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Making the invisible visible in city spaces: The hidden labour practices of market traders

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Abstract

Research on traditional street markets has demonstrated how markets facilitate the development of diverse social interactions among visitors and provide livelihood-building opportunities for market traders, especially for immigrant newcomers. In this article, we suggest that the literature has, thus far, tended to pay less attention to the everyday work practices of traders that are central to both their livelihood-building opportunities and the creation of street markets as important public spaces of social interactions. Through a case study of the Walthamstow market in East London, we study the labour practices of traders and the spaces they inhabit as workers, both inside the market and outside, to reveal the relatively hidden and underexplored work and skills that bring street markets into being. The ethnographic research findings show that the everyday practices conducted by traders involve night work, long working days and physically strenuous work activities. At the same time, traders are able to negotiate these precarious working conditions through their social relationships and processes of enskillment. We conclude that it is only by making the invisible visible that the labour and skills of those who make our urban spaces work can be recognised, (re-)valued and legitimised. This is not only important in providing ammunition for strategies to improve the generally precarious working conditions of traders, but it can also be used as leverage in coalition-building strategies to resist the additional threat of displacement that so many traders around the world face as the result of neoliberal redevelopment processes.

Keywords

invisible labour, night work, public space, skills, street markets

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摘要

对传统街头集市的既有研究表明,集市既能促进访客间多样化的社交互动,也为摊贩(尤其是新移民)提供构建生计的机会。在本文中我们指出,现有文献对摊贩日常劳动实践关注不足,而这些实践恰恰与其生计构建机会、与街头集市作为重要社交公共空间的塑造均密切相关。通过对伦敦东部沃尔瑟姆斯托(Walthamstow)市场的案例研究,我们考察摊贩的劳动实践及其作为工作者所占据的空间(包括市场内外),揭示那些使街头集市得以存在却相对隐蔽而遭到忽视的劳动与技能。民族志研究表明,摊贩的日常实践涉及夜间工作、长工时与高强度体力劳动。与此同时,摊贩仍能通过社会关系与技能习得过程应对这些不稳定工作条件。我们在结论中指出,唯有使不可见者显形,那些维系城市空间运转之人的劳动与技能才能得到确认、被(重新)赋与价值并实现合法化。这不仅对于支持旨在改善摊贩普遍不稳定工作条件的策略而言极为重要,更能作为联盟构建策略的杠杆,抵抗全球众多摊贩因新自由主义重建进程而额外面临的失所威胁。

关键词

隐形劳动、夜间工作、公共空间、技能、街头集市

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Introduction

The last three decades, traditional street markets have become a topic of considerable interest to social scientists. Within this rapidly expanding body of literature, roughly three strands of thinking can be delineated. First, street markets have been studied as important public spaces. This line of research foregrounds the role of markets as sites of sociality, intercultural contacts and community-building (e.g. Anderson, 2011; Morales et al., 1995; Watson, 2009). Moreover, in contrast to farmers or specialist food markets that have proliferated the last decade, traditional street markets offer lower-order goods and are therefore of great importance to servicing lower-income urban communities (González, 2020). Second, street markets have been studied as ‘key livelihood-building opportunities’, especially for immigrant newcomers, arguing that markets provide both an important foothold into the labour market and an opportunity for autonomy (e.g. Blennerhassett et al., 2022; Hiebert et al., 2015; Janssens and Sezer, 2013). The third line of research draws

attention to how markets, both as public spaces *and* as spaces for livelihood-building strategies, are increasingly under pressure as neoliberal urban redevelopment tends to prioritise more profitable land uses (e.g. Gonzalez and Waley, 2013; Guimarães, 2018; Öz and Eder, 2012).

Especially in the second and third line of research, the daily realities and experiences of (often immigrant) traders and vendors have been foregrounded. These studies focus on the various tactics and strategies they deploy to negotiate and challenge neoliberal and exclusionary policies (e.g. Adama, 2020; Turner and Schoenberger, 2012). While these studies have provided important insights into the relationship between institutional regulation and (constrained) agency, we suggest that the literature has, thus far, tended to pay less attention to traders’ everyday work practices that are central to both their livelihood-building strategies and the creation of markets as public spaces. In this article, we focus on traders’ labour and the spaces they inhabit as workers, both inside the market and outside, to reveal the

relatively hidden and underexplored work that brings markets into being.

We draw upon Goffman's (1959) metaphor of front- and backstage spaces to envisage markets as continuously performed spaces that are constructed and recomposed through the social-material efforts of traders. Goffman used the notions of frontstage and backstage to explain the dual aspect of how social life is performed by people. The frontstage represents the space where societal roles are performed in public, in front of an audience, while the backstage describes the private space where the performance is prepared, constructed and perfected (Fiorito and Nicholls, 2016). Within the fields of human geography and urban studies (see, e.g. Denis and Pontille, 2014; Karimnia and Kostourou, 2023; Zapata Campos et al., 2020), Goffman's metaphor of front- and backstage has been used to draw attention to practices of maintenance, repair and commoning that hide behind the visible surface of (urban) spaces. Instead of approaching spaces as 'preformed' sociomaterial frames that are 'naturally' available in the environment, Denis and Pontille (2014: 405) write:

Numerous backstage activities (Goffman, 1959) are conducted in order to manage the components of urban settings. The mere presence and persistence of [...] a given space are the result of a continuous process carried out by day-to-day practices that we must study in detail if we wish to understand [...] the production of public settings.

In line with this approach, we use the concepts of frontstage and backstage to highlight the distinction between the *usage* of markets and the social-material *production* of markets. While the former has received most research attention by conceptualising markets as sites of opportunity for livelihood-building and sociality, the latter – the backstage labour practices and skills that contribute to this usage – infills less visible

spaces in the city, behind, in-between or next to the apparent visibility of markets.

In this article, we present the findings of the social-material production of the Walthamstow market, an ethnically diverse street market in the northeastern part of London, United Kingdom. The study is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted between 2019 and 2022. Fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews with traders, market managers and representatives of traders' associations. Members of the research team also spent over 100 hours as participant observers, following various traders before and during the market day. The descriptive accounts in this article are based on the analysis of written field notes and transcriptions of the interviews.

Documenting the social-material production of the market chronologically, we focus on two central moments in the traders' everyday lives which make trading possible: the traders' nocturnal labour of sourcing products at wholesale markets before the market day begins; and second, the traders' infrastructural practices of assembling and maintaining the material infrastructure of the market in the early morning. The third component identified in the data was the traders' deployment of pre-acquired knowledges and skills that are needed to successfully perform sales during the day.

The findings make two important contributions to the field. First, we argue that traders' livelihood-building opportunities and challenges are shaped not only by neoliberal urbanism, but also by the kind of labour they perform. This became especially apparent during the participant observations of traders' night activities at wholesale markets. Although this physically strenuous night work adds to the precarity of their profession, we also demonstrate that traders are able to navigate this precarity. In part, this is enabled through relationships of friendship and trust between wholesalers and

traders and the ways they collaborate with each other.

Second, after forging trade channels and assembling the materialities of the market through which wholesale products reach customers, we argue that traders play a critical role in turning markets into public spaces of sociality. While street trading is often represented as a rather ‘unskilled’ practice, requiring low levels of education and formal training (Hiebert et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2018), we demonstrate that the creation of markets’ social-material structures is a rather complex process, requiring specific skills and competencies. Following Kovesi and Kern (2018: 171), we conclude that providing insights into the challenges, opportunities and skills that underlie traders’ everyday labour forms a necessary foundation for scholarship, activism or planning that seeks to improve the labour conditions in markets.

This paper unfolds as follows. In the next section, we start with a discussion of existing studies that have focussed on markets as spaces of sociality, livelihood-building and resistance. Here, we argue that markets as sites of labour have received less research attention. To study the ‘backstage’ labour that brings markets into being, we discuss literature on infrastructure, repair and night-time labour in the third section. The fourth section introduces the research methodology and setting. The empirical sections are organised around the above-described key moments in traders’ everyday lives and the significance of the acquisition of skills.

Markets as spaces of sociality, livelihood-building and resistance

During the last three decades, studies of traditional street markets have proliferated considerably. The in-depth ethnographic study of the Maxwell Street Market in Chicago by Morales et al. (1995) marked an important

starting point by demonstrating the role of markets in providing affordable goods and fresh produce to marginalised communities, fostering community-building and helping to incorporate newcomers into local labour markets. Extending these findings, three strands of research can be delineated.

First, studies have focussed on the social interactions and relationships of care that develop in street markets. Watson’s (2009) study of eight UK markets revealed that markets facilitate multiple forms of sociality in cities and towns. In certain markets, where affordable products attract large numbers of customers and visitors, vibrant social encounters across different groups tend to take place. Watson proposed the concept of ‘rubbing along’ to denote the fleeting encounters between people that has the potential to militate against withdrawal into the self. Anderson’s (2011) study of the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia shows that people not only seek out difference, but also learn to practice civility and share space with diverse others, nurturing tolerance more broadly (cf. Aptekar, 2019).

Second, street markets have been studied as sites of economic incorporation and livelihood-building opportunities, especially for immigrant newcomers. Limited formal-sector job opportunities, structural discrimination and/or unfamiliarity with labour market regulations in the host country have been identified as factors that push newcomers into sectors such as lower-end retailing, wholesaling and street markets (Blennerhassett et al., 2022). According to Janssens and Sezer (2013), street vending provides a low barrier to enter the labour market because of markets’ relatively low rents, flexible leases and little overhead costs. Moreover, as argued by Hiebert et al. (2015), street vending requires limited ‘skills’, level of education and formal training. Blennerhassett et al. (2022) argue that newcomer entrepreneurs also enter street vending in order to seek autonomy over their

own job and business as compared to other waged labour opportunities.

The third, and most dominant, line of research focuses on how markets, both as important public spaces of sociality *and* as key livelihood-building opportunities, are increasingly under pressure as neoliberal urban redevelopment tends to prioritise more profitable land uses. Sara González, in particular, has argued that markets all over the world, both 'formal' and 'informal', have increasingly become 'frontier spaces for processes of gentrification, dispossession and displacement' (González, 2020: 890). This body of scholarship reveals that neoliberal policies, in search for the continuous marketisation of land and higher value land uses, marginalise and sometimes even erase markets' traditional role of facilitating social interactions, providing affordable produce and sustaining precarious livelihoods (see, e.g. Gonzalez and Waley, 2013; Guimarães, 2018; Öz and Eder, 2012). Moreover, it has been argued that processes of redevelopment and dispossession are often preceded by a phase of (racialised) stigmatisation in which markets and traders are represented by urban governments as 'old fashioned', 'disorderly' and 'uncivilised' to legitimate their interventions as part of wider capital accumulation strategies (van Eck, 2022; van Eck and Rath, 2024).

At the intersection of the last two strands of research, traders' everyday experiences and practices of how they negotiate their precarious position as a result of neoliberal governance and re-development have been foregrounded. Particularly in cities in the Global South, this research has revealed how street vendors adopt a range of spatial, temporal and relational tactics to maintain access to street vending sites (e.g. Adama, 2020; Turner and Schoenberger, 2012). This research is largely situated within the tradition of informality and development studies. However, as more regulated street markets

are also subjected to the processes described above, they are experiencing similar threats as markets that have been described as 'informal' (González, 2020). Studying the historic Moore Street Market in central Dublin, Blennerhassett et al. (2022: 2752) argue that private sector developments in and around the market significantly constrain the agency and livelihood-building opportunities of traders. 'Prolonged and unsustainable exposure to such precarity', as the authors conclude, 'may lead to the destruction of the very livelihoods it helped to create'. Focussing on the Seven Sisters Market in London that has similarly been earmarked for redevelopment, Taylor's (2020) study shows that coalition-building between market traders, local businesses, residents and other groups can act as vehicle to successfully challenge the threat of displacement and pursue alternative, community-based, plans.

In sum, these studies suggest that a key debate revolves around the role of markets as sites that may foster livelihood-building opportunities for traders and a sense of community among visitors and residents, but that neoliberal policies and redevelopment plans work against these objectives. Within this debate, the market as a site of economic opportunity, sociality and resistance is highlighted, whereas the market as a 'site of labour remains shadowed, even though market vendors are vital to the creation of the market as a place for community, resilience, and social justice' (Kovesi and Kern, 2018: 172). Among the few scholars who have advocated for studying the labour practices of traders, Kovesi and Kern (2018) show that the precarity of trading is not only a result of external redevelopment plans that threaten street markets, but also intrinsically related to the type of labour itself. Although market trading offers a relatively low-cost opportunity to sell products and reach a large customer base, these qualities almost

invariably come at the expense of the precarious conditions of self-employed work, such as income insecurity, over-work and the lack of benefits.

While Kovesi and Kern mainly focus on the relationship between labour precarity and autonomy of artisan craft vendors, they do not provide in-depth empirical insights into how traders experience, cope with and challenge often long and stressful working hours. van Eck and Schapendonk (2025) show that a typical working day of a trader involves driving, sourcing products during the night and setting up market stalls in the early morning in preparation for daytime sales. In other words, long hours of 'backstage' labour precede the day-time activity of selling products in markets. To study the peculiarities of such backstage activities, we turn to literature on infrastructure, repair and night-time labour.

Backstage labour and skills

A new genre of thinking has emerged within the social sciences that narrates the public and social life of cities through 'infrastructures': 'In it, trunk networks, the built environment and public utilities and services appear not only as subjects in *their own right*, but also as matters implicated in the *making* of urban functionality, sociality and identity' (Amin, 2014: 137, emphasis added). From here, scholars have started to interrogate the often invisible maintenance work that keeps a piece of urban infrastructure together and allows it to operate effectively. As Strebel (2011) shows in his ethnography of maintenance and repair work conducted by concierge workers in a British high-rise estate, maintenance has more to do with skills, innovation and improvement than often assumed. Maintenance work is not simply the application of specific knowledge (e.g. knowing how to replace parts or resolve technical defects), but rather a socio-

technical effort that constantly produces and re-produces urban spaces.

Much of these maintenance and repair practices that keep urban spaces running during the day take place in the night. Shaw (2018) makes this point strongly through his study of nighttime cleaners, often migrants and women, who enter the offices when everyone has gone home, clear up the debris of the previous day, and vanish without a trace, leaving the buildings in a pristine condition for the daytime workers to arrive the next day. These cleaners form part of what appears to most people as the invisible urban backstage that keeps the economy and society ticking along. By quoting Goffman, however, Shaw challenges this:

all the world is not a stage – certainly the theatre isn't entirely. Whether you organise a theatre or an aircraft factory, you need to find places for cars to park and coats to be checked and these had better be real places, which, incidentally, had better carry real insurance against theft. (Goffman, 1974: 1, quoted in Shaw, 2018: 62)

Like Goffman's car parks, cloak rooms and insurance that facilitate the smooth functioning of theatres and aircraft factories, the practices that constitute everyday urban spaces such as markets extend well beyond their physical localities – in both space and time. With the exception of some studies (e.g. MacQuarie, 2023; Müller, 2020), these nightly labour practices are often overlooked in social scientific analysis of urban spaces and organisation. But, as Shaw (2018: 63) importantly argues, 'these activities are not peripheral; they are essential, a key way in which society rejuvenates itself'.

A notable contribution to this new direction in research is MacQuarie's (2023) ethnography of the migrant night workers of New Spitalfields. New Spitalfields is a big wholesale market located in London that hosts 105 stands and over 115 businesses.

The wholesalers and catering businesses supply produce to all London boroughs and throughout the UK, and, importantly, to the Walthamstow traders we have followed in our own research. MacQuarie's so-called 'nightnography' explores the largely hidden, precarious labour activities of nightworkers on which the economy of global cities depend. It subscribes to the understanding that migrant workers are politically rejected and accused of swamping the labour market, but economically they are 'the half welcome migrants' who keep 24/7 cities on their feet (van Liempt, 2024).

This article can be considered as an extension of MacQuarie's (2023) work, showing how nighttime commerce and work practices are neatly interconnected with the production of daytime urban spaces, such as markets. In the following sections, we first outline our methodological approach, followed by our empirical findings.

Case study and methodology

The fieldwork for this article was part of a European project¹ that ran from 2019 until 2022, investigating the labour and mobility practices of market traders in one urban and one rural site in four European countries. Inspired by the relational and mobile turn in the social sciences, the project started from the idea that markets are nodes in dynamic networks rather than bounded and static places (MMP et al., 2022). Within the context of this research project, and drawing upon our empirical findings derived from participant observations, informal talks and semi-structured interviews with traders from the Walthamstow street market, we seek to better understand the often-overlooked labour practices, knowledges and skills that shape and re-shape markets.

Walthamstow is the main urban settlement within the London Borough of Waltham Forest, situated in the northeast of

the city. As of 2021, the borough is home to 278,400 residents and constitutes one of the most diverse areas in the country (ONS Census, 2021). An estimated 47% of the population is from an ethnic minority background. According to the 2021 Census, the top five countries of origin for residents born overseas are Pakistan, Romania, Poland, Turkey and other European countries. The market is located in the centre of Walthamstow, with the main rail and tube station, bus station, post office and Central Library and most of the commercial development and activity located around the High Street. The market is run by Waltham Forest council and is open five days a week, from Tuesday until Saturday, from 8 am to 5 pm. Just like Walthamstow as a whole, the High Street area has a diverse, ethnically mixed population and the market traders reflect this diversity. For many ethnic minorities markets represent an employment opportunity where new ventures can be launched and tested at relatively minimal costs. The market complements the many shops that line the High Street, attracting more customers into the shops on the days when the market is running. Walthamstow traders sell a great variety of items, including clothes, food, flowers and household products.

The research that underpins this article adopted three ethnographic research methods. First, a member of the research team accompanied the selected traders to the sites of commerce from which they sourced their products. These were sites where trade was conducted at night or in the early morning. These activities were described in diary notes while accompanying traders to the Spitalfields wholesale market, located 12 km south of the Walthamstow market. Informal conversations with the traders at Spitalfields market were also conducted. Secondly, the construction of the market stalls was observed from the point of arrival to the

market site until the day began. The observations and conversations were carefully expanded into fieldnotes after having left the field sites. Thirdly, interviews were conducted with a selection of market traders. These traders were introduced by the local market manager to reflect the range of activities in the market. In particular, these were traders who accessed their products from nighttime traders in wholesale markets. All traders' names have been pseudonymised.

Night work at the wholesale market

The first key moment in the everyday lives of traders occurs at night. In London there are three wholesale markets that the traders visit to collect their produce, each of which start in the early hours. Billingsgate, located at Canary Wharf, is London's wholesale fish market. It was set up in 1698 alongside the river Thames but relocated to its present site in 1982. Smithfield, located in the Square Mile of the City of London, is London's wholesale market selling meat, equally vibrant and teeming with sellers and buyers from the early hours and no longer operating by the time the city workers arrive at their offices. Without these markets, local markets like Walthamstow could not exist. In this study, we focus on traders who collect their produce at New Spitalfields. MacQuarie (2022) describes New Spitalfields as a 'frenetic' place that throbs with movement, humming voices, the rumble of forklift engines and machinery and the rhythms of workers' bodies. From 10 pm, when the night shift starts for wholesalers, all 16 gates of this fruit and vegetable warehouse stay wide open to invite in market traders.

One of these traders is Rob, a fruit and vegetable trader who has been trading at Walthamstow for over 40 years and learned

the job from his father when he was a small child. For a couple of nights, a member of the research team followed Rob and documented how he purchases his market produce in New Spitalfields. Meeting Rob for the first time in front of the wholesale market on a cold December night in 2021, the researcher reflected in their fieldnotes on the constant movements and cold that characterise the organisation and atmosphere of the market – much in line with MacQuarie's (2022) observations:

The temperature in the hall is quite low. Various gates are wide open on all sides of the building to keep the fruit and vegetables fresh. There are lots of forklifts all over the place, carrying fruit and vegetables, taking things out to trucks. There are designated walking areas, but it is necessary to look out all the time.

Very soon, it became clear that night workers at New Spitalfields seem to suffer from sleep deprivation while lifting heavy loads and conducting repetitive, monotonous task under these cold working conditions. Although some workers might cope with these conditions better than others, many of them described bodily problems during the night:

I started wandering around the floodlit aisles and stopped to speak to a wholesaler, who was looking tired and was stretching. He gets up at 10 pm. He goes to sleep at 10 am to 4 pm, then from 8 pm to 10 pm. 'It's not normal to live like this', he said. He explained that it is busy from midnight to 3 am, then quiet for an hour before it gets busy again. Some customers come to buy after they close their shops, whereas others come before they open their shops or stalls.

The fieldnotes above confirm the research findings of Müller's (2020) study into the experiences of factory and hospital

nightworkers. The physical and mental consequences to night workers were the most prominent topics in her interviews. Moreover, as Müller (2020) emphasises, night work has disruptive effects on social life, as sleeping during the day and irritability and fatigue after night shifts tend to strain personal relationships and active engagement in private and societal life.

Yet, despite the hardships that night work at the wholesale market entails, Spitalfields simultaneously forms an important *social* space. Moments of social interacting and caring became visible as Rob and other traders came together to secure essential produce, supporting each other in preparation for the market day. The following excerpt from the fieldnotes illustrates this point:

One of the first places Rob and I went to was Waldon fruit. Rob is a regular customer there and he has worked with this company for 40 years. He introduced me to several of the staff there and spent quite a bit of time telling several of them about where he had been yesterday ... While chatting with various people, he was also checking out their goods and started ordering. He mentioned that it's very important to have rapport with people to keep the business going. After spending some time at Waldon, Rob decided it was time to move on to other stalls. He greeted a large number of people on the way and clearly knows many of them very well. He haggled about the price with several of them, but always in a friendly and joking way. Rob said that it is his 'job to find the product and get the right price'.

The above makes clear that the wholesale market is more than a place where economic transactions take place between wholesalers and market traders. Indeed, as argued by MacQuarie (2022: 7): 'Working at night in this market [...] fulfills more than just making good sales; it has a social dimension'. The wholesale market provides opportunities for traders to form working relationships with suppliers and to negotiate over

the right price of products via established contacts or friends (Alford et al., 2019). This also requires the development of specific skills to distinguish between the preferences and needs of different customers (Kothari, 2008). Asif, a Pakistani trader who mainly sells Caribbean vegetables, explained how he always orders his produce at Spitalfields to meet customer demand:

I always order Jamaican sweet potato, yellow yam, Jamaican coco yam and soft yam, regardless of season. Old people can't eat hard yam but soft or French yam can be cooked in just 10 minutes so people without teeth can eat them. Bread fruit they love too. Chow-chow, I order it all the time, it's good for blood pressure. The customers buy plantain every single day, but you never earn any profit on it. None in London does but you have to have it cause everyone buys it.

Through this sourcing activity, which entails the development of social relationships and complex knowledges about products, customer demand and suppliers, traders are to some extent able to negotiate and shape the very real precarious conditions of night work. Moreover, Alford et al. (2019: 1089) argue, this tactical action of sourcing extends production networks by 'creating new retail spaces on the street'. In the next section, we consider how traders create the material infrastructure of the market after having collected their products at the wholesale market.

Assembling the market stall

The second key moment occurs in the early hours of the morning. Traders spend considerable amounts of time before the market is open setting up their stalls, which often involves an elaborate process of setting up the metal frame, raising the tent and securing it to make sure it will not be taken by the wind. Like most markets in London, traders at Walthamstow are not allowed to

leave anything out at night, which means that all market stalls need to be assembled in the early morning. Describing this work, Umar, a Pakistani trader who sells household bed linen, remarked:

The hard work is in the morning. It's like if you want food you have to cut the onion, you have to cook all ingredients. It's the same here: you have to put the lighting up, take things out of the van to display. That's what I tell my daughter: things don't just make themselves, you have to put in hard work.

Tom has been trading on markets for over 20 years and, just like Umar, owns a van where all his materials for the stall and his goods are stored. Over the years, he has gradually developed methods for building his stall most effectively, shifting from using a heavy marquee that required a lot of labour to recently investing in a light-weight version that he could simply pull out of his van and then open up and click to lock. This would take him a few minutes after which he set up an equally simple stall table. The whole process now took him about 10 minutes and was a result of his effort to save time both in the morning and at the end of the day. While Tom explained his strategy, he pointed to another trader who sold clothes in a nearby stall and said that it took that trader up to two hours to set up his stall because he sold clothes that needed to be hung up on a much sturdier frame to be stable.

There were major differences in the labour and time it took to set up and dismantle stalls, but they all required the know-how to secure their goods and make sure that they did not get wet, fly off in strong wind or get stolen by people passing by. That traders deploy different strategies to save time setting up their market stalls is not surprising, given the fact that this process is preceded by a long night of work at the wholesale markets as described in the previous section.

A focus on the practice of assembling market stalls also reveals that the material infrastructure of markets are tied into, and shaped by, large networks of both human and non-human relations that influence how markets come into being. This is nicely captured by Benjamin Coles, who visualises in his photo-essay of the Borough Market in London that:

Nearly everything arrives at Borough Market from somewhere else, and before Borough Market is Borough Market, everything must be taken from their crates, vans or floor, and stacked, piled or otherwise arranged so that the market can take place. Borough Market is a place of assembly and assemblages. (Coles, 2014: 518)

Diary notes from an early morning visit to Walthamstow market with Louis, a flower vendor selling Christmas trees and accessories in the winter months, paint a similarly complex network of practices, human and non-human actants that are all tied into the 'sociomaterial assembly' (McFarlane, 2011: 649) of markets:

Louis can't wear gloves because he's often touching the water that the flowers are in. In winter the water is freezing so he has to smash the ice with his fingers. His finger tips are often all cracked in winter. He brings out some small cactuses and realises he forgot some at Spitalfields. 'I told you I always forget something!' He takes out the wreaths he made himself with his cousin. 'The ones you buy are no good, the berries are all soggy and the leaves are too dry'. The other day he had to cut down two holly trees so he got the materials for the wreaths for free. You just get a metal frame to make the ring and put on some moss, and then throw on whatever you like' ... He cuts the stems of the flowers he bought and places them into the display buckets. When Louis is done cutting the flower stems and displaying them, he mentions it's quite different from cutting Gerbera daisies (brightly coloured type of

flower). He shows me what he means. 'With the Gerbera daisies, you have to take out each individual stem and wrap a metal wire around it, otherwise the head of the flower flops down. The flower lives long but the stem dies quickly, that's why you have to metal up the stem. It's freezing cold to do it with your fingers in winter.'

This snapshot comes close to Jacobs's (2006: 2) notion of a 'semiotics of materiality' in which the assemblages of human and non-humans that together constitute the material infrastructure of places are brought into view (Strebel, 2011: 247). In order for Louis to sell Christmas decorations and flowers from his market stalls, metal frames need to be set up, lamps have to be hung up, holly trees need to be cut, wreaths have to be assembled through a wide range of materials and large water containers need to be filled.

But the materiality of the market stall also contains another facet: Louis' labour and his motivations and skills. Louis knows exactly how to cut the stems of different types of flowers to make them look nice on display and make sure they last longer. The construction of the market stalls and the display of products are produced through traders' 'embodied immersion' (McFarlane, 2011) – the meticulous process of wrapping metal wire around flower stems, smashing the ice of frozen water buckets, fingers that become crackled because of the cold.

Traders inscribe their experiential knowledge and bodily activities into the market and thereby 'charge their vending locations with "interactional potential" for the selling and buyer encounters' (Malefakis, 2019: 132) that will emerge during the day. That is what we will turn to next.

Traders' knowledges and skills

In this section, we consider the skills and knowledges that enable traders to perform their role of selling goods and products from

their market stalls. Many traders articulated a narrative of the sociality of markets, as widely documented in existing studies (e.g. Anderson, 2011; Morales et al., 1995; Watson, 2009). In this research, traders provided more in-depth insights into the strategic work, efforts and social skills that are needed to facilitate and sustain sociality and social connection. Zayan, a middle-aged perfume seller in Walthamstow, remarked in an interview:

I think markets are very important because it brings more of a local community out. I think shops bring too much professionalism to the role, while with markets it's more of a place people can gather and socialise. It's more of a community sort of thing, where it's not just trading, but you're trading amongst the community that you all get to know each other and be all ... like a lot of people, a lot of customers they come, they stop, they talk and that's what I like about the market community, you know people and look after them.

Capacity to work with the local customer base is an important part of the picture and these social dimensions of traders' work make their interactions more meaningful as they establish relations with people. Even though they are 'only' interactions, traders need to develop these skills to establish good relations with customers and make sales. Some traders were aware that their ability to chat to people, remember their families and entertain them with banter, also enhances their success as a market trader. Rob has spent many years building trust with customers and has developed a strong connection to the market:

I serve a lady on my stall who I've served since I was 19. She remembers me serving her with my nan. Well my nan died in 1976 but I still serve her to this day. So I've served her maybe for 40-odd years and she's lovely, and I can tell you exactly what she has. She has two bowls of oranges, she has a bowl of grapes and a bowl of bananas every Thursday and then she

comes back Saturday for more. I know lots of people who lose their partners who want to talk to you, that I've served for years.

Rob's relationships have developed over the years and across generations, but newcomer entrepreneurs have to continuously devise creative practices to engage people. These relationships do not simply happen, but are the outcomes of strategic work and efforts to develop them through interacting with customers in ways that make them feel welcome and enjoy the conversations. Anas, a Pakistani trader who had different work experiences before becoming a market trader in Walthamstow, recognised how his communication skills helped him as a trader:

When I was younger, I worked in a five-star hotel on an apprenticeship and I also worked in a hair salon. So working in these two places I gained a lot of experience in customer service. So you know in five star hotels all the high class people, you have to really be good with your English and really be presentable, you have to talk very well; so I was very good at that. And in the hair salon, dealing with the customers, washing their hair and things like this, yeah. So I learned those skills during that time, and when I used it here, when I was on the market stall, I was just getting sales, sales, sales.

Some market traders are more interactive than others, but it is clear that developing skills in interacting with customers is an important factor for sustaining their businesses. The need for these skills is similar to what is required for any sales job (Powers et al., 2014), but several traders pointed out that they had much closer relations with their customers than people working in department stores who would simply complete transactions with less interaction. In addition to the necessity of these interactions to develop personal relationships and make customers return regularly, they also

contribute to the social expectation and discourse of sociality in markets and their roles in creating communities.

Interestingly, in existing studies market trading has often been presented as a rather 'unskilled' practice that provides relatively easy access to city labour markets. Janssens and Sezer (2013: 247), for example, argue that because street markets require minimal overhead costs, trading 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 labour market'. In a similar vein, Hiebert et al. (2015: 6) argue that many 'entrepreneurs in these markets need not have full command of the local language, tertiary education, or formal training'.

However, this widely held assumption that traders are people who end up in markets through lack of alternative options does not reflect the wide diversity of backgrounds of the traders we studied in this research. Some take over their parents' market stall having learnt how to run the stall since childhood, others decide to trade on a market for greater freedom and to be their own boss and yet others have started a business on markets because of changed life circumstances. Regardless of the personal reasons, when someone has made the decision to become a market trader, the next step is to select one or more markets where to trade – a process that, just like selling products and engaging customers, involves specific skills.

Instead of just setting up business at the nearest market, the different strategies and ways of selecting where and when to trade require in-depth understanding of the diverse processes involved in market trading. The reasons why traders choose specific markets need to be understood in relation to their knowledge and understanding of the opportunities and limitations of these different sites. The selection is often a complex

process that depends on multiple factors, such as variations in consumer preferences, the local demography, supply logistics and local regulations. This suggests that the selection of markets and the capacity to adapt strategies over time constitute a skill that is necessary to succeed as a market trader.

In Walthamstow, many of the traders only work on the most profitable days to reduce the expenses for market fees. In this way, traders could dedicate the other days to other income-generating activities and thereby adapt to the circumstances to balance their effort and profitability. Managing time and resources was not only about convenience, but a key skill that most traders took very seriously as it could make the difference between making enough money to get by or not.

Traders also need to know how to convince market managers of their success in the market since it is market managers who decide who is allowed to trade on the markets they supervise. Rather than just setting up a stall wherever they prefer, traders often have to convince the market manager that their business is viable, well organised and does not interfere with the business of long-term traders. The process differs between markets (see Jónsson et al., 2023) but in Walthamstow, the process is elaborate and requires traders to promote their products and present themselves as professionals. Khaled, the market manager, described:

So the process now is that you fill out the form. I then invite them [traders] in for an interview, we call it a quality assurance meeting. They have to bring in their samples, so for example yesterday we had a whole nice Chinese spread! So he brought egg fried rice, king prawns, vegetable fried rice, chili dumplings and various things ... So we have a little fun with that. But the seriousness is we wanna see what they're selling. Not so much the food, the food is good, so we can taste it and all the

rest of it, which is good, but essentially mainly clothes, products, mobile phones, toys, we wanna feel it so it doesn't crumble in our hand ... Yeah, like a formal interview you would go for a job, so you see this person, if they come in smart, if they come in prepared. What's the body language like, and then seeing whether they're enthusiastic and all the rest of it.

While no formalised skills are needed to pass through this quality assurance meeting, it is clear that prospective traders need to have a clear business strategy, be able to communicate well and know their trade sufficiently to convince the market manager that they are capable of doing a good job on the market.

The key message here is that market traders are skilled people whose tireless performance in the front stage of the market is predicated on backstage practices and knowledges, often invisible and unrecognised, which turn markets into important public spaces. It has become clear that traders employ a wide range of labour practices and skills to facilitate interaction with customers and other traders to make their business work, most of which are learned on the job or through more experience in other sectors.

Conclusion

We conclude that the complex everyday practices and skills that undergird the construction of urban spaces such as traditional street markets warrant more research attention. Without the arduous night and early morning work of traders, no market would exist. By drawing on Goffman's (1959) metaphor of front- and backstage, we saw that markets as frontstage sites of social interactions and livelihood-building depend on backstage labour and skills that are more invisible and which are often overlooked in existing studies on street markets. By following a number of traders, we gained insights into the precarity of traders' self-employed

working conditions, characterised by extremely long working days and physically strenuous work activities. These working days often start in the middle of the night when traders travel to wholesale markets to source produce. This is followed by the physically demanding work of assembling market stalls and displaying products in the early morning. Yet the very fact that these activities take place out of sight in the hours when much of the city sleeps means they are easy to ignore. It is only by making the invisible visible that the labour and skills of those who make our urban spaces work can be recognised, (re-)valued and legitimised.

Similarly the skills and knowledges that enable traders to trade successfully are often learnt from previous generations, or in previous employment or on the job. Traders' social connections with wholesalers and other traders, as well as their knowledges about products and customer preferences, enable traders to get the right produce for the right price and perform successful sales in the market. This finding sharply contrasts with earlier studies that have represented market trading as relatively 'unskilled' practice that simply provides easy access to urban labour markets (Hiebert et al., 2015; Janssens and Sezer, 2013; Martínez et al., 2018). Access to these knowledges through training and on the job support would serve to provide ammunition for strategies to improve the generally precarious working conditions of traders and enhance their success. Recognition of hidden skills and their validation could also be used as leverage in coalition-building strategies (Taylor, 2020) to resist the additional threat of displacement that so many traders around the world face as the result of neoliberal redevelopment processes.

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Notes

1. Moving MarketPlaces (MMP): Following the Everyday Production of Inclusive Public Spaces. Read more about the project on this website: <https://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/moving-marketplaces> or watch our video in which we present the project's main findings: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W M4WC7QXpfw>.

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