

# Contesting Nodes of Migration and Trade in Public Space: Thessaloniki's Bazaar Economy

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Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Thessaloniki (2003 and 2004), this article concentrates on the bazaars of urban irregular<sup>1</sup> refugee<sup>2</sup> street vendors<sup>3</sup>, and on the port city as a node of migration and trade.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that street vending compensates for the loss of day labour jobs in

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- 1 In the following I will use “informal” and “irregular” as open categories as proposed by Greiner (2003: 51) referring to forms of work and of gaining livelihoods or survival, which are not, or only rarely registered by official statistics of the regulated economy (Komlosy et al. 1997: 10). When I refer to the street vendors as “working informally”, I mean that they have no licenses and cannot get them because of legal requirements, and therefore pay neither taxes nor self-employed insurance contributions, with all the respective consequences.
  - 2 In this context, “refugees” are defined with Jacobsen as “all people crossing the border from conflict-affected countries, regardless of their assigned legal status in the host country” (Jacobsen 2005: 5). I will use the term “refugee” both for recognised refugees and for asylum seekers. Whenever a distinction is necessary, I will use the terms “asylum seeker” and “recognised refugee” explicitly.
  - 3 I will use the terms “street vendors”, “street traders” and “street hawkers” interchangeably and consider the self-employed hawkers described in this work as “entrepreneurs”, i. e. people who own and run their own business (Kloosterman/Rath 2003: 14).
  - 4 Main methods used in the field included participant observation, semi-structured interviews with street vendors and other members of refugee communities, social workers, formal trade representatives, local politicians such as the vice mayor and municipal police officers, as well as the analysis of scientific literature, local and national newspapers and internet pages.

the port economy. Rationalisation of work in the port has influenced the urban economy and indirectly enforced the increase of (informal) street trade. Furthermore, waterfront revitalisation, as well as ensuing urban transformations aiming to increase Thessaloniki's competitiveness, are shaped by an ideal image of a modern European port city that leaves no space for irregular hawkers. Nevertheless, the street bazaars, more than anything else, represent the nodal function of port cities on a micro level. Different actors produce and use specific images of the city both consciously and unconsciously, and the streets as bazaars become a site of contestation.

While the world of street markets in Greece is colourful and diverse, this article will focus on asylum seekers and refugees, trading in the informal sector.<sup>5</sup> This is one exemplary group of low income (temporary) refugee entrepreneurs who have formed survivalist or "displaced<sup>6</sup> livelihood networks" (Jacobsen 2005: 1).

The port city of Thessaloniki has a long tradition as a node of migration and trade. It is situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, connecting the European Union with the former Eastern Block and the Orient. Due to its geopolitical position, the city has always played a major role in migration and trade.

In the past two decades, Thessaloniki has been strongly promoted as a multicultural city with a colourful history. Historic sites from Byzantine, Roman or Ottoman times have become tools of publicity campaigns, attracting both tourists and investors. Besides the monuments of the past, it is also the actual presence of immigrants from diverse countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Nigeria, the former Soviet Union, China, Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq, as well as the former Asia Minor refugees, which contribute to the multicultural image of the city. These different groups have been shaping the physical and social space of Thessaloniki by meeting in public squares, playing cards or chess in the parks. Restaurants, supermarkets and bookstores offer "ethnic" products to migrants and local clients, and the urban soundscape carries fragments of Albanian, Russian, Bulgarian and many other languages.

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5 A high percentage of political refugees and especially asylum seekers in Greece live in a state of transit characterised by a high level of vulnerability, insecurity, instability and socio-economic marginalisation within the Greek society. The transitory nature of refugees' lives is attributable to the fact that most of them are asylum seekers and remain in the asylum process with an unforeseeable outcome. The respective legal status holds many difficulties for the refugees and turns the provision of their basic needs into a question of survival.

6 The term "displaced" refers to the status of the individuals as forced migrants or refugees.

At the same time, local authorities and urban developers aim at turning Thessaloniki into a modern and neo-liberal European port city, while insisting and underlining its regional role as “Capital of the Balkans”. Thessaloniki has become a role model as the first Greek city focusing on waterfront development (Gospodini 2001: 286). The planned improvement of infrastructure also implies control and limitations of (in-formal) trade to a tolerated minimum, if not eradicating it entirely.

In the market, divergent interests collide. Different uses, perceptions and daily practices contribute to the construction and contestation of public space. Thus, the streets and other public spaces where street vendors survive are often sites of competing interests of traders, city authorities, business investors, municipal police and the general public.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the microcosms of the street markets contribute to the image of the multicultural port city, while, on the other hand, they represent “un-wanted” and “illegal” elements which are viewed as contradictory to the ideals of a “European” Thessaloniki.

In this article, I will show two conflicting versions of port-city image construction. Local policy and public discourse have shaped the image of Thessaloniki as a multicultural European port city as a successful strategy of city development manifested in public space. On the other side, by becoming part of the bazaar economy irregular migrant street vendors implicitly produce, and make use of, this image of multicultural Thessaloniki in a pragmatic way. While the planners’ ideals result in re-development plans and intensified control of public space, the immigrants’ activities are not just part of their “cultural luggage”, but a result of limited professional choices in the context of global, national and local transformation processes and international migration.

## Port cities as nodes of migration and trade

Port cities are nodal points in the complex system of international labour and trade (Läpple 1994: 462; Schubert 2001: 16) and are highly competitive to each other. More than 90% of the global trade volume occurs by sea (Rodrigue et al. 2006). Consequently, port cities serve as maritime gateways for the centres in the hinterland. But they have also always been nodes of migration. The bazaar economies of port cities link and localise both dimensions of movement: of goods and of people.

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7 The study has been part of the EU project “European Port Cities: Disadvantaged Areas in Transition”, which focused on the subject of social exclusion.

International competition between cities in their global network has a direct impact on urban transformations and competing image ideals in Thessaloniki. Municipal and national governments and urban planners invest in improved infrastructure and place marketing, in order to increase the city's attraction and success as a European, or at least Balkan, hub of trade, industry and tourism. Waterfront redevelopment is one major aspect on the agenda of the competitive city, and has been a hallmark of urban revitalisation strategies since the 1980s (for Greece see Gospodini 2001; see also Hoyle et al. 1988; Gordon 1997; Malone 1997; Marshall 2001). In consequence, urban transformations and image changes have led to the exclusion of "unwanted" and "illegal" users of public space like informal street vendors.<sup>8</sup>

"The redevelopment of urban waterfronts into gentrified residential and commercial areas produces new spaces for investment and accumulation and provides symbolic visuals for entrepreneurial 'city branding' campaigns." (Cowan/Bunce 2006: 429)

Urban public space is shaped by these policies and ideals, but also by the activities of local actors and by the reactions of urban authorities. It is socially and culturally constructed and constantly being (re-)negotiated by different social, ethnic or gender groups. Public space materialises in physical place, shaping social interactions and feeding imaginary and discursive representations (Harvey 1993; Lefèbvre 1994; Brown 2006: 22).

Immigrant street vendors influence the city's public space by their activities as much as the rest of the population, but with one difference: their activities are visibly concentrated in the city centre, thus playing a prominent role in the process of image construction.<sup>9</sup> Equally present are the strategies of police forces, tax officers and border patrols to counteract and prohibit informal trade. Pedestrians form a third party in the contestation of public space. While many of them are customers, some are also opposing the hawkers.

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8 Informal trade is often seen as hindering the efficient operation of cities and it is said that it prevents progress (Rogerson 1989; Centeno/Portes 2003), a position supporting prohibitive interventions, which seek to exclude and remove traders (Lyons/Snoxell 2005: 1302).

9 Cross (1998: 44) compared the spatial behaviour of street vendors to the one of land invaders since they also aim to gain access to a public or privately controlled good through informal means. "Land invaders take over land that has not been authorized for sale or subdivision. Likewise, street vendors invade streets to use them for trade and frequently also to avoid taxes and regulations that push up costs for formal business" (ibid).

The centre of Thessaloniki, being also the business centre of the city, has different meanings for these diverse actors and their everyday lives. The immigrant street vendors are interested in public space for reasons of economic survival, striving for access to space on the business streets, next to the bus station or at the central square, and frequently opposing the interests of formal traders and urban authorities. Thus, in urban public space both social norms and political practice manifest themselves, i.e. it has an “indirect role in supporting the economic and social aspirations of dominant business élites. Urban managers seeking to project the image of a modern city in order to attract foreign investment, or to upgrade the highway network, may undertake radical redevelopment or city ‘beautification’ that involves spatial cleansing with little regard for the existing users of space such as informal traders [...]” (Brown 2006: 24; see also Middleton 2003). As a result, urban public space can become a site of contestation (compare the cases of New York and Quito: Stoller 2002; Middleton 2003) since street vendors most often concentrate on places with high pedestrian flows such as transport terminals, shopping malls, streets and offices.

“Contest can arise from a number of sources, for example the protectionist approach of vested interests such as landowners and formal businesses, the desire of urban managers for orderliness and control, or the expression of political power and control. [...] The exclusion of ‘undesirable activities’ is an integral part of modern city management.” (Brown 2006: 12)

As Harvey (1973, 1993) has argued, urban public space is an imperfect common property resource because it is freely, but not equally, available to all individuals and even where access is permitted, use may be denied.

Transformations of maritime technology since the 1960s include containerisation, new port technologies, changes in size and nature of ships, new transport systems and the development of new port industries. Thessaloniki, like other port cities, has been facing significant changes in port structures and port-related labour, resulting in the rationalisation of work and the decrease of former port functions. In consequence, many port workers, dockers and day labourers, lost their jobs. A further significant change in the ports’ role and growth occurred in the 1990es, when Thessaloniki regained access to its hinterland in the Balkans. In the past decades a process of revitalisation has been occurring in the port area.<sup>10</sup> Port functions expanded and moved westward, while

10 “Revitalisation” refers to changing uses of space, renewal and reconfiguration due to different interest groups in the spatial interface of port and city (Schubert 2001: 16).

the inner city port opened its doors to the public in 1997 in the course of the Cultural Capital events. Meanwhile, these areas which had lost their direct economic relation to the port have become centres of entertainment (compare Schubert 2001; Hoyle et al. 1988). It was the first experience of waterfront development in Greece (Gospodini 2001).

Nonetheless, the port is no more the central dynamic engine and economic base of the city (Läpple 1994: 466). Processes of revitalisation are supposed to fill this gap and to compensate through modernisation of the urban economy. As the case of Göteborg shows however, the new “waterfront-jobs” are not directed towards the same clientele of job seekers (Ekman 1998: 87). In the case of Thessaloniki, other forms of economic survival and day labour outside of the port were created by the job seekers themselves, drawing from local and national traditions.



*Fig. 1: Street vendor on the seaside of Thessaloniki (photo: Salinia Stroux)*

Street vending is one possible economic strategy of informal self-employment in the service sector. The informal economy is a process of income generation, which “is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated” (Castells et al. 1989: 12). It has to be distinguished from illegal economy, although boundaries are often blurred. The absence of state regulation in the informal economy may affect various elements of the work process, such as the status of labour (i.e. working undeclared, lack

of insurance or social benefits, paid under minimum wage), the conditions of work (i.e. public hygiene, safety hazards), the form of management of some firms (i.e. systematic fiscal fraud) (ibid 13). Nevertheless, it can also be perceived as a construction bound to state regulation and different definitions in law.

Street vending is a typical subsistence niche of migrants in southern Europe's informal economies (Baldwin-Edwards; Arango 1999). Entrepreneurship provides work and income for groups who face substantial obstacles in the labour market, leading either to high rates of unemployment or to exploitative low wage employment (Kloosterman/Rath 2003: 3). "Ethnic entrepreneurship [...] [in southern Europe] [...] seems more to be a subsistence level occupation for the vast majority of immigrants engaged in it" (Baldwin-Edwards 1999: 9). It is certainly an alternative to earlier forms of day labour like the ones provided by port economies in the past, which have disappeared due to recent transformations in the port sector.

Following a definition by McGee and Yeung (1977), street vendors are "[...] those people who offer goods or services for sale from public spaces, primarily streets or pavements" (ibid 25). Apart from the spatial feature differentiating street vending from institutionalised markets or shops, Greiner (2003) adds the aspect of mobility, as the vendors move towards their clientele (ibid 5). Hence, in this article informal street vending is defined as an economic strategy of marginalised groups evolving out of structural pressure, social networks of shared experiences and individual choice, whereby street vendors use mobility to access their clientele on public spaces where they sell their goods. Irregular street vendors in particular are excluded from legal and administrative protection covering commercial licensing, labour contracts, income taxation and social systems (Reyneri 2001: 3). Based on research by Williams and Baláž (2005) on immigrant street traders in Slovakia, I consider refugee street vendors in Thessaloniki as actors "participating in multiple networks at different scales, which are both workplace and socially situated" (ibid 534). Their entry into the economy of street hawking is not just a response to their situation as refugees in a host country. They are reflexive agents responding to opportunities, and utilising various resources by networking on local, national and transnational levels, the main resource being their social networks. Hence, these refugees create new opportunities through their activities.

## Urban change in Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki was founded in 315 BC at the north-western shore of the Thermaikos Gulf. With approximately one million inhabitants it is the second largest city in Greece, metropolis of northern Greece and capital of the Greek province of Macedonia, as well as a significant international port and commercial centre. It is Greece's second major industrial centre with a growing service sector, and accounts for 7.2 % of all immigrants in Greece (Cavounidis 2002). Offering refuge for the Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and being a general attraction point for other refugees, migrants, trade-diasporas and travellers, Thessaloniki has a distinct multicultural history. Due to the influx of refugees from Asia Minor in the 1920s, it was labelled "capital of refugees". Since its nomination as European Cultural Capital in 1997, the multicultural history of the city has been promoted increasingly, pointing to the long tradition of coexistence of different cultures. New tourist sightseeing walks use this history as a focus of public image construction and promote Thessaloniki as a "European" city.

In consequence, during the past two decades Thessaloniki has been undergoing significant changes with the goal to improve the image of the city on political (EU membership), cultural (Cultural Capital 1997) and economic (e.g. tourism, EXPO) levels. In preparation for the 1997 Cultural Capital events, Thessaloniki was the site of various projects like the preservation of the upper city, the utilisation of modern period architectural heritage, the "freeing" of the city's monuments and distinct projects in the regional municipalities. The physical changes focused on the multicultural city image and on the upgrade of the historic centre<sup>11</sup> (Tsolouvis 1998). In 2003, further plans foresaw a 4,4 million Euro investment by the local government in different spatial projects – including the Ladadika area (Zouka 2003). These strategies of urban transformation resulted in the displacement of actors that had used the public space before, including street vendors, addicts and the homeless. Furthermore, public places and streets in the historic centre of the city have become representative symbols of Thessaloniki's leading role as a European hub in the Balkans. In consequence, special units of the border police control shopping malls and central tourist places like Navarinou Square. By patrolling and checking the papers of suspects, they create an image of security to some, and new forms of exclusion for others. At the

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11 I.e. by the Urban Pilot Project funded from 1989 till 1993 and prepared by the Organisation of Thessaloniki for the Master Plan Implementation and Environmental Protection, which was set up in 1985 by the Greek ministry of environment.

same time the police and private security personnel control street vending by patrolling the streets and squares and asking for work permits.

In 1953, the Thessaloniki Port Fund and the Board of the Free Trade Zone merged to one new body named Free Zone and the Port of Thessaloniki. The port extended and started to move westwards. During the 1960s the city underwent a construction boom and new industries moved into the region. As a result, the port specialised in the transportation of raw materials and industrial goods. In 1999 the Thessaloniki Port Authority became a private-sector company with listings on the Athens Stock Exchange. Following the redefinition and opening of European borders in the 1990s, the port of Thessaloniki regained its hinterland in the Balkans and former Eastern Block, and former transit routes were revitalised, supporting claims by the Thessaloniki Port Authority that “in the Balkans all corridors lead to the Port of Thessaloniki” (Thessaloniki Port Authority 2002). Today Thessaloniki is Greece’s second major transit port handling nearly half of the Greek exports. Since 2001, the port of Thessaloniki, although being one of the smaller international ports, has become a hub for the EU connection to the Balkans and the Black Sea.

While the port has been growing and moving westward, it also changed functionally with a decreasing role as employer. One group affected directly by the port transformations are the specialised workers like dockers, transportation workers (coach drivers) or salvage and towage sailors. The personnel of the Port Authority declined successively. In some port professions, specialised employees have entered the job market. Other traditional port-related crafts such as porters or coach drivers, who still managed the transportation of goods until 20 years ago, have disappeared completely.

Today, the old port facilities in the historical centre of Thessaloniki have become a promenade filled with coffee bars. The former inner city port and its seaside scenery now serve as a background for street vending, tourist-tours by coaches, kiosks, musicians and visual artists. The revitalisation measures of 1997 and following years concentrated on a single-dimensioned re-use of space, creating spaces of “high culture” like exhibition halls, congress halls and expensive coffee bars, inherently excluding other groups of users and thus preventing the port from getting integrated into to the centre of the city. This led to alienation between the port and the inhabitants of Thessaloniki. Only the first pier which opened its gates in 1997 to the public is attracting a larger clientele for leisure activities.

## **A node of migration: Refugees' economic strategies**

Situated at the south-eastern borders of the European Union, Greece, especially the eastern part of the country, has become a point of entry for immigrants to the EU via Turkey. They usually come to Thessaloniki after arriving by boats at the eastern Greek Islands, or after passing through the north-eastern land borders. It is mainly these external EU-borders that define Thessaloniki's role as a centre of human mobility. The proximity to Turkey, but also to Macedonia and Albania not only attract immigrants to the city as a place of transit. Since the 1990s, they have been entering Thessaloniki in growing numbers with the purpose of settling. This development is strongly influenced by European policies. The Schengen Treaty in particular had a great impact on the situation of immigrants in Greece, giving rise to the development of external and internal buffer zones, where immigrants can be prevented from entering the EU in the first place, or at least are forced to remain in their first safe host country within the EU – which in this case is Greece.

Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece were traditionally countries of emigration until the late 1980s. Sizeable inflows of permanent migrants have only recently begun (Reyneri 2001: 11). Numerous unauthorised migrants from Eastern Europe, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan and other countries have been arriving in Greece over the last three decades.<sup>12</sup> As southern Europe's state with the highest proportion of foreigners (Reyneri 2001: 11), Greece still struggles to recognise this fact officially, and to react appropriately to the realities of being a country of immigration (Reyneri 2001: 11ff; OECD 2005: 117). According to estimates quoted by Reyneri (2001: 5f), unauthorised migrants<sup>13</sup> in Greece (1.7% of local population) already outnumbered the authorised migrants in 1992 (1.3% of local population), while in 1998, this number reached an even higher percentage (5% vs. 0.9%, Reyneri 2001: 6). Two regulation procedures have already been completed (1998 and 2001) and a third one<sup>14</sup> is in the process of being passed. Refugees whose asylum cases were rejected be-

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12 Until recently, immigration laws did only rarely allow for legal immigration so official numbers of foreign-born people remained largely unrecorded, since most migrants were entering the country unauthorised.

13 Greek nationals and other EU members excluded.

14 This third regulation has introduced a new set of financial prerequisites, including a fee of 1,500 euro for an application to enter the process of legalisation.

fore the end of 2004 are now allowed to apply for a migrants' residence permit (green card), thus changing their status.

The massive influx of migrants to Greece is probably due to its geo-strategic location, with many kilometres of external European Union borders and the proximity of transit to source countries. As most refugees, after arriving in Greece, hope to move on to other European countries with better asylum and reception conditions and higher recognition rates (Papadopoulou 2003: 348), they either try to remain undocumented or they apply for asylum without the intention of permanently settling in Greece. The decision to stay depends mainly on local opportunities to integrate successfully, and on the degree of embeddedness in transnational migrant networks.

The Greek job market and its accessibility constitute significant difficulties for refugees, because Greek refugee policy does not offer any public welfare support. As a result refugees urgently need to find jobs. Greece, in contrast to other European member states, provides asylum seekers with a work permit to "cover their basic needs" (since 1998), although it is restricted to salaried employment and does not include the right to self-employment (Mestheneos 2002: 184; Skordas/Sitaropopulos 2004: 46).<sup>15</sup> Other than that, there is no policy of economic integration for refugees except for a de-facto integration in the shadow economy, where most refugees are (self-)employed (ibid 47).<sup>16</sup> The UNHCR has underlined in its reports that "a large number of refugees (in Greece) live beneath the poverty line" (UNHCR 2002).

Regarding the limited possibilities within the regular labour market, self-employment, though irregular, has become an attractive alternative. It is a temporary solution and economic integration strategy (Papadopoulou 2003: 353) which, interestingly enough, follows the same patterns as natives' strategies. High unemployment rates (3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 2005 9.7% for Greece and 11.4% for the Thessaloniki agglomeration) may explain the very high rate of self-employment among Greeks (National Statistic Service Greece 2005). "It is both a cultural preference and a way out of unemployment or underemployment" (Mestheneos 2002: 187).

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15 Refugees receive a work permit under the precondition that they first apply for asylum and receive residence permit. Once they have passed health tests they can apply for a work permit at the prefecture. With the work permit they can get a tax number (AFM) and go to the job office to receive an unemployment card. After receiving a work permit (2-7 months after arrival) the situation changes and opportunities begin to arise.

16 Transient policy describes a state of 'non-policy' that is typical of local authorities in the first phase of labour migration, when the immigrant population is still small and many of them are undocumented.

Arriving in Greece, asylum seekers encounter an economy with specific socio-economic characteristics: a large informal economy; a high rate of self-employment and the subsequent fragmentation of the economy into small, mainly family-run enterprises; seasonality and high labour intensity in construction or agriculture; and a rejection of low-paid, low-status jobs by Greek citizens due to higher education levels, higher socio-economic aspirations and the delayed labour market entry of the young and women. There is a big demand for unskilled low-wage labourers, attracting and binding immigrants to Greece (Fakiolas 2002: 60ff; Hatziprokopiou 2004: 327f; Mestheneos 2000: 5ff; Reyneri 2001: 58).

Nonetheless, newcomers usually have few employment options before they are able to get a work permit (Fakiolas 1999: 215). For this first phase without a work permit, the majority of refugees and social workers perceive street vending as the best choice. My fieldwork suggests that in time, migrants' social networks function as informal employment agencies. Besides friends and expert institutions like specialised social workers or the local job office, they also consult newspapers or use the "Piazza", open markets for day labourers. The longer people live in Greece and the more experiences, contacts and knowledge they have, the higher their expectations, their chances and the likelihood that they end up finding better jobs.

Concerning refugees' participation in informal street vending, social workers and NGOs working with refugees criticise the limited possibilities for immigrants to engage in regular street vending. They see this profession as the best alternative for many asylum seekers, despite its illegal status. In their daily work they are confronting the refugees' problems concerning permits, confiscated goods, fines and criminal proceedings. A social worker from a local refugee organisation stated in an interview:

"Street vending is a solution for those asylum seekers who cannot work in hard, dangerous and difficult jobs in factories, in construction or crafts, who cannot work in the legal sector, because they have problems of health, they are handicapped, victims of torture, have for some reason no work permit or they might have a formal job which is not sufficiently paid. They have no other choice to generate livelihoods but to do this informal work. [...] Street vending as a profession in their countries of origin is not being perceived as something to be proud of, therefore I assume that most of them are forced to work in this niche for reasons of survival." (Interview with S.K., 30/04/2004)

## A node of trade: The streets as bazaar

Thessaloniki's role as a magnet for tourism is of particular importance in the interrelation of image construction, local policy and the transformation of urban space. Thessaloniki's selection as European cultural capital in 1997, the choice of the city as a venue for the Olympic games 2004, and attempts to draw EXPO 2008 to the city, motivated plans for an appropriate representation of the city as both "multicultural" and "European". One example is the planned renewal of the central public market. Since the opening of the Balkans, Thessaloniki and surrounding areas have also become a first choice for big new shopping malls and international companies even before Athens, because there is a steady influx of tourists from the Balkans, coming explicitly for shopping.

Thessaloniki's nodal functions become most visible in public space. A growing number of Chinese products enter the Greek market, ethnic enterprises open around the central square, international money transfer and telecommunication offices promote global contacts, and street vendors from different national backgrounds sell goods from various countries on the streets and in the markets.

Ambulant and stationary street professions have a long history in Greece. Informal street vending is an established alternative profession and has always been a strategy of the economically disadvantaged. This does not mean that it is generally tolerated, supported or recognised by the public or the state, but it has survived until today, despite attempts to reduce informal trading to a minimum. A century ago street vendors, selling *koulouria* (Greek sesame pretzels), *salepi* (traditional drink imported by Asia Minor refugees), flowers, milk, newspapers, pottery and many other things, belonged to the daily picture of urban Greece.<sup>17</sup> There were also many other itinerant labourers present in the city, such as mobile trades- and craftsmen who provided their services in public space. These street professionals either used the street directly as their workspace, or indirectly as a contact point with potential customers. Some of these professions were predominantly associated with specific ethnic groups, but they all represented economic strategies of the "urban poor" (Tsaktsira 1997: 207f).

As a result of industrialisation many of the old professions disappeared, but a neo-liberal and global economy has raised new necessities,

17 Many of the street foods had first appeared in the Constantinople and Smyrna of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and were introduced to the Greek capitals from the mid 1800s till the arrival of Asia Minor refugees in Greece. For a more detailed history of Greek street foods and their origin see Matalas and Yannakoulia (2000).

and opened new opportunities for flexible small-scale enterprises. Street vending has remained an attractive economic alternative until today, although it has changed its face and has been adjusted to the current market conditions. There are no reliable figures available, but the police estimate that vendors in Greece (regular and irregular) number around 10,000 with an upward trend (Athens News 2003).

Street vending is still a profession of the economically disadvantaged (Matalas/Yannakoulia 2000: 15). Nevertheless, for some it has brought greater wealth and higher income opportunities than for others, who can barely survive. In 1995 the Greek government passed a new law which defines street vending as a social project exclusively for disadvantaged parts of the population (i.e. handicapped, heads of big families or war veterans), and limited to a number of “traditional goods”<sup>18</sup> as *koulouria*, nuts, books, flowers and old furniture.<sup>19</sup> Thus in its legal form, street vending is limited exclusively to small parts of the native population, and only few people enjoy the advantage of an official permit. The street vending licence is usually bound to one place, it has to be renewed annually and the vendors have to pay taxes and contribute to the insurance fund for self-employed.

Although non-Greek nationals are excluded from legal access to this profession<sup>20</sup>, street vending in its irregular form has become a niche for immigrants with different legal status (Rosewarne/Groutsis 2003: 13). Apart from a few regular hawkers who mainly offer *koulouria*, national-lottery coupons or “traditional” goods, there are many different types of irregular street vendors in Thessaloniki. They may be Greeks – especially elderly, Greek Roma, or they come from other countries, particularly Egypt, Nigeria, Congo, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Albania and Georgia. These street vendors sell a variety of goods ranging from CDs, DVDs, sunglasses, cheap jewellery, and watches, toys, scarves, flowers, balloons, collectors items, nuts or sweets, tissues, idol cards, gloves, self-made articles like socks or carpets, or cosmetics, just to name a few. These diverse groups build social networks on different levels. They create co-operatives and compete with each other.

Street vendors differ in the way they work, in the products they sell and the markets they serve. Elderly women from Georgia and other

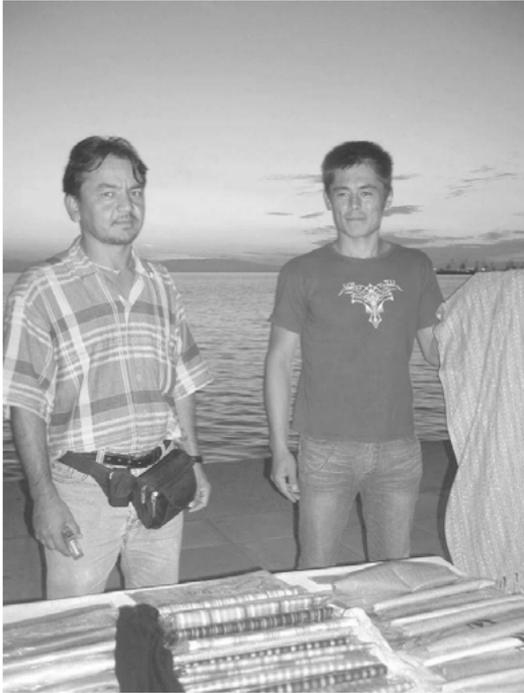
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18 The classification of “traditional goods” is the responsibility of the local authorities.

19 Since 1970 street vending is under control of municipality and prefecture authorities, whereas licensing used to be the responsibility of the General Commissioner of Police before (Matalas/Yannakoulia 2000: 13).

20 Nevertheless, there are some exceptions to that rule. A few immigrants have obtained licenses for street vending in Athens (approx. 200 persons).

countries of the former Soviet Union sell fresh spices and vegetables on a small scale, serving mainly ethnic markets. Anglophone Africans sell pirated CDs and DVDs, serving a non-ethnic clientele. They walk from one coffee bar to the next restaurant and offer their goods mainly to Greeks and tourists. Francophone African street vendors offer exotic products to a non-ethnic market, profiting from an underdeveloped market niche in Greece by selling “African” wood arts, jewellery and bags. Chinese mobile vendors use vendor’s trays to hawk a diversity of cheap electronic stuff like massagers, singing dolls, or radios, walking from one restaurant to the other and selling to a variety of customers.



*Fig. 2: Refugees selling Chinese scarves (photo: Salinia Stroux)*

Refugees working as irregular vendors in the streets of Thessaloniki are part of what Baldwin-Edwards (1999: 1) has labelled a “twilight zone”. Despite efforts to get a licence for street vending, they remain informal professionals for structural reasons. In my fieldwork, I have focused on a network composed of Afghan, Iranian and Iraqi refugees. In the most ambulant version, they sell scarves in winter, sunglasses in summer, Santa-Claus hats at Christmas time, watches and bracelets or other jew-

ellery throughout the whole year. More stationary vendors also hawk bags, clothes and small electronic accessories at weekly markets.

These street vendors work in different places and create individual combinations of work spaces, but the majority sell in the main business and shopping area in the centre of the city, because of the high fluctuation of clientele, a low degree of danger, high degree of protection and low competition with established shops and other vendors. Generally speaking, the better the relations to neighbouring shops, the fewer problems with the police, the greater security, and the fewer similarities between the goods of shops and street vendors, the less competition and the fewer conflicts arise.

A central agglomeration of hawkers is situated in the commercial centre around Tsimiski Street, Ag. Sofia Church, Aristotelous Square and Egnatia Street. A second seasonal site for street vending is the seaside promenade and the White Tower square, a highly frequented recreational area in summer time. Some vendors also look out for specific locations that are lucrative because of their uniqueness in centrality and low competition, where they can exercise their business as a monopole. Most suitable are junctions and other sites close to shopping areas, malls, big supermarkets, institutionalised markets and central business streets. Special events like the EXPO, concerts or religious festivals next to churches also attract hawkers. Other important locations connected to the street as workplace are the weekly markets in different areas of the city. Usually, irregular vendors open their stalls at the edges of the formal markets.

There are up to eight or nine markets in different quarters of the town every day. Additionally, two private Sunday markets (called “Joussouroum”) in the outskirts offer a semi legal status. They are both officially run by two different Gypsy unions and offer everyone the possibility of renting a place and selling things with or without a general street vendors’ permit. Nevertheless, they are highly contested institutions with an unforeseeable future, since the city is preparing to close them down and open a public Sunday-market according to legal regulations instead. Finally, in the summer when people leave the cities for vacations and flee the urban heat, the street vendors also move out as far as possible and profitable – depending on whether they own cars or whether they can join others with cars. They follow the tourists mainly to Chalkidiki, a tourist region in the south-east of Thessaloniki.

## Contested images, contested space

Public markets, and especially multicultural ones, usually attract tourists all over the world. Nevertheless, immigrant informal street vendors do not seem to fit into the agenda of waterfront revitalisation and development of the historical centre. Street vendors without licences form a highly visible and therefore vulnerable part of the informal sector. In public discourse, street vending is seen as a major obstacle to the national economy. The Chamber of Commerce complained about informal street vendors and the sub-standard goods from their Chinese suppliers as a “scourge of our epoch that kills off the future of trade” (Charisis 2004). Fears relate to illegal market competition to the small-scale trade sector, disturbances of tax-paying pedestrians, and a negative influence on the city’s image. In the words of the vice-mayor of Thessaloniki: “We will not let our city be transformed into a great bazaar! Our city is not a welfare office for those residents who are unable to generate their livelihood.”(Interview with vice mayor, 29/04/2004)



*Fig. 3: Arrest of a street vendor and confiscation of his goods (photo: Ioanna Katsarou)*

For these reasons among many others, street vendors confront massive state intervention reaching from daily police and tax officer controls to the confiscation of their goods, fines, arrests and even criminal proceedings. They are directly affected by consequences of gentrification and urban upgrading, such as expulsion from public space and frequent controls. More than ever, an intensification of conflict could be observed

under the pressure of the Olympic Games 2004. Since then, controls have even been strengthened; and new laws and directives have been enforced.

On the other hand, street vending is simultaneously tolerated to a certain degree. One reason is the high demand for cheap products. Customers buying from the hawkers represent different segments of the population, i.e. Greeks, tourists or migrants. Another reason is a widespread sense of solidarity with vulnerable groups, observable in the daily contacts between hawkers and customers. On a face-to-face level, there are even forms of occasional co-operation between regular and irregular vendors.<sup>21</sup>



*Fig. 4: Street vendors fleeing with their goods (photo: Christos Stefanou)*

For the economically disadvantaged, street vending can be an economic (survival) niche even in its irregular form, although in Greece there is a trend towards an intensification of conflict. Despite increasing state interventions and public insult, the customers do not stop buying, nor do the street vendors turn their backs on their jobs. Thus it is a temporary economic solution and might even become a successful self-employment strategy, but it remains a highly precarious job opportunity with an unforeseeable future.

21 Bromley (2000) described these seemingly contradictory policies as typical and talks of “containment”.

## Conclusion

Traditionally, ports have been places of economy and trade, as well as places of passage for different populations. This idea still lives on in our minds. If we think of ports, we see ships and we see markets, and a colourful mixture of people. Today, a big part of the ongoing trade in the port area is indeed invisible to the public. The street vendors reinforce the mental picture of port cities that is still alive in advertisements of the tourist industry and other image constructions. They fit quite well into the seaside panorama of the promenade and the picturesque port-city face of Thessaloniki. The vendors are attracted to the seaside because of its recreational function for inhabitants and tourists, who enjoy the port as background scenery. As itinerant traders traditionally connected to the port, they contribute visually to the port city's image while utilising the market value of the port scenery, in a balancing act at the boundaries between illegalisation and expulsion from public spaces.

Street vendors represent a variety of different backgrounds and different statuses from illegalisation to legal working permits. Besides the Greek elderly and "traditional" vendors, it is mostly the newcomers in town who enter the street vending business. Access is relatively easy, it is a flexible profession and no large investment of capital is needed in the beginning. Of course, the disadvantages are plenty. As a part of the Greek (shadow) economy and as a part of urban street-life, street vending is directly interwoven with current changes in public space, which again are connected to international port-city developments. As "multi-culturalism" has become a resource in promoting the city to investors and to tourists, street vendors are part of the colourful picture used to construct a port-city image. The streets of Thessaloniki have remained a bazaar in a contested space which is constantly re-negotiated. It is here that the characteristics of the port city as a node of migration and trade become most obvious, and different uses and images of port cities are in conflict with each other.

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