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## – ‘ALL EYES ON ME’: The (In)Formal Barriers to Market Trade in Europe

GUNVOR JÓNSSON, MARIA LINDMÄE, JOANNA MENET AND EMIL VAN ECK

### Abstract

*Studies of marketplaces in the global North have often conceptualized markets as important public spaces of social encounter and conviviality where visitors, regardless of race, age, class or gender, feel they have an equal right to be. Yet comparatively little has been written about how inclusive European marketplaces are for the traders who (want to) work there. In this article we argue that the common conception of marketplaces as accessible to everyone, and as vehicles of socioeconomic mobility, is oversimplistic and romanticized. We draw on empirical data from marketplaces in four European countries to focus on the more or less informal ways in which markets are regulated by managers and traders themselves, and on the exclusionary and inclusionary effects of this process that may ultimately determine traders' access to and success in these markets. This article not only challenges dominant conceptions of marketplaces as accessible and inclusive, but also addresses prevalent stereotypes about economic practices in the global North and assumptions about the ways in which these differ from practices in the global South.*

### Introduction

During fieldwork at a street market in London, we talked to Omar, who had been operating his stall at the market for five years. His market was situated in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood, where many residents faced economically precarious circumstances: a third of households had no adults in employment, and the number of benefits claimants were higher than the average for London and the United Kingdom. Talking about his experiences as a newcomer at the local market, Omar stated firmly: ‘Exclusion is good! When I started here it was “all eyes on me”, but I made it’. When asked to clarify what he meant by ‘all eyes on me’, Omar elaborated:

The traders are suspicious when a new person turns up; they make life hard for you. They ask you what you are doing and tell you that you can't stand there. I don't mind that stuff. It's good, it adds competition! ... We don't want anyone from the street to think they can just come and join the market. Like people who've just lost their job, they want to join the market. They look at me and my stall and say, 'ahh, it's easy!'. They think I'm young, they say to themselves, 'he's just a kid, if he can do it I can!' So they turn up with their things. But the next day they aren't there. And why? Well ...<sup>1</sup>

This article is the result of collaborative work. Gunvor Jónsson and Maria Lindmäe contributed with conceptualization, analysis and writing of the article. Emil van Eck and Joanna Menet contributed to review and editing. The data presented in this article was collected and analysed by all four authors in their respective study countries. This article is based on research conducted for the Moving Marketplaces (MMP) project. MMP is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme ([www.heranet.info](http://www.heranet.info)), which is co-funded by NWO, AHRC, AEI, SNF and the European Commission through Horizon 2020 (grant number: Hera.2.015). We gratefully acknowledge the support of our colleagues in the MMP project: Janine Dahinden, Marco Madella, Rianne van Melik, Joris Schapendonk and Sophie Watson. We also thank the anonymous IJURR reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this article.

1 All interviews were conducted in the local language(s). Apart from extracts of interviews conducted in the United Kingdom, extracts in this article have been translated into English by the authors.

To those with few income generation options, perhaps owing to lack of financial resources or limited residency rights, marketplaces appear to be an attractive employment option. Generally, relatively little start-up capital and no formal qualifications<sup>2</sup> are required to set up a business in a European marketplace. Various scholars have argued that marketplaces provide a potential route out of precarity and towards greater inclusion into the labour force and economy for marginalized people (Janssens and Sezer, 2013a; Hiebert *et al.*, 2015; Vaughan, 2015). Although we agree on the whole that marketplaces often constitute important spaces of social inclusion and public conviviality, we argue that a conception of marketplaces as accessible to and inclusive of everyone who wants to work there is oversimplistic and romanticized, as Omar's comments indeed suggest (see also Aptekar, 2019). While some traders get ahead, others struggle. This can be attributed not merely to their financial assets and skills sets, but is equally determined by informal mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that entail that some traders are supported while others face significant barriers, including discrimination in the marketplace.

A stark division appears in the reviewed literature on marketplaces, which scholars have tended to conceptualize either as public space or as places of work by focusing respectively on the social dynamics that unfold in these spaces (Watson and Studdert, 2006; Dines, 2007; Watson, 2009; Morales, 2011; Janssens and Sezer, 2013b; Polyák, 2013; Pottie-Sherman, 2013; Hiebert *et al.*, 2015; Mele *et al.*, 2015; Schappo and van Melik, 2017) or on the traders who work there (Clark, 1988; 1994; Seligmann, 2000; Gertel, 2009; Meagher, 2010; Jónsson, forthcoming). This division reflects regional divisions in urban studies, in which the public space approach is firmly situated in wealthier regions of the world, while research on market traders focuses primarily on poorer regions where informality supposedly prevails. Our article unsettles this North/South divide by examining marketplaces in the global North primarily through the perspectives of the traders and their experiences of the market as a place of work, and by exploring the relevance of the concept of informality in the context of European marketplaces (see also Hentschel, 2015; Devlin, 2018). We thus build on the global urbanism paradigm, which rejects the problematic global North/South dichotomy that prevails in urban theorizations (Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009a).

By focusing on informal regulations and boundary work in European marketplaces in this article we challenge prevalent stereotypes of economic practices in the global North and assumptions about the ways in which these differ from practices in the global South. Informality and the sociocultural embeddedness of economic activities in marketplaces have traditionally been the focus of studies conducted in the global South (e.g. Hart, 1973; Clark, 1988; Lyons and Snoxell, 2005; Meagher, 2010). Meanwhile, similar dynamics among traders in the global North have received relatively little attention (although, see Boels, 2014; Ram *et al.*, 2017; Devlin, 2018; Clough Marinaro, 2019). Traders and their businesses are often left out of analyses of European marketplaces and only appear as a kind of backdrop to the social interactions among visitors. This analytical approach to marketplaces relegates the (business) practices of traders to a kind of 'blank canvas' devoid of social dynamics, meaning and politics. As a result, there is only a limited understanding of how markets in Europe are organized. The literature on informal economies in the global South proves useful for analysing how markets in Europe operate from the perspective of traders.

In this article we show how informal mechanisms within formally regulated European marketplaces can result in exclusion and inequality among market traders. The limited research on informal and socially embedded economic practices of traders in the global North has largely been confined to migrant spaces (Riccio, 1999;

2 Although no formal qualifications are required for obtaining a licence to trade this does not mean that it is an 'unskilled' occupation (Watson, 2022).

Boels, 2014; Schapendonk and Ekenhorst, 2020; Sandoz, 2021). This implicitly equates informality with immigrant entrepreneurship, thereby reinforcing the impression that this is a foreign, 'imported' phenomenon. Both in Riccio's (1999) and Sandoz's (2021) work, it is Senegalese men who perform informal sales on European streets. Similarly, Schapendonk and Ekenhorst (2020) look at Senegambian vendors and their in/formal circuits of trade in different locations in Europe. Although Boels's (2014) research does pay attention to informalities within a formal market in Brussels, the reported informal practices appear only to be performed by North African, Pakistani, Polish, Romanian and other Eastern European sellers. In this article we challenge such assumptions by showing that also among local, non-immigrant traders in the global North there are similar forms of informal regulations and agreements that directly affect traders' economic opportunities in marketplaces. These boundaries are not merely constituted by bureaucratic barriers but also produced through forms of exclusion among the traders themselves. Our analysis emphasizes the significance of informal regulations and boundary work within European marketplaces and the co-existence and mutual constitution of relatively formal and informal practices.

In the section that follows we review the literature on marketplace regulations and structures in the global South and North, focusing particularly on informality and social embeddedness of economic activities. This is followed in the third section by a review of relevant scholarship on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within marketplaces. The fourth section contains a brief description of our methodology, while in the remainder of the article we analyse and discuss empirical material from four marketplaces in Europe. The empirical analysis focuses on two stages of inclusion and exclusion in marketplaces that (potential) traders face: the stage of market access when traders try to acquire a licence and set up a stall, and the stage following entry into the marketplace when traders seek to make a living and expand their businesses.

### **Informal marketplace regulations and structures**

In this article we consider informality as 'income generating activities that operate outside the regulatory framework of the state' (Meagher, 2013: 2), reflecting the prevailing definition accepted across disciplinary and ideological boundaries. We regard informality not as a discrete economic sector but as forms of economic activity that exist alongside, or are intertwined with, relatively formal economic activities. We dismantle the idea that informal economic practices mainly prevail in marketplaces in the global South by showing how such practices shape marketplaces in Europe. There is a common tendency to perceive of informality as a feature of (urban) economies only in the global South and to associate informality with illegality, landscapes of poverty and megacities in the developing world (Roy, 2009b). Our analysis steers clear of such normative assessments of informality, including the stigmatizing view that equates informality with illegality and chaos (Guha-Khasnobis *et al.*, 2006; Totolo, 2013). Our point is not to make a normative argument about whether informal structures regulating socioeconomic practices and conduct at marketplaces are good or bad. Rather, we want to explore how such mechanisms operate to include and exclude traders in marketplaces in Europe, and with what effects.

While the literature on European marketplaces provides limited insight into mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of market traders (although, see van Eck, 2021), researchers in the global South have had much to say about these dynamics. Scholars have dedicated significant attention to understanding how markets in the global South are informally organized and regulated under conditions where the power, reach and resources of the state are relatively limited. Scholars have pointed out that despite a weak or absent formal regulatory framework, marketplaces in these contexts are, in fact, often highly structured and regulated, owing to established social networks, norms, rules and agreements among traders. The establishment of exclusive trade networks and

informal rules and norms that govern traders' behaviour may serve to facilitate loyalty and trust, ensure protection against excessive competition and criminal elements, and aim at attracting more customers. At the same time, they can also have perverse and divisive effects, such as upholding established hierarchies and blocking newcomers from entering or succeeding in market trade (Geertz, 1978; van der Grijp, 2003; Meagher, 2010; Totolo, 2013; Carrier and Elliott, 2018; Monteith, 2018; Malefakis, 2019).

The dearth of research into informal practices among licensed market traders in Europe is rather surprising, given the significant body of academic literature which documents that social norms, values and networks are in fact elements of *all* markets and workplaces (Granovetter, 1985; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Waldinger, 1995; Krippner and Alvarez, 2007; Varman and Costa, 2009). This literature largely stems from economic sociology (and to a certain extent from economic anthropology and geography) and has corrected many flawed assumptions about economic activities, particularly in the wealthier regions of the world, including Europe and the United States. Karen Ho's (2009) ethnography of Wall Street has, for example, shown how the booms and busts of financial markets are not simply caused by inevitable market forces but are actively constructed through the values and actions of investment bankers working at Wall Street. In the British context, Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison's (2019) study of elite occupations found a powerful 'class pay gap', with those from working-class backgrounds who make it into prestigious jobs earn, on average, significantly less than their colleagues from privileged backgrounds. Their research shows that, contrary to official claims, implicit norms and values shaping workplace culture constrain socioeconomic mobility opportunities for certain groups.

This type of literature uses the term 'embeddedness' rather than 'informality' to capture the sociocultural contexts that shape any given economic activity, whether in the global South or North (Granovetter, 1985). The concept of 'embeddedness' is used to refer to the social context in which all economic activities unfold. It emerged to challenge the representation of economic behaviour dominant in economics, including the notion of a self-regulating market governed by an 'invisible hand' (Polanyi, 1944; Granovetter, 1985). It differs in this sense from the concept of informality, which is often contrasted with state regulation and, in some contexts, associated with the idea of illegality. In this article, we nonetheless use the term 'informality' to analyse the boundaries, norms and networks that affect trade practices, as we consider this a more powerful term to dismantle the global North/South divide that we are critiquing. In this article we do not attempt to rethink the idea of embeddedness as such. Rather, we aim to bridge disconnected literatures and perspectives on marketplaces in urban studies and other social science disciplines, and in the global North and South. The literature on marketplaces and informality in the global South has tended to subsume discussions of embeddedness within the broader framework of informality without necessarily treating embeddedness as a distinct and separate issue. Since we are taking inspiration from this literature, we use 'informality' as an umbrella term that includes the issue of embeddedness.

Both in the global North and the global South, studies of informality primarily deal with questions of rights and legality and hence the relationships with the state and the law (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004; McFarlane, 2012; Devlin, 2018; Koster and Smart, 2019; Jónsson, forthcoming). Such scholarship has contributed to dismantling the formal/informal binary by emphasizing that informality is not necessarily an (unintended) by-product of a weak state apparatus but is, in fact, deliberately produced by the state, for example, when the state strategically withdraws from and purposely neglects certain spaces (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004; Devlin, 2011). This line of inquiry is reflected in research on informality among traders in the global North, which has tended to focus on unlicensed ambulant street vendors (Devlin, 2011; Delclós, 2018; Clough Marinaro, 2019; Schapendonk and Ekenhorst, 2020). In contrast, the question of how

licensed market traders perform informalities and how this affects the (presumed) inclusivity of marketplaces has not yet been addressed. In studies of unlicensed street traders, informality is often seen as something imposed from the outside, as a process of illegalization enacted by state authorities (e.g. Devlin, 2011; Delclós, 2018; Clough Marinaro, 2019). These studies illustrate the close entanglement of formal-informal dynamics, as supposedly 'formal' institutional actors purposely produce the 'informality' (and illegality) of street vendors for their own political and economic gains. In this article we highlight similar formal/informal dynamics among market managers, who have the authority to grant trading licences, and among traders producing their own hierarchies and in-groups. While the idea that the formal and informal are entangled is now widely accepted, our analysis of how this unfolds in European marketplaces is significant, as it refutes widespread claims about the low barriers to entry into European marketplaces.

### **Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in marketplaces**

Research into social dynamics in European marketplaces has typically been situated within a scholarly tradition that considers public space as inclusive of 'different others' (e.g. Lofland, 1989; Carr *et al.*, 1992; Valentine, 2008). This analytical approach is exemplified in the ethnographic study of a central market in a small French town by De La Pradella (1995: 364): 'Through the type of relations that people have with one another, every Friday for a few hours in the streets of the old part of town, the actors create a public space'. This idea that markets constitute quintessential public spaces is firmly ingrained in more recent studies that have conceptualized markets as 'cosmopolitan canopies' (Anderson, 2011) where diverse people come together and practice getting along. Hence, marketplaces are commonly regarded as important spaces of urban conviviality and encounters across differences (Watson and Studdert, 2006; Dines, 2007; Watson, 2009; Morales, 2011; Janssens and Sezer, 2013b; Pottie-Sherman, 2013; Hiebert *et al.*, 2015; Mele *et al.*, 2015; Schappo and van Melik, 2017). Watson (2009) in particular has shown that different forms of sociality are enacted in marketplaces, ranging from fleeting to recurring encounters between visitors that may constitute feelings of familiarity and extended and durable relations of care. Yet comparatively little has been written about how inclusive European marketplaces are for traders who (want to) work there. While it is in the economic interest of traders to provide equal access to all customers, the dynamics of inclusion among traders themselves are more ambiguous and require closer analysis before considering them exemplary of assimilative conviviality.

Focusing on traders, and reflecting the inclusivity argument that prevails in Northern urbanism, Janssens and Sezer (2013a) hold that marketplace trading in Amsterdam presents low barriers to entrepreneurship. They argue that this is because street markets require little start-up capital, which is 'especially relevant for the most vulnerable groups in cities, such as immigrants who have little formal education, and experience social and cultural obstacles when entering the labor market' (*ibid.*: 247). In a similar vein, Hiebert *et al.* (2015: 6) underline that 'entrepreneurs in these markets need not have full command of the local language, tertiary education, or formal training'. Because of their presumed cultural openness, some ethnic marketplaces in London have been described as 'areas of initial immigrant settlement' and the 'first footings' of immigrants in the host country's society (Vaughan, 2015: 35–36). Blennerhassett *et al.*'s (2021: 2) study of a street market in central Dublin echoes this narrative, showing that outdoor markets constitute 'key livelihood-building opportunities for immigrant newcomers' owing to 'relatively affordable rents compared to prime city centre locations, and flexible, short-term leases in a context where commercial leases range from annual to ten years in duration and require a significant financial outlay' (*ibid.*: 3). Van Eck (2021) has argued that certain marketplaces act as easily accessible loci



for upscaling entrepreneurial activities because of the steady clientele that traders can develop through the dense intersection of neighbourhood residents and customers.

In contrast, scholarship in the global South has shown that entry into markets is not that easy, starting with the very system of licensing, which is seen to create inequality and informality by legitimizing some traders' actions while ruling out the rights of others to trade on the street (Meneses-Reyes, 2013; Meneses-Reyes and Caballero-Juárez, 2013). Even if legal access to the market is achieved, there may be cultural and linguistic barriers that make permanence at the market more difficult. A study on female traders in Cuzco (Seligmann, 2000) showed that women had difficulties participating in the traders' union meetings, as these were held in Spanish and not in the native Quechua language of the majority of the female traders. The study also shed light on gender discrimination and the expulsion of female traders from meetings if any children who accompanied them started crying. Codes of conduct and cultural norms that are imposed on traders by city authorities and market managers have also been highlighted as common tools of exclusion in marketplaces. For example, traders who had been fortunate enough to obtain a licence for working on the streets of Mexico City were required to take a shower every day, cut their nails, and talk and laugh quietly to retain their place in the city (Meneses-Reyes, 2013). The city authorities have used similar hygienist arguments to portray the female traders of Cuzco as vulgar and 'unladylike', with the aim of freeing up space for future urban developments (Seligmann, 2000).

In the European context, institutional actors, particularly national and local authorities, have often been portrayed as the culprits who exclude traders by organizing their eviction and relocation (Gonzalez and Waley, 2013; Hernández Cordero, 2017). However, norms and discourses within markets and among traders themselves have also been seen to produce exclusionary boundaries along ethnic and social lines. In a market in North London, Watson and Wells (2005) found that socioeconomic decline provided a breeding ground for new forms of exclusion centred on race. Recent asylum seekers became easy scapegoats for the sense of loss that white traders and residents were experiencing. Their nostalgia for the past 'glory days' of the market and their romanticized imaginary of the 'local community' were based on exclusionary visions that glossed over past racial tensions and divisions. Similarly, Alkon and McCullen (2011) have warned about the romantization of locality and bounded community associated with marketplaces, as these notions risk reproducing privilege and whiteness. We agree with these diverse authors that marginalization and discrimination in the marketplace often reflect the dynamics of wider society, including marginalization along the lines of race and gender. Meanwhile, our observations extend these analyses by showing that hierarchies and networks are established on the basis of other markers of difference that emerge within the marketplace. These include internal hierarchies and solidarities based on a trader's longevity at the market, their performance of 'hard work' and their ability to grow and expand their business. While such success factors may indeed reflect these traders' high position in wider social hierarchies (e.g. being white and male), this is not always the case.

In the remainder of this article we present and analyse our empirical data on traders working in European marketplaces, following a brief outline of our methodology in the section below. Our data shows how entangled formal/informal practices produce dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of traders who are attempting to gain access to and pursue a career in the marketplace.

### **Methodology**

This article offers insights from an international and interdisciplinary research project examining the role of traders in the everyday production of marketplaces in four European countries: the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in one outdoor marketplace in each of the four

countries from the summer of 2019 to the spring of 2022. Interviews were carried out remotely when markets were fully or partially closed because of Covid-19-related sanitary restrictions. The markets differ in size, ranging from twenty to approximately three hundred stalls, and vary in terms of management models. Three markets are publicly owned and managed by local authorities and one follows an autonomized model where a board of traders manages the market. All four outdoor markets operate out of non-permanent structures and offer both food and non-food products. They operate one to five times a week and are situated in middle-size to large cities. The way these markets are organized leads to similar mobility patterns for traders, who are required to construct and dismantle their stalls daily, move translocally between different markets and negotiate their relationships with a variety of institutional actors and traders. Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic of this article, which addresses social exclusion and hierarchy, our interlocutors and their markets have been anonymized to avoid identification of our research participants.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations and informal conversations with traders, market inspectors and managers, as well as with representatives of local governments and traders' associations. Hundreds of hours were spent following various market traders during their selling and buying activities (for further methodological details, see Breines *et al.*, 2021). The field notes and interviews were transcribed and coded using an inductive approach to avoid imposing preconceptions on the data (Charmaz, 2006). This first stage of analysis was then discussed collectively to detect similar themes and findings across the four countries. These discussions were fundamental to this article as they provided multiple perspectives and layers of interpretation, which led us to the conceptualization and analysis presented in the article.

A starting point for our conceptualization and analysis was to think of how scholars have commonly approached markets in the global South and wondering what might emerge if we approached marketplaces in the North through similar analytical lenses—that is, approaching European markets as places of work and exploring the pertinence of informality in these contexts. This 'experiment' partly resulted from the fact that one of us had previously worked extensively on marketplaces and livelihoods in West Africa and was therefore intimately familiar with the literature and concepts from this region (Jónsson, 2019; forthcoming). As a team of co-authors, we were also drawn to this epistemological approach out of ethical concerns to redress the global asymmetries of knowledge/power in urban studies. Postcolonial scholars have contested the prevailing Eurocentric viewpoint that dismisses research on and from the global South as merely provincial examples and context-specific theories (Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009a; also e.g. Bakewell and Jónsson, 2013). We take a cue from the global urbanism agenda, which approaches scholarship from the South as authoritative and as contributing highly generalizable concepts and insights (Pieterse and Simone, 2013; Pieterse and Parnell, 2014; Robinson and Roy, 2016).

### **(In)formal barriers to market trade**

#### – Barriers at the entry level

Our fieldwork across Europe shows that entry barriers to selling on the market are certainly not as low as the studies by Hiebert *et al.* (2015) and Vaughan (2015) suggest. First of all, novice traders were often required to invest a fair amount of money when starting their businesses. This may include paying for a van, storage space, production or shipping of goods, municipal taxes, petrol and fees for obtaining a licence—contrary to claims that markets were defined by low economic-access barriers.

When novel traders aimed to start a business in a marketplace in Europe, they first needed to apply for a permit. In each of the four investigated countries, the regulations were manifold and often difficult to navigate. In public markets licences



are usually issued by the municipality or the equivalent local authority that oversees the functioning of the market, including compliance with market regulations. Because markets usually have a limited capacity, licences were not always available, and it might take years to obtain permits to trade in the more popular markets. Furthermore, licences that did become available often required the new trader to sell the same line of goods as the previous licence holder, further reducing opportunities for entry to new traders. Applying for the trading licence could require a fair amount of paperwork: traders may need to have a registered company or cooperative, or perform their sales as freelancers. Food traders had to undergo public health agency checks, while non-food vendors were usually required to present certificates for selling determined brands. In addition, traders would sometimes have to present proof of being debt free and certification that their tax declarations were in order before their applications could be approved.

Bureaucratic vocabulary can be challenging for anyone, but those with little knowledge of the local language found the attendant paperwork particularly challenging. This was especially the case in the autonomous community of Spain, where only one of the local languages was strongly favoured by the market inspectors and other authorities during administrative procedures. Moreover, in some countries the formal rules for granting traders a licence directly excluded or discriminated against non-nationals and migrants from outside the European Union (EU). In Spain, only EU residents could apply for licences that became available on an open call. In the Netherlands, people from outside the EU without a particular type of identity card or residence permit recognized by the Dutch authorities were not able to register with the National Chamber of Commerce—a prerequisite for obtaining a trader's licence. Therefore, the portrayal of marketplaces as providing 'first footings' and 'areas of initial immigrant settlement' in a host country society (Vaughan, 2015: 35–36) is not always valid.

Institutional regulations of access to trade in marketplaces, including the process of licensing, should in theory follow democratic principles of equality to avoid discrimination. However, we observed a series of entangled formal and informal aspects determining traders' access to marketplaces that suggest that acquiring a licence was an unequal and subjective process that produced exclusion. The following example from a Dutch market illustrates that, in addition to official and governmental regulation, less tangible and more informal codes of conduct and traditions also imposed forms of inclusion and exclusion. Over the previous decade the market had transitioned from being regulated by the municipality to becoming self-managed by a non-profit traders' association. Rather than imposing a standardized allocation system for available trading spots, the board decided to make use of its own application system. This system, which determined who gained access to work on the market, was based on a number of selection criteria, including the novelty, diversity and quality of the merchandise that traders were offering. This selection process was explained as follows by the market manager:

In theory, everyone is able to apply for our market. And if someone applies, we always ask the question: Tell us why you are the most suitable trader to acquire a spot here. In fact, it's a job application. Who are they? What do they sell? How? ... Look, if a trader who leaves is [worth] a seven [on a scale from one to ten], then the new trader should be at least a seven-and-a-half.

While 'in theory' everyone was welcome to apply for the licence to trade at this market, exclusionary mechanisms nevertheless emerged from rather implicit, if not ambiguous, selection criteria. Indeed, criteria for selecting new traders to join a market might not always be thoroughly objective or straightforward—what exactly is a 'seven-and-a-half'?—and could therefore make access to the market more difficult for newcomers who lacked previous experience or knowledge of markets.

Furthermore, information about available licences was not always transparent. In some markets, licence holders who wanted to sell their business were not obliged to put them on an open call. Instead, a private agreement could be made with the new trader, after which the required papers were then presented to the city council. This meant that whoever sought access to a market must not only know the formal procedures of obtaining a licence but should also have a significant number of social contacts and strong networks, as the most useful information about licences becoming available often circulated in informal contexts and meetings. This echoes Sandoz's (2021) findings that in a context of unequal access to formal resources, resorting to informality is crucial for many entrepreneurs. Sandoz documents how a wide range of transnational entrepreneurs in Barcelona, including digital nomads, small shop owners and ambulant street vendors, rely on different forms of informality to overcome structural constraints and improve their business opportunities. In this sense, the additional labour of networking and being 'plugged in' to relevant circuits of information required for setting up a stall in a European marketplace are not exceptional but reflect the informal manoeuvres required when embarking on many other forms of entrepreneurship in Europe.

In addition to these dynamics, there were practices of an even more informal and legally suspect character that determined traders' access to markets. When asked about the licensing process, one trader of Bangladeshi origin based in Spain described how he had achieved his permit to a new, well-paying market:

*Trader:* Ángel, he was a *gitano* [gypsy];<sup>3</sup> he sold clothes. He got retired. He said, 'you want this stall?' And I said, 'yes'. Then he said I must pay him 4,500 euros.

*Interviewer:* So you don't only pay the city council?

*Trader:* You must let the city council know and they charge around 300 euros for changing the name of the licence holder. After that, you pay the trader. It's scary to pay the money in cash. You know the *gitano* takes your money and goes away and there is no proof to show you paid.

In this case, not only did obtaining the licence require the trader to maintain certain social ties in the marketplace and stay on top of information about licences becoming available to make sure he was the first person to be offered the licence; the trader was also obliged to pay a significant amount of money under the table after having informed the authorities of his intentions and paying the official fee for the licence. Licences can thus circulate in spaces that are parallel to the formally regulated systems; in fact, the formal licensing process would potentially not even take place without the behind-the-scenes negotiations. This relates to Schapendonk and Ekenhorst's (2020: 714) argument that an act of formalization 'here' may create other informalities elsewhere (see also Meneses-Reyes and Caballero-Juárez, 2013). Our informant's experience shows that these dynamics also occur contrariwise: not only can formalization produce informality, but informal structures can also overlay formal ones and determine their efficiency. Even though having a licence is the fundamental prerequisite for market access, informal rules and agreements can determine the eventual price and speed of market access. This represents a barrier to newcomers who cannot speed up the process and buy their way into the market, have less start-up capital and fewer contacts in the markets, or fear entering legally dubious agreements with previous licence holders. Abiding by certain informal agreements such as those described above in the Spanish context may put the trader in a vulnerable legal and economic position, especially when they are less familiar with the local language and laws.

3 Literal translation. Note that, similar to the term 'gypsy', the word *gitano* is often used as a slur in Spanish contexts.

In the section that follows we show how informal mechanisms facilitate or, contrarily, impede traders' daily performance and careers in the marketplace. Our findings specifically show how discourses of 'quality' and 'professionalism' were used to establish exclusionary in-groups once a trader had already gained access to the market.

– Boundaries within marketplaces affecting traders' careers

Our starting point for the analysis of symbolic boundaries within the marketplace that affect traders' careers is the observation that exclusion and inclusion go hand in hand: boundary work results in definition and hence the exclusion of 'others' who do not belong to the in-group (Dahinden and Zittoun, 2013: 199; see also Barth, 1969; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2013). To understand how mechanisms of exclusion operate it is therefore relevant to also understand who gets included and how they are included through such boundary-making practices.

While some markets were more socially divided and hierarchical than others, traders were not necessarily locked into predefined social groups within the market. Their status and allegiances within the market could change over time, and traders worked actively to signal group membership and uphold certain symbolic boundaries within the market (see also Barth, 1969; Wimmer, 2009). One of the principal forms of producing inclusion and exclusion among traders was through the emic notion of a 'community' of traders, in some cases referred to as a 'team' or 'family'. A community of traders could be based on a formally constituted union or association of traders where membership fees were paid, but it could also take the shape of an imagined community that was founded on loosely defined norms, values and codes of conduct. This echoes the findings of scholarship on trade in and from the global South, which has highlighted the significance of social networks for successfully conducting commerce (Ebin, 1995; Meagher, 2005; 2006; Jónsson, forthcoming). Research has shown, for example, that the establishment of trade networks and informal norms to govern traders' behaviour within such networks may serve to facilitate loyalty and trust, protect traders against excessive competition and attract more customers (Gambetta, 1988; Portes and Landolt, 1996; Grabowski, 1997; Krippner and Alvarez, 2007; Totolo, 2013).

Entry into a community of traders was not necessarily guaranteed upon obtaining the permit to trade; rather, it could take time for the trader to gradually become accepted. For example, trader Omar, cited at the beginning of this article, told us that as a newcomer to the market he had had to earn the respect and trust of other traders, especially of the old-timers:

Like this woman, I pitched up next to her and she just started shouting: 'Move, move!' I told her if she had a problem she could go speak to the market inspector. She just kept screaming at me, using the 'f-word' and what not. She had a little dog and I told her if she kept going like that her dog was going to run away from her. That made everyone laugh. Laughter, it's good. Little by little they start to trust you. They see you are serious, so they leave you alone. With time they even start to help you, give you advice and stuff ... You need to struggle if you want to be here. I wouldn't want it any different. Like that woman with her little dog—we need people like her! If you want to work here you need to be able to put up with things like that. The market is good, it's regulated.

This description of Omar's initial trials in the market is in stark contrast to the way European marketplaces are frequently portrayed in scholarly literature—as open, friendly, accessible and convivial (e.g. Watson, 2009; Hiebert *et al.*, 2015). Traders tested Omar, challenged him, and put him in his place. Newcomers to his market had to be resilient and tenacious and show the other traders that they were 'serious'. This reflects our more general observations that in the different marketplaces, to be

accepted and supported by other traders, a trader had to display certain qualities, such as professionalism, being serious about trading as a profession, and bringing quality to the marketplace. Such norms and discourses defining appropriate behaviour contributed to the creation of exclusionary symbolic boundaries, both towards newcomers and among more established traders, as we show in the next example.

In Omar's view exclusion in the marketplace was good and necessary because it kept the market regulated and added competition. While exclusion is often portrayed as something negative, the creation of exclusionary social boundaries can benefit in-groups of traders as these enhance cohesion and compliance with norms and standards. This, in turn, can lead to trust, mutual support and collaboration (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Varman and Costa, 2009; Meagher, 2010). These insights are perhaps not too surprising for those who are well versed in theories of social capital and boundaries, which stress that exclusion and inclusion go hand in hand. As Roger Waldinger pointed out several decades ago, 'the same social relations that ... enhance the ease and efficiency of economic exchanges among community members implicitly restrict outsiders' (Waldinger, 1995: 557; see also Portes, 1998). The literature on social boundaries and discrimination in European (and North American) marketplaces has largely focused on exclusion and marginalization occurring along lines of race and class, for example, in gentrified farmers' markets or antique dealers' markets (Watson and Wells, 2005; Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Tchoukaleyska, 2016). The example of Omar suggests, however, that exclusion is not only exercised by traders who have a privileged social status and are reproducing the social hierarchies and forms of marginalization found in wider society, for example, along lines of gender, class, age and race; the market also establishes its own *internal* hierarchies and forms of inclusion and exclusion based on internal norms and values such as longevity in the marketplace and perceived professionalism and work ethic.

The common rhetoric about markets as a 'family' or a 'team' was a powerful notion that underpinned solidarity among many market traders. Yet not all market traders were included in this imagined community. The dual nature of social boundaries as both including an excluding is clearly illustrated in this conversation with a white Dutch male trader in the Netherlands:

*Interviewer:* Do traders also help each other in other ways, in a social sense? Do you have an example of that?

*Trader:* Well, I have an example of an entrepreneur. He had a very hard time and was very close to bankruptcy. Then we put money together and bought him a new sales car.

*Interviewer:* Wow.

*Trader:* So we created a restart for him. And now he's doing good business and is back on track. But that only happens to people with whom you have a bond, of course. See, there are loners too. In that case, it won't happen.

In this brief conversation the trader discursively demarcated the boundaries between those who were and weren't eligible for mutual help in his market. In this case, the type of conduct associated with 'loners' was used as a criterion to exclude someone from receiving support from the community. While previous studies in Europe have already highlighted the informal dynamics among traders, such studies have tended to focus on migrant spaces and immigrant entrepreneurship (Boels, 2014; Schapendonk and Ekenhorst, 2020; Sandoz, 2021). The above example, by contrast, illustrates our wider observations that non-immigrant white men (and women) also participate in informal

networks and forms of micro-regulation of European marketplaces. This counters stereotypical assumptions about informality as an imported and marginal phenomenon that is largely restricted to migrant and ethnic minority spaces in Europe.

In one marketplace there could be several hierarchically related in-groups that included and expelled traders based on different criteria. Evaluations of quality and professionalism often played an important role in these boundary-making processes. This was illustrated by a Swiss woman who traded goods from India with her Indian husband. The woman explained how perception towards her as a trader had changed since her business had expanded. When she initially worked alone in her small stall, she would receive gestures of solidarity and support from other small-scale traders. However, this changed when her business improved thanks to joining forces with her new partner:

As soon as they see you are a bit successful, they get envious ... And they change their attitude. It was a change for me also: before, I was by myself, and then they see you come with a partner who is totally useful, you know [laughing] ... and then they see you are a close team. And then they changed towards me. This was actually a bad experience for me ... I said the word useful before, because many of them have a boyfriend who is coming who is totally useless [laughing]. And then they see, 'hey, they are able to do something together!' And then they drop you. They cut you out. This was really an intense experience for me.

Meanwhile, this woman (Trader 1) and her husband (Trader 2) also experienced another change, as they were suddenly accepted into a new circle of traders—the 'real professionals':

*Trader 1:* You know, you come with a small car, then you have a combi, then you have a bus ... And there the growth is visible, and then you see already how people change towards you. Some who ... like what we are now ... let's say the real professionals, they would not talk to you because you are a small, middle, come-and-go thing, no? And then all of a sudden you become equal to them. And then you become colleagues. I also experienced that change.

*Trader 2:* Before, you were not a colleague then ...

*Trader 1:* You've been too small. And so the small ones are intermingling with each other and the big ones—you are not interesting to them ... You are not professional. And then the bigger ones ... then you become a colleague of them. And they are not envious. This is also great. Because they are doing this since twenty, thirty years, fully established. They are not envious. It's more like: 'Welcome to the club!' [laughing]

The so-called 'professionals' were defined partly in material terms: they had a bigger stall, offered a wider range of products and owned a bigger car or van. In addition, they often met during their travels to Asia, where their goods were produced while, as the woman trader explained, 'the small ones you don't meet'. This example illustrates how boundaries were created in this marketplace as an in-group of 'professionals' defined against an out-group of 'smaller traders'. Maintaining the exclusivity and prestige of 'the club' of professionals entailed keeping the smaller traders out.

Finally, while socioeconomic mobility and success in a market sometimes reflected a trader's high position in wider social hierarchies—for example being white, male and having significant start-up capital—the example in this section illustrates that this was not always the case. The Swiss woman and her Indian husband were apparently accepted into the 'club of professionals' based on their economic performance and

professionalism. This suggests that internal hierarchies and networks are established on the basis of markers of difference that emerge within the marketplace, including ideas about work ethic, tenacity and persistence in trade, seniority and longevity of traders and their perceived economic performance.

### **Conclusion**

In this article we argued that by shifting the analysis of marketplace inclusivity from customers to traders, and by paying attention to formal/informal micro-regulations and forms of organization that exist among traders and market managers, research can shed light on important elements that affect the socioeconomic inclusion and career trajectories of traders in Europe. By drawing on approaches and findings from the global South we showed that, in addition to formal, explicit rules, informal practices and agreements also shape the working lives of traders in European marketplaces. This applies to both market entry and the careers of traders, who encounter diverse norms and regulations to which they must adapt to gain access to the privileged in-group of traders in the marketplace and the benefits this may offer. These norms and regulations may have an exclusionary effect on those who lack the required social and economic capital and knowledge to comply, but they can also reinforce a sense of community and lead to forms of collaboration and mutual aid among traders. These findings confirm earlier research that has shown that inclusion and exclusion are mutually constitutive dynamics that cannot simply be defined as good or bad (Barth, 1969; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2013).

Recognition of informal practices in European marketplaces does not necessarily equate to these places being chaotic or illegal; instead, these practices reveal another layer of relations and agreements that make these markets more complex and differently structured entities than has hitherto been assumed. Academic work in the global South has helped reveal the existence of inequalities that expostulate oversimplistic ideas of European marketplaces as accessible and as vehicles for socioeconomic mobility and inclusion. While we are not arguing that markets are primarily exclusive, our aim in this article has been to depict a more nuanced perspective on in- and ex-clusion in marketplaces. We invite future research on marketplaces in the wealthier regions of the world to pay closer attention to the different forms of internal hierarchies and social networks that reproduce inequality and examine the complex regulatory and organizational mechanisms at play in these marketplaces to generate a more nuanced understanding of how marketplaces differ from other types of public space, in Europe and elsewhere. Social dynamics in marketplaces are not merely constituted by spontaneous, unregulated interaction, and scholars ought to pay more attention to the specific formal/informal regulatory mechanisms shaping what goes on in these spaces.

This article contributes to the demystification of two assumptions. First, we showed that informality in the global North is not only practised by migrants or the urban poor, who resort to it out of necessity (*cf.* Devlin, 2018). Rather, informal micro-regulations and the social embeddedness of economic activity exist in *all* social and hierarchical layers of the marketplace—from Swiss traders of goods to Dutch market managers, who all navigate different forms of informality in their everyday pursuits to turn existing norms to their advantage. This finding adds to existing literature that argues that informality does not 'belong' to the global South but is an organizing urban logic (Hentschel, 2015: 83, see also Roy and AlSayyad, 2004).

Secondly, by pointing to the existence of different forms of boundary making among traders and market managers we deromanticized the oversimplistic idea of markets as inclusive of different others. Generally, there are no formal distinctions between different kinds of market traders: officially, they are all subject to the same formal regulations and belong to the same traders' associations, which represent them as one homogenous group. But in terms of support, solidarity and friendships there are



often clear divides within marketplaces, and these divides are informally established. By highlighting the existence of different in-groups that allow access to newcomers based on compliance with particular norms and values we showed that togetherness among traders requires more than mere tolerance and acceptance of difference through short everyday encounters (cf. Ye, 2019). Conviviality and cooperation among traders depend on building trust and on traders' compliance with the internal rules that may produce exclusionary boundaries towards those who fail to adhere to the norms and values of the in-group. The marketplace is not an 'empty slate'; it is not a neutral space free from social dynamics, where any prospective trader can simply turn up and launch their business uninhibited. We should therefore be wary of the hopes and expectations that are often posited about markets as quintessential public spaces and acknowledge that boundary making through informal practices, rules and regulations is as inherent to markets as it is to whichever space that is socially regulated (Massey, 2005).

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