would not sell bananas here for sure" (interview performed while doing field research in April 2008; translated from Vietnamese).

Instances of self-organization in the form of a concerted protest that reaches beyond the initial locality are rare due to the high level of state control over public space. Still, such protests sometimes occur. In August 2008, one month after the promulgation of Decision no. 02, several women vendors regularly assembled on the sidewalk in front of the entrance to the Government Office in Hanoi. The sidewalks in front of the Government Office are a common site for diverse small-scale protests, most of them related to cases of land dispossession and unjust compensations. However, this time, numerous women assembled to demand a marketplace where they could conduct their businesses. In contrast to previous protests to reclaim land, this protest of women street vendors appeared to be well-organized. On the first day of the protest, a group of about 40–50 people set up a small camp with tables and chairs. In the first week, the red banner above their camp read "300 women and children lack a marketplace to do trade" (*300 bà con thiếu thường chợ hàng*). One week later, the number of women and children protesting had already grown to 500—at least, according to the placard. Now the banner read: "500 women and children lack a market to sell their goods, complaint no. 3" (*500 Bà con thiếu chợ bán hàng kêu cứu lần thứ 3*). Some days later, the same slogan with "complaint no. 5" followed (participant observation in August 2008). In this rare instance, the quiet encroach-

ment of the ordinary transformed into a collective and choreographed action of women and children.

Overall, the urban public in Hanoi recognizes sidewalks as a shared resource from which multiple actors need to benefit. In his anthropology of sharing, Widlok (2017, p. 1) defines sharing as "enabling others to access what is valued." Sidewalks in Hanoi are valued for the social interaction it provides as well as the economic opportunities demanded by people who do not own property in the city or are unable to rent a business space. In my analysis of local newspaper articles, one main argument put forward by journalists and readers was that the sidewalks are a space for poverty alleviation. Many urbanites are in favor of street trade, recognizing its potential to provide the urban poor with possibilities for generating income. Widlok (2017, p. 79) argues that sharing "is an issue between those who do not have but who need to decide how and how far they can make demands on others and those who need to respond to such demands." The very presence of street vendors in the city is thus seen as an urgent demand by urban subalterns to which the city and its residents need to respond. House owners respond to this demand by setting up informal arrangements with vendors, permitting them to use the public space in front of their houses for business. This sharing of public space is justified by the vendors' need to make an income, thus appealing to residents' sympathy (*tình cảm*; Nguyen, 2022).

Another reason for the urban public's support of street trade comes from their economic demand. In Hanoi's narrow alleys, mobile vendors deliver fresh produce and meals right to their customer's doorsteps. Although the city has run campaigns to foster the development of supermarkets and malls, many Hanoians still prefer to run their daily errands in local markets and purchase from nearby vendors (Gerber et al., 2014). Elderly and retired residents, in particular, negotiate the maintenance of temporary and local markets with local authorities, arguing that they are not physically fit enough to travel to distant markets and have too little money to shop at malls (Nguyen, 2018). In such negotiations, elderly citizens once again address local authorities' moral obligations toward the community.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the conditions under which self-organization can thrive in an authoritarian political setting, particularly by taking the state's failure to provide public goods and the lack of consistency in enforcing regulations as determinants of weak statehood. First of all, the municipality of Hanoi does not provide equal access to urban space for all of its citizens. In Vietnam, the urban public recognizes sidewalks as a shared resource that various actors should benefit from. However, the legal framework acknowledging the sidewalk as a public good is missing. The discussion of the three regulations, no. 2, no. 148, and no. 227, shows that they privilege



certain groups such as shop owners while marginalizing street vendors. Moreover, regulations no. 148 and no. 227 actually contradict each other. Second, this article addresses the state's lack of consistency in enforcing rules in the policy arena of urban management and planning. Although regulations on sidewalks exist, they are not properly implemented on the local level.

To navigate the urban legal chaos, urban citizens need to self-organize. I chose an actor-oriented approach to examine the agency of women who are the majority of street vendors in Hanoi. Together with local officials, house owners, and the urban public, they choreograph a local order of the sidewalks. This local order is governed by social norms of mutual responsibility and empathy. Urbanites' empathy for street vendors' livelihoods is based on narratives of justification (Pfeilschifter et al., 2020), such as street vendors being in need. The idea of acknowledging the need of others and providing care for them is rooted in the moral framework of *làm người* and *thành người*, with the latter meaning to become a morally and socially responsible person. *Làm người*, in turn, refers to the work of leading a moral life, which above all means providing others with "socially accepted ways of caring" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 106). Empathy and moral obligations toward the community not only determine relationships among fellow neighbors and vendors in the locality, but they also define state-society relations at the local level (urban residents and local officials co-create mediation spaces, negotiating the enforcement of regulations).

Overall, social relationships with fellow traders, residents, and the police are crucial for maintaining spaces to trade in the city. Social capital thus becomes a "collective property resource" within the locality (Korff & Rothfuß, 2009, p. 363). Urban self-organization in the Vietnamese party-state most often remains confined to specific localities, although there are rare exceptions, such as the concerted occupation of public space by street vendors, who demanded their place in the city. The public demonstration described above was only possible because the women recognized that others shared the same injustices. On this basis, they were able to orchestrate collective action. In their protest, they appealed to authorities' awareness of their social and moral obligations as mothers. Referring to their role as providers for their families, they did not protest alone, but together with the children they cared for. As their banner said, "women and children" demand a share of the city. In conclusion, the intricate connection between forms of local self-organization and municipal authorities under authoritarianism operates based on a shared value system determined by both municipal regulations and informal practices of caring for the community.

## Acknowledgments

This article was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—

Project Number 391467173. I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan DeVore for language editing as well as Miriam Laage for proofreading this article. I also thank the editorial team and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and advice.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Từ 8.1. thu Phí sử dụng lề đường, bến, bãi, mặt nước [On 8.1. the city of Hanoi will introduce a fee for the usage of sidewalks, roadsides, watersurfaces]. (2008, January 3). *Thanh Niên*, 2.

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