Let’s Clean Up and Bring Some Order Here!
Moral Regulation of Markets in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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This study examines activities and processes through which projects of moral regulation are implemented as well as lived, transformed, and resisted by their targeted actors. Our ethnographic study focuses on discourses and practices of civic duty for orderly and hygienic conduct in the rehabilitation of marketplaces in Yaoundé, Cameroon. By drawing on the inhabited institutions approach and the literature on ethics as practice, our analysis extends research on moral work to put forward a perspective on moral regulation as a situated practice. We show how moral work is built on individual reflections but is simultaneously negotiated through actors’ relationships, that is, responsibilities to family, interactions within the community, and personal history.

Key Words: moral regulation, morality, moral work, inhabited institutions, ethics as practice, street vendors

Projects of moral regulation of different spheres of social life are a significant form of institutional intervention (Becker, 1963; Garfinkel, 1967; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Nyberg, 2008) in which some actors act to problematize the conduct, values, behavior, or culture of others by imposing different forms of regulation upon them. These projects seek to construct, impose, and enforce any normative judgment that some conduct is intrinsically bad or wrong. Thus institutional efforts of moral regulation are processes through which behaviors and actions are socially constructed as moral and immoral (Shadnam, Crane, & Lawrence, 2018). Such interventions are of continuing significance and visible today in a series of persisting traditional moral problems that occupy public attention as well as political, legislative, and social movement efforts. Examples of these are abortion, surrogacy, and euthanasia, as well as other diverse social issues hotly contested in strongly moralized terms, such as corporate scandals (Janney & Gove, 2017; Rhodes, 2016), the commodification of housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016), work precariousness (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017), and the moral responsibility of wearing a mask as COVID-19 spreads within communities and across national borders as we write this article.
Moral projects are highly consequential too. They redefine categories of actors, for instance, the deserving/undeserving urban poor, the disposable/nondisposable worker, the good/bad woman, or the antimaskers/mask wearers. They often design and enforce mechanisms for rewarding and controlling deviance, for example, access or lack thereof to public housing (Desmond, 2016). An important element in our understanding of moral regulation has been the development of actor-centered analyses focusing on who comes up with the rules that define specific conduct as moral/immoral and the different mechanisms that force others to abide by the new rules and norms. Although these works embrace a view of institutions as both obdurate and stable but also replete with activities and contests, they tend to focus on the activities of moral entrepreneurs to “structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982: 221). Yet, this typically comes with a lack of attention to how moral norms and categories are lived, contested, resisted, and transformed by people whose behavior is singled out as moral or immoral (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Martí & Fernández, 2013; Nyberg, 2008). This is what guides our research on how moral regulation emerges and is negotiated through the daily experiences of “real people in their everyday lives” (Tronto, 1993: 79). This means paying attention to the relational and inhabited aspect of moral regulation, disrupting the notion that moral projects are only in the hands of those who have power or manage collectively to build it (Becker, 1963; Rhodes, Pullen, & Clegg, 2010). It implies that all sorts of actors are involved in moralizing efforts, perhaps in unanticipated ways. This means, too, that the gap between designed and imposed morality and actual behavior as experienced by local actors becomes the focal point of inquiry (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007; Rhodes et al., 2010), because moral life is “always contextual and historicized” (Tronto, 1993: 62).

Our objective is to clarify moral regulation by interrogating the process through which it is put in place by authorities and lived by targeted actors, whose potential to make a living out of their market-based activities is likely to be impacted, improving or exacerbating their condition. This presents moral regulation as a continuous, more or less coercive, but contested and negotiated effort to transform, sanction, and suppress some categories of actors and forms of life. We focus our empirical efforts on the discourses and practices regarding urban disorder and hygiene in trading during the rehabilitation of marketplaces in Yaoundé. In this setting, the moral discourse designed, disseminated, and enforced by local authorities attributed blame and responsibility for different social ills to market vendors. The project, which sought to regulate their everyday life and behavior, appeared as an attempt to produce profound changes in market-based activities and relations through the disciplining of unruly trading.

The remainder of the article unfolds as follows. First, the literature review presents the extant approaches to moral regulations and institutions, and by drawing on the inhabited institutions approach and the literature on ethics as practice, we elaborate on moral regulation as a situated practice. Next, the methodology section describes our ethnographic approach supported with secondary data. The article finishes with a discussion elaborating the central contributions of this study and concluding remarks.
MORAL REGULATION OF MARKETS

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Moral Regulation and Institutions

Projects of moral regulation have exhibited a multifaceted concern with regulating different spheres of human life. Historically, but also in today’s world, many occasions for moral regulation have been straightforwardly physical: lack of physical exercise, obesity, or ugliness. Some address people’s form of life: unemployed, homeless, migrant, and ex-convict. A well-known example is Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s “broken windows” approach to crime in New York City—which inspired a large number of urban reform projects—to go after “disorderly people” because their behavior, if unchecked, was a gateway to serious crime. Such projects of moral regulation have typically been addressed in the literature in two ways: first, by studying them as intentional efforts by which moral entrepreneurs—such as Giuliani and his first police commissioner, William J. Bratton—set social expectations, rules, and norms that problematize the conduct of a group of actors (Dobbin, 2001; Hampel & Tracey, 2016; Hunt, 1999), and second, by focusing on how such targeted groups of actors—like the people on the sidewalk of New York’s Greenwich Village described by Duneier (2000)—are actively and collectively engaged in (re)constructing meaning, as moral norms are always interpreted and enacted situationally (Fine, 2012; Garfinkel, 1967; Wittgenstein, 1968).

Much institutional research on moral regulation sees it as comprising more or less coercive institutional attempts to suppress some identities and forms of behavior and life and to encourage and enforce other preferred forms, establishing a type of moral order in a specific field of action (Durkheim, 1973; Hunt, 1999). This involves the construction by a moral entrepreneur of normative judgments that some conduct is intrinsically bad or wrong. Studies have thus focused on who comes up with and makes the rule that defines specific conduct as immoral (Shadnam et al., 2018).

There are two predominant streams of research in this literature. First is the study of what we could call top-down moral regulation—with an obvious look at legislative action—concerning how enforcement organizations, agencies, and officials are established and how existing ones are given new direction. A second stream of work explores bottom-up moral regulation, highlighting how moral regulation projects may emanate from below through the efforts of collective actors who are not holders of formal political power.

Research on top-down moral regulation focuses on the design and implementation of institutional projects of moral regulation, typically through two fundamental tasks: defining which actors act morally, or not, and setting mechanisms of surveillance for detecting instances of noncompliance and reinforcing prevailing mores and beliefs. The first task entails setting, enhancing, and encouraging preferred forms and categories of actors: those who are permitted to participate and those who are prevented from participating in organized areas of action and under what conditions they may do so. Thus previous research suggests that efforts to regulate spheres of institutional life exhibit a persistent moralization of some categories of actors, whether young men (Hunt, 1999), the poor (Desmond, 2016), ghetto and slum
inhabitants (Millar, 2018; Shelby, 2016), or Jews (Martí & Fernández, 2013). The second institutional task, key for the maintenance of projects of moral regulation, seeks to “structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982: 221). It involves setting the mechanisms of surveillance for detecting instances of deviance and noncompliance. This requires putting in place “systems which will automatically punish, shame, embarrass, or penalize” (Lawrence, 2008: 179) to defend one’s world against the transgressors (Bloom & White, 2016).

A second stream of research on moral regulation shifts focus from moral entrepreneurs and their tasks to make explicit the inhabited nature of moral regulation. Drawing on interactionist insights, scholarship on this tradition invites us to focus on the social, which seems fixed in many ways, while being unstable and contested and therefore providing opportunities for creating and transforming relations and rules of the game (Becker, 1963; Fine, 2012; Goffman, 1963; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). This means considering the complex relationship between rules, moral norms, and practice, as well as assessing what individuals and organizations do in situations of “moral multiplexity” (Reinecke, van Bommel, & Spicer, 2017). These are situations where the moral criteria are unclear and open to different interpretations. As Gouldner’s (1954) classic study showed, established and imposed codes of conduct and moralities might become negotiated and fragile when colliding with local dynamics, creating clashes in the existing norm system.

A key insight from this literature is that the meanings of rules or the categories they create are not enacted according to what is inscribed; rather, they vary with their context of enactment. Institutions “are not inert categories of meaning” but rather “inhabited by people and their activity” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: 911; also Scully & Creed, 1999). They are potentially at “play, being created, altered or negated” (Fine, 2012: 88), and they depend on interpersonal relations and arenas of action (Binder, 2007).

Moral Regulation as a Situated Practice: An Ethics of Practice Perspective

Increasingly, there has been engagement among institutional scholars to incorporate action into institutional processes within the growing body of work exploring how agents inhabit institutions (Binder, 2007; Fine, 2012; Hallett, 2010). We argue in this article that these writings on norms and rules that are meant to morally regulate behavior can be extended by engaging with the scholarly conversation on ethics as practice. This approach inserts embedded activities and the reality of lived experience (Clegg et al., 2007; Rhodes et al., 2010) into the study of the morality of everyday practices (Jackall, 1988; Kjonstad & Willmott, 1995; ten Bos, 1997). In the same way, the inhabited institutions approach focuses on how situated actors enact existing institutions (Binder, 2007: 549), while the ethics as practice perspective posits that rules are always interpreted and enacted situationally. This suggests a wide range of opportunities for people to operate outside scripted norms and behaviors (Gordon, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2009).

Mundane, everyday activities are often characterized by a situation of moral multiplexity (Reinecke et al., 2017) or pluralism (Clegg et al., 2007). There is, thus, a potential conflict and competition between norms and precepts that are meant
to guide behavior (Munro, 1992). Cases of victims of perceived injustice are illustrative of this dilemma. We can think of people who feel justified in violating some norms by, for instance, selling drugs, defaulting on their credit cards, or squatting in unauthorized spaces to support themselves and their families (Shelby, 2007). As put in more philosophical terms by Tronto (1993: 79), “morality is not grounded in universal, abstract principles but in the daily experiences and moral problems of real people in their everyday lives.”

Both approaches—inhabited institutions and ethics as practice—are broadly consistent with the turn toward a practice perspective on organizations that stresses the situational factors that shape behavior in and around organizations. Yet, a common criticism is that in their assessment of situated practice and local interactions, they might potentially read off preexisting social structures, patterns of interpretation and coordination, individual and collective biographies, and shared histories (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Fine, 2012). A literal reading of Gordon et al.’s (2009) call for an approach to ethics “beyond predetermination” might give the impression that moral choice is a sort of free play or that anything goes. Certainly there is the risk that a focus on the situated daily experiences to explain how people adhere to, violate, ignore, or creatively interpret codes and moral norms (Bauman, 1993) might obscure “wider structures in its assessment of local interactions” and obfuscate “the pattern of pre-existing logics” (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013: 934). In other words, does a focus on situated activity imply a sort of tabula rasa understanding of morality? To address such criticism, it is necessary to study how the moral daily experiences of “real people in their everyday lives” (Tronto, 1993: 79) are materially and socially configured. Very much like in Gouldner’s classic analysis, this requires combining “historical” and “real-time” analysis, because morality is “always contextual and historicized” (Tronto, 1993: 62). The task, then, is to see how structural factors, institutionalized power structures, shared understandings, and collective identities provide a potential historical grounding that, while not determining practice fully, still “guide[s] the enactments of subjects who exercise some degree of freedom in governing their own conduct” (Clegg et al., 2007: 112).

Despite greater attention on efforts by specific actors to (re)define the moral norms that determine categories of proper behavior in specific social worlds, we need a better understanding of the situated and intermediate nature of moral regulation. To advance this perspective, we empirically investigate the process of moral regulation in the markets of the city of Yaoundé. The gist of our argument is that the study of moralizing projects cannot neglect how moral categories are lived, contested, resisted, and transformed by people directly affected and singled out as immoral (Creed et al., 2010; Martí & Fernández, 2013). Our study extends research on moral work to put forward a perspective on moral regulation that highlights the on-the-ground activities and dynamics of moral regulation in complex institutional contexts, such as the market. To advance this perspective, we pose a broad question to guide our empirical analysis of moral work in local markets in Yaoundé: how do people work for, within, and between moral regulation efforts?
METHODOLOGY

Research Setting
To examine the role of on-the-ground activities in moral regulation, we focus on the case of the rehabilitation of marketplaces in the city of Yaoundé, Cameroon. This project was part of the Yaoundé City Project 2020, which aimed to develop the urban area, boost local businesses, and improve the quality of life of city dwellers. Yaoundé has more than thirty marketplaces, which are managed by the municipality; however, many more informal marketplaces remain targets of eviction expeditions by the city’s administration. The rehabilitation of marketplaces started in 2004 as the City of Yaoundé teamed up with businesses and other international organizations to provide an estimated three thousand new trading places throughout the city; additionally, older marketplaces were renovated and expanded. These changes were expected to boost the capacity of vendors, to be a source of economic return for the city and support the development ideals of the city administration.

In July 2014, we were given official permission to undertake our study at the municipality and its marketplaces. Ethnographic data were collected by one of the authors (referred to here as “the ethnographer”). She was introduced to the city’s division of economic and financial affairs, in charge of market-related activities such as rent contracts, tax collection, and general administration. She explained that as an ethnographer, she was looking for rich insights and thus needed to spend time in the field to observe ongoing activities and listen to the conversations (van Maanen, 2011).

Because she originates from Yaoundé and speaks the local language, she was able to easily create connections with the participants. The ethnographic work focused on how the participants—local authorities, police and enforcement actors, and vendors—lived the institutionalization of the new rules. Notes were written when possible at the field and, when not possible, when back at night (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001; van Maanen, 1988). She evaluated her role as a researcher within the field, that is, recognizing her own subjectivity (Prasad, 2014). Although she was raised in Yaoundé, she lived in Europe, where she was immersed in Western standards of hygiene and organization, but she still felt the plea of the informal dwellers fighting for their self-sufficiency. Consequently, the ethnographer kept pondering her position as an insider/outsider but also, more importantly, her role in the perpetuation of a moralizing discourse that largely failed to recognize local realities (Duneier, 2000).

The fieldwork included many conversations between the two coauthors, as we felt a sense of urgency to provide a nuanced analysis. The second author originates from Spain and was not immersed in the phenomenon, which facilitated an analysis that dove deeply into the phenomenon while developing its conceptual understanding and contribution to theory.

Because involvement and close observation are crucial for understanding how formal ethical precepts are creatively interpreted, adhered to, violated, or ignored (Clegg et al., 2007), the ethnographer participated in meetings and observed the activities of the hygiene team, the raid team, and market administrators. She focused her observations on three specific marketplaces under the same market administrator.
with the goal of explaining the structural conditioning that forged these sociohistorical contexts and opened avenues for different actions, as well as the ongoing processes that ultimately determine people’s decisions (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013).

First, the General Market is the oldest, largest, and most attractive marketplace in the city, with more than two thousand registered vendors and at least the same number of unregistered vendors. This marketplace was created in the 1960s, renovated in 2012, and identified as a problematic site due to the ongoing resistance of its vendors. Second were its adjacent specialized sites: the Fruit Market, created in 2006, with 44 vendors, and the Flower Market, inaugurated in 2007, with an estimated 115 florists and decorators. In these smaller and newer marketplaces, the reform appeared to be better received. Despite being under the same management, the moral reform manifested differently due to the markets’ histories, sizes, and specializations, which provided grounds for disentangling the heterogeneity of experiences of the reform.

Data Collection
Ethnographic data were collected in three field trips to Yaoundé, in July 2014 for twenty-one days, in February 2015 for twenty-four days, and in May 2015 for two days, making altogether forty-seven days. The ethnographer took observation notes and conducted fifty-two ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979), lasting from twenty minutes to two hours. When possible, the interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim. When tape recording was not possible—for instance, when interviewing street vendors, who were often on the move as they conducted their activities—the ethnographer took notes as soon as possible. Other primary data include a large set of pictures and videos. The data also include secondary data, such as publications from the city (press releases, work documents, and reports). We also collected a wide variety of documents for analysis, including historical, legal, and political studies on the transformation of the city of Yaoundé. Finally, we collected newspapers, amounting to more than one thousand pages.

Data Analysis
Before entering the field, we analyzed the secondary data to understand the history of the city as an organization, its administration of public spaces, and its management of marketplaces. This allowed us to construct a preliminary story exploring the conditions leading to the rehabilitation and its implementation. While the newspapers recounted vivid stories of police repression and vendor resistance, the city’s strategies and vision were detailed in documents gathered from its documentary center, while historical accounts detailed the political and social transformations of the city. This preliminary story provided significant contextual understanding of the rehabilitation.

Next, as Langley (1999) suggested, we conducted our analysis in different phases, as described subsequently. This implied an iterative and continuous move between our data, emerging insights, and the literature, toward the objective of theory building. Since the rehabilitation project sought to introduce new norms of behavior
and, essentially, to transform trading habits, we understood this transformation process as a project of institutionally organizing morality, that is, predefining an ethical model. Our approach draws on both the ethics as practice and inhabited institutions approaches (Clegg et al., 2007; Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Fine, 2012) to account for the reality of the lived experiences of vendors, which defies ethical preconceptualizations as they assessed vending issues in all their complexity and uncertainty. We follow a “nested mode of analysis,” which recognizes the dynamic and ongoing processes of negotiation and accomplishment between actors and structures (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013: 937). Thus, in the face of the imposition of new norms, we recognize the possibility of actors to follow trajectories of action that reproduce traditional patterns of behaviors, as well as their capacity to make practical and normative judgments that embrace the new norms. For this, we also draw inspiration from the work of anthropologists studying the urban poor (e.g., Duneier, 2000; Wacquant, 2013) to explore how a situated view of moral regulation requires a focus on how individuals’ reflexive reflection—or the mechanism through which they diagnose their situations and assess their interests—is also enacted in relation with others whose opinions matter because they share similar concerns, interests, and social contexts (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). We used two concurrent phases with several data analysis steps, which we detail in the following sections.

Phase 1
The first stage was to generate a description of “what is going on” (Wolcott, 1994: 16). This process, referred to as inspiration by Langley (1999: 707), involved drawing inferences from observations so that they stack up to credible theoretical claims (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). To do so, we first read the field notes, the preliminary story, and transcribed interviews to illuminate the history and nature of the moral reform. We began by developing a narrative account of our findings by chronologically ordering the raw data. The narrative account included quotes from our field notes, interviews, and documents that supported our exploration of the moral dilemma of street vending.

The production of this historical narrative enables us to consider conditioned action, or the interdependencies between history, context, and different configurations of actor preferences as sources of action (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Duneier, 2000). Consequently, we created provisional categories and codes (van Maanen, 2011) that provided descriptive labels for the different sorts of activities and processes. Thus the result of the first stage of the analysis is an account of the historical signifiers that propelled the ethical imperative of the moral reform: uncertainty and the struggle for self-sufficiency, and the creation of a formulaic model of morality to predetermine the course of action: reform and the reclaiming of moral authority.

Phase 2
In a second move, we sought to investigate how the imposed moral norms worked through practice, that is, how vendors interpreted and reconstructed behaviors and actions deemed appropriate, or not, within a community of vendors. This process
required us to go back and forth between the data and the emerging theoretical arguments (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As this stage of the analysis focused on the lived reality of experiences (Hallett, 2010; Tronto, 1993), we built codes that closely reflected the interviewees’ own words and our field notes. Accordingly, we allocated the code “perceptions” to interview data in which vendors expressed their concerns and aspirations in relation with reforms. These perceptions often expressed the constraining or enabling nature of the moral initiative in achieving self-sufficiency. For example, a vendor would say, “I am doing better here [the street]; I don’t need a store!” or “I won’t lie to you, being here [in the marketplace] help me a lot.”

We moved on to examining the negotiations between groups of vendors operating within the same marketplace. We allocated the code “performing morality” to data that showed the ongoing conversations within a community of vendors. Text examples included observation notes recording collective resistance to a specific rule (e.g., street vendors positioning scouts on street corners), interview data explaining the struggle to agree on a specific practice, or the considerations that led to a common agreement to change a rule.

We then engaged in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which consisted of comparing first-order codes, clarifying themes, and creating second-order constructs. Such an inductive, iterative, and recursive process allowed us to derive more abstract theoretical constructs. We categorized the data by aggregating data related to perceptions, which resulted in a construct we termed individual reflections. We also categorized the data by aggregating data related to performing morality, which resulted in a construct we termed ongoing negotiation of meaning. We carried out our analysis through several iterative discussions, where we developed the constructs and evaluated the categorical fidelity of our codes. This process was crucial for refining our coding scheme and clarifying our theoretical contributions.

Finally, we proceeded to theorize the interrelations between the main elements of our empirical analysis by engaging the literature on ethics as practice (Clegg et al., 2007; Rhodes et al., 2010) and inhabited institutionalism (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Fine, 2012; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). We inferred that the lived reality of the reform is constituted through a dynamic interaction between individual reflections and ongoing negotiations within the community of vendors, who ultimately enact the boundaries of what is acceptable, or not, as they conduct their daily activities.

We then generated a theoretical framework to make sense of how these constructs related to one another and to the literature. We recognized the challenge of self-sufficiency and the uncertainty of the economic environment, with which all vendors are confronted. This then allowed us to stretch our consideration of how history, actors’ positions, and community negotiations enact an understanding of (in)appropriateness.

FINDINGS

We structured our findings into two parts: first, the moral dilemmas of street vending, which explore the environmental uncertainty that allowed street vending to flourish and the reform initiative that ensued to reclaim moral authority, and second,
the lived reality of moral reform, which explores the negotiations of people faced with the pressure of the reform.

The Moral Dilemma of Street Vending

Our first set of findings provides context to the moral dilemmas that informed the moral reform and its lived experience. We elaborate on this through two themes: 1) uncertainty and the struggle for self-sufficiency and 2) reform and the reclaiming of moral authority.

Uncertainty and the Struggle for Self-Sufficiency

Yaoundé became the capital city of Cameroon in 1960, when the country gained its independence from France. The current administration, which has been in power since 1982, faced a turning point between 1987 and 2006 owing to an economic crisis that exacerbated the exodus from villages toward the city as people searched for a better life. The crisis highlighted the poor economic performance of the government and exacerbated already high levels of unemployment. This prompted the urban poor to engage in informal vending practices, thereby organizing in spontaneous marketplaces (sidewalks, parking lots, and open spaces) and finding new ways of coping with the lack of market infrastructure resulting from cuts in government spending. Before 2004, when the rehabilitation started, references to Yaoundé being "a large market" rather than a capital city abounded in the media.

Another consequence of the economic crisis was the general instability of the country owing to the introduction of multiparty politics at the end of 1990 and a surge in a new democratic voice from people who demanded economic and political change through sociopolitical mobilization. As an official who had worked for the city for more than twenty years explained in an interview, the municipality was forced in a period of management hiatus to maintain social order:

> With the democratization of the country, people got a newfound freedom, you might remember the riots.... There were lots of problems.... So, in the administration, the immediate effect was the rise of tolerance. Nothing was done, no one dared to touch them [street vendors] otherwise what we will hear is obstruction of freedom. Everyone lifted the pedals so that the opposition does not take advantage of the situation and contest.

However, in sharp contrast with such a view, the narrative of the vendors operating in these neglected marketplaces is that of a struggle for dignity and the right to earn a living, which explained their application of creative organization skills to construct a life for themselves, their families, and their communities. As a street vendor put it, "it is impossible to live a decent life because of the politics of this country." Such sentiment was echoed by many others, who highlighted the corruption, inefficiency, and lackluster performance of the administration in providing and maintaining market infrastructure.

Starting in 1994, the municipalities dissolved their contracts with providers of services like electricity and cleaning, and business began to deteriorate for the vendors. As a representative of market vendors explained,
the market then started to rot, because it was inundated with garbage, the gutters were full. The market lost almost half of its customers because people wouldn’t come here saying it was too dirty, the vendors had no other choice than to take matters into their own hands.

Furthermore, street vending rose as an important survival strategy to create opportunities to address the socioeconomic problems lived by the disenfranchised. Innovative practices of day-to-day survival emerged to develop self-reliance and promote self-sufficiency. More concretely, the vendors established arrangements for a variety of issues that they considered relevant for their activities.

First, partnerships and forms of support emerged that blurred the boundaries between the spontaneous and official marketplaces in several ways. Many people arriving in Yaoundé from rural areas, in search of a better life, often end up in the marketplaces engaging in petty activities but ultimately end up working for slightly bigger vendors to make ends meet. Also, many among the homeless youth came to the marketplaces every day in their attempts to earn their daily bread. They helped larger vendors by peddling for them on streets and in other open spaces. These partnerships between the peddlers and the more established vendors enabled them to reach more customers and achieve a more stable source of income.

A large majority of street vendors also lived at the periphery of the city, which means that they traveled long hours to do business in the city center. Many among these vendors traded fresh products like fish and thus shared the costs of a storage space in the cold rooms of larger formal entrepreneurs inside the market to store unsold products. Others paid a small amount to storeowners to keep their merchandise for the night. For instance, a jewelry vendor explained the following:

_I rent a small box from a large storeowner to keep my stuff. These stores that you see over there, you can rent storage space for your merchandise…. That is what most of us around here do._

In spontaneous and official markets alike, a fee was often collected to pay for private security guards to guard tools, tables, wheelbarrows, chairs, and merchandise against thieves and to pay for cleaning. It was also common for vendors from the same ethnic group to organize transportation for their goods from their native village to the city. These goods ended up either on the shelves of stores within the official marketplace or in wheelbarrows and trays on a street corner. Finally, the vendors also organized informal saving and insurance clubs, among other social clubs, and they exchanged information regarding retailers or wholesalers from which good bargains could be obtained. Consequently, the vendors found ways to organize themselves to fill the needs of the services required for their activities in marketplaces. But more importantly, they created a localized market system, which allowed people who lacked other options to pursue self-sufficiency.

Reform and the Reclaiming of Moral Authority
In July 2004, a new law was enacted that decentralized the administration of urban areas in Cameroon, thereby transforming the system of governance to empower
cities to handle their local affairs. The City of Yaoundé engaged in what it referred to as a *progressive rehabilitation* of public spaces. This was fueled by Cameroon’s eligibility for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries special assistance, which gave it access to debt relief from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Our analysis reveals a subsequent set of moral regulation activities that sought to define new norms of appropriateness in and around marketplaces. Between 2004 and 2006, these new rules appeared in many work documents designed to serve as guidelines for the administration of public space. First, it was important to set up moral infrastructure through legislative action, to define the new rules by which market players should abide in their transactions. This consisted of a set of different norms with the objective of linking certain behaviors to urban disorder, dirtiness, and uncivility. Then followed the establishment of enforcement mechanisms and agencies (e.g., raid and patrol teams, the hygiene unit) in charge of controlling inappropriate behavior. In doing so, the infrastructure for the moral reform was established, offering to the local actors a vision and understanding of what behavior is acceptable and what behavior is not.

A second set of activities corresponds to the demolition of spontaneous marketplaces with bulldozers and the creation of “modern” marketplaces to support the “civic rearmament of the people.” The local authorities did not “like people wandering on the streets” because they created waste and contributed to “urban disorder” through their presence and activities. Vendors were described as disrespecting public space and misusing public infrastructure and were considered “undisciplined,” “stubborn,” or as “villagers” whose behavior was “unfit” and “improper for the city.” They “lacked civism,” and “they did not know how to behave in a city,” as city officials explained in interviews and as the local media reported. Street vending made the city dirty and impeded its development and was thus condemned by the local government on moral grounds.

The constructed market was the Fruit Market in 2006, followed by the Flower Market in 2007 and other marketplaces at the periphery of the city. This resulted in nearly five thousand new stalls or stores by 2012. The local government defined the right location, spaces, and time for market-based activities and required the use of appropriate tools and equipment for trading goods. In the words of the newly nominated vice councilor for markets,

> We have made many changes to improve the working conditions of the vendors. We want to promote a modern and more proper way of conducting business in the market…. Our objective is to bring all of them [vendors] inside the market, in their own working space and the customers will learn to follow them. Then we will have no more congestion on the roads.

A third set of activities concerned sanitation measures. The vice councilor played an important role to ensure hygiene and cleanliness in trading. In an interview, she described her tasks as follows:

> To help the vendors understand and know the right gestures…. We also focus on educating them toward a citizenship behavior. As a citizen, hygiene should be...
important.... I discuss with the vendors and their leaders, I particularly want to see that the market is clean.... I look at the way their products are presented, displayed. For example, vegetables should not be spread on the ground, so the vendors need to know how to handle, protect their products and display them better.

The aforementioned set of activities sought to define new norms of appropriateness regarding how, where, and when market activities were to be organized. These rules were enforced through different coercive mechanisms. For example, trading illegally on the pavement led to a fine with possible arrest, or imprisonment until the fine is paid. Noncompliance with the rules within the marketplaces could also lead to the expropriation of merchandise or a temporary suspension. Repression was particularly intense starting from 2009, as the city sought to eliminate all resistance to the reform.

In sum, the moral dilemma of street vending shows how people who felt disenfranchised organized their lives and work in their pursuit of self-sufficiency and how a top-down narrative that projected a new logic of appropriateness claimed superiority over these local ways of organizing.

The Lived Reality of the Moral Reform

The moral reform was an intentional effort to set a narrative describing what is nonacceptable—urban disorder, dirty markets, and uncivil behavior—and provide a prescriptive model of behavior, that is, trading in designated marketplaces, restricting vending activities within the confinement of specified stalls or stores, and following sanitation measures. Our fieldwork reveals that the moral reform was not the prominent point of reference for the behaviors and attitudes toward street vending. Rather, the morality that was enacted in the everyday unfolding of vending activities was shaped by vendors’ individual reflections and the ongoing negotiation within communities of vendors on behaviors perceived to be acceptable or unacceptable. Thus the reform initiative did not itself shape what is morally acceptable but opened the ground for localized debates regarding what practices needed to be reinforced within a community of vendors and which ones constituted legitimate forms of deviance.

Individual Reflections

Our data suggest that the vendors did not experience the moral reform uniformly but rather had different reflections regarding their struggle toward self-sufficiency. Their prior personal histories, experiences, priorities, aspirations, and responsibilities affected their interpretation of and shaped their decisions regarding the types of projects they pursued within the market context. The vendors, whose life stories varied tremendously, felt either empowered by opportunities they perceived in the reform or restrained by the transformation reform required. Our analysis reveals a series of interpretations that determined personal positions in relation to the moral reform.

Perception of moral correctness. A first category of individual reflections shows the desire of some vendors to embrace the new arrangements. This was rooted in the
perceived alignment between their interests and the newly imposed moral frame. The perception of moral correctness is the belief in the rightness of the new model of morality and the willingness to accommodate one’s conduct to fit its requirements.

First, the need for stability and security was highlighted by these vendors, who looked to operate in a formal marketplace where they believed activities would grow and prosper. The risks associated with street vending pushed many vendors to consider the new arrangements. A secondhand clothing vendor explained the threats of evictions in these words:

*It is difficult to create something serious on the street. When you are on the street you are not protected, everywhere I went, the municipality always came and evicted everyone.*

This poultry vendor shared similar concerns:

*On the street there is always a risk of losing everything. When my stall was destroyed [in a spontaneous marketplace], I was lost for a moment. I was very upset. I relocated here [General Market] because I wanted this new space to become a place where I can relax.*

Still, the perception of moral correctness was not necessarily a question of opportunities now but a question of sustainability and hope for the future. A store owner at the General Market explained the following:

*When the councilor started messing things up in the city, evicting people left and right, and destroying their things. For me it was clear, I understood that the only way to be safe as a vendor in Yaoundé is to relocate in a store. That’s why I persevere. Even if I don’t gain much now, my children could do something in the future with this store. They can work here.*

Thus the new arrangements were viewed as appropriate because they could provide a stable income for the vendors and their families. A fruit vendor told us, “I have six children; they are my responsibility! I do this to create something for them and for myself.” A legume vendor also shared the following: “This is an investment for me and my children.” However, for some vendors, the location of the new marketplace itself was perceived to have good potential for their specific businesses. This view was shared among many flower vendors, one of which said the following when asked about his decision to relocate in the flower marketplace:

*I thought the site of the Flower Market was picked wisely, it is situated in the city center, just at the opposite of the cinema hall. That is a good location.*

Operating within a formal marketplace also provided opportunities to organize better. As many vendors explained, “There is a roof to protect the flowers from the sun,” “Everything is new and clean,” and “Bouquets of flowers could be hanged beautifully.” It was revealed in our discussions that “clean and organized” marketplaces were necessary for attracting selective customers. Consequently, the moral goals were believed necessary for activities to flourish, and aesthetics became linked with “proper” behavior. A flower vendor explained:
The question for me has always been to have more comfortable working conditions. Being able to have the best display stand for my merchandise. So that we can make beautiful bouquets, people can appreciate the effort I put in my work. This cannot be done in chaos!

Similarly, a representative of the flower vendors added,

For us it is all about the look, decoration. Flowers are beautiful…. It is in the nature of a decorator to be clean; I don’t see how a decorator can be dirty and messy. Flowers cannot exist in dirtiness; they reflect something beautiful about the world, and people like to see that.

In general, the need for self-sufficiency and to provide for their families was at the heart of these vendors’ aspirations. Although they remained concerned with their ability to make daily ends meet, they perceived that doing what is right according to the moral reform could open avenues for more opportunities and stability.

**Perception of moral incongruence.** A second category of reflections reveals the need for a number of individuals to distance themselves from the demands of the moral reform, which they perceived to be in misalignment with their self-sufficiency. The perception of moral incongruence is the belief that the new model of morality is inappropriate for earning an honest living and reflects an unwillingness to conform to its requirements.

Our data record many vendors who opted to remain “illegal” or “informal” as they rejected relocation in the official marketplaces. These vendors considered relocation to be too costly (i.e., in rents, utilities, taxes, security) or unnecessary. Many often worked as peddlers for formal vendors, some were students who helped their family members during weekends and holidays, while others were petty vendors who simply could not afford formal stores. One such petty vendor pointed out, “I cannot afford to relocate in those new marketplaces. It is very expensive!”

For many of them, the forced relocation meant breaking from preexisting local arrangements and established relationships with customers and other vendors and suppliers. They complained about the lack of means to negotiate good prices with wholesalers to fill up a store, and they feared losing their loyal customers and being separated from their savings club members, among other concerns. While these social and economic costs of relocation were a serious impediment to relocation for many, some vendors emphasized the incompatibility between their identity as street vendors and the new norms, as this jewelry vendor explained:

I am a street vendor. A street vendor is not someone who waits calmly [in a store] that the customer approaches to buy stuff. A street vendor is someone who forces people to purchase their products. It is someone who forces the unexpected, the unplanned purchase, that is the essence of the business…. Street vendors cannot simply wait for the customers to come to them, street vendors are strikers!

A similar lack of interest in relocation was shared by other people who did not aspire to a permanent career as a vendor but rather were in the markets just to make enough money to be able to invest in other life projects (e.g., a music career, an atelier for a seamstress, paying for an education). In an uncertain economic and
employment environment, street vending served as a springboard for desired activity. A fish vendor explained:

*I don’t want to locate in a marketplace, what will I do in a marketplace? … I am not going to be here for long. I am a seamstress by profession; that is what I was trained to do…. I am just here to collect enough funds to open my own atelier. I am not going to do this for the rest of my life!*

These vendors acknowledged the moral reform; some even viewed it as appropriate for others but not necessarily for themselves. They perceived that the precarity of their situation or the transitory nature of their vending activities made it impossible to obey its rules. Thus positioning oneself outside the moral system was perceived as necessary to pursue desired life projects in an uncertain everyday.

**Perception of moral equivalence.** A final category of aspirations reveals more practical evaluations, especially among formal vendors who already occupied existing marketplaces before the reform initiative. They were conflicted as their accepted model of morality—behaviors ingrained in customary ways of vending—was now challenged. These vendors needed to consider their changing positions within the marketplace and reflect on whether to (dis)continue past modes of operations. The perception of moral equivalence is the denial that the reform is morally superior and more appropriate in organizing vending activities within the formal marketplace. It also reflects the willingness to accommodate the customary ways within the new model of morality.

For these vendors, operating solely within the boundaries of one’s stall was challenging due to the difficulty in making ends meet, since their expenses increased after the renovation of infrastructures. As a tuber vendor told us,

*the market is fine if you manage to sell something regularly. If you then come to the market every day and return empty handed…. What do you do? They asked you to do all these things and at the same time, they stop you from selling! How can I do it?*

For this vendor, there was a contradiction between the vending restrictions and the increase in taxes and other financial contributions. Similarly, a small store owner revealed how trading uniquely within her store did not allow her to make ends meet:

*It is seriously overwhelming. I often wonder how others manage. You have to pay for these things. I also need to be able to pay the rent and expenses at home…. There is no way to survive here if I sit and wait…. I am responsible for a large family. Many people depend on me, and we survive through this business right here.*

Other vendors complained about the selection of Wednesday as a cleaning day for the General Market. A secondhand clothing vendor explained, “*Wednesday is a wrong day to close the market! That is when we make about half of our sales!*” The decision to close the market for an entire day was also considered problematic, as a small stall owner explained:

*The problem of the sanitation measures is that they are unrealistic. An entire day devoted to cleaning every week! With no vending allowed! It is a bit much for very small vendors who live day by day.*
Furthermore, the rule to trade exclusively within the confinement of one’s store was perceived to hinder flexibility. These vendors believed that it is was necessary to remain flexible to be able to connect with potential customers whenever an opportunity presented itself. As several of our informants told us, “markets come and go,” and “it is important to be flexible enough to catch those moments.”

Finally, some vendors criticized the request to display goods only on shelves within their stores; they explained that their customers perceived that goods that are neatly organized in shelves within stores are too expensive. One vendor said, “When you put your stuff in there, like they ask, you wait.” Another one added that “no one comes to ask: how much? Everyone believes that things in a place like this are too expensive.” The requirement to trade exclusively within the confinement of one’s store was compared to “imprisonment.”

The relocation arrangements were questioned by vendors who were transferred to the periphery of the General Market after its renovation. Such was the case for a number of live poultry vendors who perceived that the new arrangements stigmatized their line of activity and disrupted their access to customers and the maintenance of their networks. A chicken vendor explained:

*They told us that our activities are too dirty ... that the chicken smell bad so they sent us to this market and hid us behind here. Our customers do not even know we are here; they have no way to connect with us.*

Generally, these vendors who were forced to discontinue their old trading habits within the formalized marketplace questioned the significance of the moral reform. There were various inferences to the politics of hygiene; some vendors believed the administration to be corrupt and its agents untrustworthy. The following excerpt from our field notes recounts a discussion with a group of vendors when the ethnographer probed them on their thoughts on the sanitation measures:

**PINEAPPLE VENDOR:** *Forget about the hygiene question* [talking to the researcher], you won’t learn anything about hygiene here! *The whole thing is a scheme.*

**PEANUT VENDOR:** *They are not concerned about hygiene! All they want is to exploit us. Those guys [the raid team who patrolled the markets] on a day like this cannot go home without at least 50000 francs in their pockets.*

**PINEAPPLE VENDOR:** *They are all thieves! You can’t believe anything they say. Just go home, go study something else! You have wasted your time coming here.*

**WATERMELON VENDOR:** *They arrest people, take their money to enrich themselves ... all thieves.*

**ALL VENDORS:** *All thieves, real thieves, thieves* [said the vendors simultaneously].

We observed a general discontent to push back against the moral reform because of the perceived disingenuity of its implementers. The ethnographer was often the recipient of this discontent when she participated in tax collection and the enforcement of sanitation measures with market management. She, too, was often
referred to as a thief because of her participation in a system the vendors perceived as abusive. When approaching the vendors alone, she needed to make convincing statements about her position as a researcher solely seeking to understand sanitation measures and the organization of marketplaces. As shown in the preceding excerpt, the vendors often tried to convince her of the immoral character of the market administration.

This perception of moral equivalence reveals that the requirements of the moral reforms often clashed with the traditional trading habits and some previously established relationships with customers. These vendors interpreted the reform through the lens of their history—their preexisting trajectories of actions and interactions within the marketplace.

Thus the perception of moral equivalence comprises individual reflections that show a more structural conception of the individual vendor. The personal positioning with regard to the reform was typically viewed in relation with others.

In sum, the individual reflections (perception of moral correctness, incoherence, and equivalence) assess the vendors’ initial attempts to position themselves within or outside the imposed moral system. However, our analysis also shows how the ethics of their everyday practice were ultimately situated in their interactions with each other.

Ongoing Negotiation of Meaning within the Communities of Vendors

This section discusses the ongoing conversations and meaning making within communities of vendors. Despite initial individual reflections on the significance of the reform, the dynamic of the practice of vending in a market led to further calculations as activities were organized within a community of vendors. This shows situated interpretations, which provided cues for the conduct of the vendors within and around the moral framework. These interpretations address the plurality of considerations that are at play as vendors make decisions whether to engage fully with the reform, disrespect or transform it, and possibly push for an alternative morality.

**Performing moral correctness.** This first process emerged mostly among the vendors who perceived the reform to be morally correct. They engaged in negotiations that sought to reify the rhetoric of the reform in daily activities. Performing moral correctness reflects a collective effort to do “the right thing” by enacting the new norms in everyday activities. Moral agency is geared toward reproducing the new model of morality by considering the everydayness of correctness in situated work practices as new guiding principles are (re)negotiated.

While an important gap remained between the moral reform and these negotiated guiding principles, interesting here was the engagement toward moral correctness among a community of vendors. This was particularly demonstrated in the specialized Fruit and Flower marketplaces. However, we also witnessed individual efforts to abide by the rules at the General Market by vendors whose stores were centrally situated. Although some of these vendors perceived that the moral reform was a nuisance because it constrained old habits, respecting rules, such as trading exclusively within the store and following the sanitation measures, was necessary to avoid
being fined or arrested. Despite perceived misalignment of interests, acts of moral correctness were also enacted by individuals seeking to avoid harsh enforcement measures.

In the specialized marketplaces, we saw a general desire among a community of vendors to embrace the top-down moral goals. The vendors cleaned their individual workspaces every evening at the ends of their shifts. The representative of the Fruit Market explained the process through which such an agreement was reached:

_I have had to speak once or twice, not much. Everyone understands that they have a role to play. We have a small marketplace, there are forty-four of us here. Whatever one does or does not do reflects on all of us. We cannot do what others do in other large marketplaces._

This representative set the tone for the significance of the sanitation measures for their activities, and the individual vendors smoothly followed that leadership. Similarly, it was understood that attracting a new selective clientele required better standards, as a representative of the flower vendors explained: “_You have to understand that it is not the average Cameroonian that shops in this market. It was important to keep things clean and organized._”

Despite the general agreement on specific guiding principles, the ambiguity of every vendor’s reality means that the principles were not always properly executed. At the Flower marketplace, the representative explained, “_Although we expect everyone to clean, it does not always happen unfortunately…. It is not always easy, but we make it work._” He further added that rather than having the vendors clean before or after their workday, an effective way to keep the marketplace clean was to collect a monthly contribution and hire a cleaner. This allowed the vendors to focus primarily on their activities.

Another important question that arose for these vendors who sought to trade essentially in their designated stalls was what to do about “illegal vendors,” or vendors who disregarded the moral reform and sought to occupy the streets around the marketplaces, thereby causing ambiguity for the customers and diminishing opportunities for formal vending. Thus performing moral correctness also meant finding ways to create boundaries that safeguarded against the potential immorality of others. A fruit vendor explained,

_We ask them to leave, some have tried to resist…. A bunch of us gathered around them and forced them to leave. Sometimes, we have had to contact the municipality to come remove them, but typically we ask them to leave and they go._

By publicly reckoning the newly imposed regulations, these vendors established their legitimate right to the location by forcing others to leave. Furthermore, adopting the new norms implied that mechanisms for self-restraint and self-discipline were agreed on to avoid deviant behaviors. For instance, the vendors agreed that trading on the street and sidewalks led to aggressive selling techniques, which disadvantaged everyone. It was thus important for everyone to trade exclusively within the confinement of individual stalls. By creating and enforcing such boundaries, the vendors challenged preexisting informal trading habits on economic but also moral grounds. This provided them with a certain legitimacy at municipality.
Unlike the General Market, which was subject to frequent patrols and was required to remain closed for an entire day of cleaning weekly, these specialized marketplaces were exempted from such measures, as they were perceived to be “well organized” by the city officials.

Furthermore, the fluctuations in the number of market visitors, the rainy seasons, and other personal concerns frequently caused uncertainty and threatened self-sufficiency for these relatively small vendors. Consequently, the agreement to restrict vending activities within the confinement of one’s store/stall was not always reflected in practice. A fruit vendor explained:

*Sometimes the market is dead, nothing happens for weeks. If someone shows up, who I know is nobody’s loyal customer, you bet that I am going to try to make sure I sell something. We can agree all you want, if I go home empty handed every day…. I am the one who has to look at my children and tell them, “Sorry my children, the market was bad today,” not you. When my landlord bangs at my door, I have to answer, not you.*

Consequently, the need to solve apparent incommensurability between the established guiding principles and self-sufficiency stimulated further negotiations. This was resolved through an additional principle of exceptionality, which allowed for the temporary disrespect of rules. In the Flower Market, the vendors concluded that they would normally trade within their designated spaces, except for the holiday seasons and Valentine’s Day, when there were many new customers. In the Fruit Market, the aggressive selling techniques were reevaluated as inappropriate only when colleagues tried to “steal” other people’s loyal customers. But when new customers came to the market, it was common for most vendors to actively draw them to their stores or meet them on the street.

Finally, performing moral correctness is a process of socially organizing morality stemming from a perception of moral correctness among a community of vendors. The main features of this localized translation of appropriateness are an engagement with the new norms, the creation of boundaries to restrain illegal vendors and to self-discipline, and a principle of exceptionality to deal with the volatility of vending.

**Performing moral incongruence.** This process describes a collective effort to operate outside a model of morality perceived to be at odds with life projects. Moral agency in this process consists in negotiating the perceived polarization outside the boundaries of the new moral infrastructure. It entails coordinated and uncoordinated acts of defiance that are viewed as illegal and do not directly challenge the foundational claims of the new model of morality.

While their experiences were not synchronized, our analysis shows that many did not relocate in any of the designated marketplaces. They pursued the problematized behaviors around the city center, while others were reported to have moved to much calmer streets and intersections at the periphery or to have abandoned street vending altogether. The process of performing moral incongruence that we here describe seeks to capture the activities and experiences of vendors who continued to operate in the city center. They navigated around the main streets of the General Market and
were subjected to frequent raids, arrests, fines, and confiscation of merchandise. A city official argued for the necessity of such measures:

*People should understand that it is not a pleasure to demolish them but a necessity…. The center of the city should be a place where people move peacefully and freely…. They [vendors] don’t use the modern spaces that were constructed for them because they lack discipline…. They are rebellious, and they have difficulties in letting go of old habits…. More discipline will be needed for people to understand and obey.*

The coercive measures sought to discourage inappropriate, “rebellious,” and “uncivil” behavior. However, our analysis shows how the ongoing negotiation and meaning construction among the illegal vendors reflected a resistance against a narrative that derogated who they are—people trying to make a living and provide for their families—and subjugated them.

An important feature of performing moral incongruence is a neutralization of the immoral attributes bestowed on the vendors. They often reappropriated the derogatory terms and labels by the officials to either mock the moral project or justify the disrespect of its rules. During the fieldwork, it was common to see groups of vendors sitting together, trading on street corners underneath signs forbidding street vending or posters reminding people to keep the city clean. For instance, some vegetable vendors piled large amounts of rotten vegetables at the foot of such signs. When asked why they thought of the sign, they provided many sarcastic answers: “I am uneducated,” “I don’t know how to read,” “I never went to school.” Other vendors added, “We are villagers, we don’t know what that sign says.” Such responses were followed with a laugh or smile, then an even bigger laugh by the rest of the vendors who sat nearby. Such discussions epitomized the use of mockery among groups of illegal vendors to undermine the authority of the immoral attributes.

Our analysis also shows that the illegal market space was shaped by an organizational struggle and survival skills that articulated practices built outside the discourse of a system perceived to be unjust. These vendors found new ways of coping and acting on the street. During our discussions, many street vendors related tactics used to escape arrests and outsmart the patrol teams and the police. They explained how they have studied the patterns of the patrols, how they have learned to recognize their agents despite their disguise. Because of the perpetual threat to their merchandise, the vendors explained that they have to be on their guard and would typically run inside the market with their bassinets upon hearing the word *awara*, which is a signal to warn others of police or city agents. On some street corners, the vendors would position some young guys whose main task was to warn others when they saw the incoming cars of the raid teams.

Such tactics show how what may appear as disorderly to an unknowledgeable observant and what is sanctionable to local authorities is a complex set of coordinated social support and economic activity at the margin of the moral system. However, during the fieldwork, we saw how these tactics of tinkering and dodging entailed high risks and also endangered the self-sufficiency of these vendors. This is shown in the following excerpt, which is a discussion with a group of four vendors after they had lost their merchandise during a raid:
VENDOR 1: I lost 140,000 francs yesterday, that was all my merchandise, everything is gone, I have been here since … I didn’t return home; I spent the night here. I have been wondering what to do …

VENDOR 2: They took two wheelbarrows of nuts from me, I have been thinking that I should come here with my machete …

RESEARCHER: A machete?

VENDOR 2: Yeah! They want our death, when they steal everything from you, how are you supposed to feed your children? How are those poor children supposed to pay for their school [pointing to a group of younger peddlers], all they care about is to fill up their pockets…. I am telling you I am coming with my machete! [The man is speaking with so much anger in his voice.]

VENDOR 3: I tried to start something [an uproar]. I don’t know what you guys were doing, nobody reacted…. I myself didn’t have enough rocks here with me [speaking to the vendors].

VENDOR 2: I had nothing either, that is why I am bringing my machete the next time.

RESEARCHER: But this only happens on Wednesdays, right? The market is supposed to be closed …

VENDOR 4: No, it happens all the times! They disturb us all the time!

VENDOR 1: I told you my merchandise was taken yesterday, they took everything, since then I have been sitting here, I don’t really know what to do, everything is gone, if it is war they want, they are going to get it!

RESEARCHER: Hmm, you would be endangering your life …

VENDOR 2: What life?

[As we are talking, we see two men in uniform heading toward us; one of the vendors, who had peanuts in a wheelbarrow, runs inside the gate of a private building nearby. A vendor holding a bag of secondhand clothes runs to hide behind a small kiosk, but too late for him—a man in uniform runs toward him and requires him to follow him at the station. A few more words are exchanged that I cannot hear. The vendor is rushed inside the market’s gate. After ten minutes or so, we see the vendor walking away.]

RESEARCHER: They let him go?

VENDOR 1: He probably gave at least 5,000 francs.

RESEARCHER: Five thousand?! I wonder if his merchandise is even worth that much …

VENDOR 1: It is better for him to give everything now than being taken down to the station, once you are there, things are bad, it is 25,000!

Although these vendors aspired to co-create their own understanding of organizing according to what they deemed appropriate, the repercussions of outside interventions either from the officials or other formal vendors often restricted them. Despite this highly uncertain environment, illegal vending, as a self-sufficiency, has remained a highly resilient strategy at the margins. It reflects an organizational and survival struggle that is also expressed through an effort to legitimize actions in
moral terms. For instance, the illegal vendors condemned the condemners, referring to them as corrupted: “All they care about is to fill their pockets,” “All they do is steal from those who try.” They made claims about their right to fulfill their basic needs: “How are you supposed to feed your children?”, “How are those poor children supposed to pay for their school?” Thus they were committed to fighting for what they believed to be morally right, despite the costs.

Finally, performing moral incongruence is a process of socially organizing an alternative morality outside of the imposed norms of appropriateness. The main features of this process are resistance to the rules, the neutralization of immoral attributes and survivalist tactics that pushed for the right to pursue self-sufficiency at the margins of the moral system.

**Performing moral equivalence.** This is a collective effort to accommodate customary trading habits within the new model of morality. This process signifies a certain reciprocal duality in the relationship between the new and old models as activities are organized within the formal marketplace. Thus the morality of everyday practices is a dynamic social negotiation fueled by the perception that traditional vending habits were just as significant to trade effectively within the formal marketplace. Although some vending habits that were not in alignment with the prescribed norms could be occasionally seen in the well-organized Fruit and Flower Markets, the process of performing moral equivalence captures the social organizing of morality to challenge the new norms within the formal marketplace. Our analysis shows how the negotiations and meaning creation within the community of vendors in the General Market sought to make practical and normative judgments that decoupled everyday practices and ceremonial compliance.

We saw the justification of the old collaboration and interaction patterns based on the claims that the city officials lacked a clear understanding of the nitty-gritty of market management, therefore the top-down reform was out of touch with lived reality. One representative of the vendors explained the clash of values regarding the sanitation measures in these words:

*Vendors have other things to do! The municipality has tried to change things. Some slogans here and there on the walls of the market. But, honestly, as someone who has been in this market for seventeen years, I don’t see any change. Things are exactly the same.*

This implies that merchandise was often displayed on the ground, in alleys, and in open spaces despite the rules. We also observed how these vendors continued to use the services of peddlers who traded on their behalf on the street and in the corridors of the marketplaces. Furthermore, others did not hesitate to leave the confines of their stores to trade themselves on the streets and alleys of the marketplace, when business was slow. The following vignette describes the daily activities of some vendors shadowed during the fieldwork:

*Madeleine is a storeowner at the oldest marketplace. She arrives at the market’s gate around 7.20 am. The gate is still closed but there are already many people waiting by it. As she waits, a young man, Benji, joins her and they discuss briefly until the gate opens at...*
7.30 am, the official opening hours. Madeleine rushes to her store with Benji, after opening the store, she rapidly pours a large bag of nuts in a wheelbarrow. Benji wheels it outside the store while Madeleine retrieves a small bag full of coins from behind her counter. She hands the bag of coins to Benji, who puts it in a belt bag and leaves rapidly to go trade the nuts on the street and alleys of the market.

Madeleine then proceeds to putting bassinets of tomatoes and onions on the ground outside her store. She also makes piles of yams on the ground then she gets a piece of coal behind her counter and writes their price on the ground. She moves between the inside and outside of her store as she serves customers.

At around 2 pm, Elise, another vendor stops by on her way to her own store. Elise puts a large tray, with dry spices that she carried on her head, to rest on the ground as she discusses with Madeleine. In the meantime, Benji returns and Madeleine pours another bag of nuts in the now empty wheelbarrow. Benji warns Elise about a street that saw the visit of the patrol team, they both agree to avoid the streets for the rest of the afternoon. Benji heads for the inner alleys of the market. Elise complained that she can’t possibly remain in that “prison” [her store, which is located at the back of the marketplace and typically remains closed while she trades on the street] for the rest of the afternoon. Madeleine asked her to leave her tray where it was and stay with her for a while. The two women spend the rest of the afternoon at Madeleine’s store, Elise sells some of her spices and assist Madeleine with some customers.

Madeleine and Elise are storeowners who operated in the General Market and pushed the boundaries of the formal rules in their daily activities. Madeleine did this through her use of a peddler (Benji) who traded on the street on her behalf. She also displayed her produce on the ground in the open space in front of her store, thereby defying the sanitation rule. Similarly, Elise used her store mainly to store her merchandise, while she traded on the street where she believed there were more customers. Benji, a peddler, shared information with Elise on the presence of patrols on the street. Finally, Madeleine temporally shared her vending space with Elise, who had abandoned her own store.

The process of performing moral equivalence is not unified across the marketplace; it does not look the same daily and often hinges on the stringency of the enforcement measures. Rather, this process shows how groups of vendors make do with new rules, supporting and relying on each other to push for an alternative morality within the formal marketplace. However, the ethnographer witnessed how the vendors swiftly adapted their behavior and posture during surprise visits by city officials. Similarly, the leader of the cleaning team explained a situation when he was warned about a surprise visit of the chief councilor, which created a frenzy as this leader sought to ensure that all the vendors had returned to their stores and that any waste resulting from trading fresh produce in alleys or open spaces within the marketplace was cleaned away:

*My telephone was ringing like crazy.... Our representative called, everyone called me.... They said, “Where are you?” “He is coming [the councilor]!” “You have to save us, or we are dead!” ... I gathered my guys very fast, we separated, I sent everyone in a specific place. “You go there, and you, there, and if you finish earlier go help the others.” ...*
After few hours the market looked perfect, when the councilor came, he was happy, he was like “they told me your market is dirty. What are they talking about? The market is clean.”

Consequently, the vendors engaged in decoupling practices by avoiding the streets during patrols and keeping the alleys and open spaces of the market clean and unoccupied during the the officials’ visits. As such, they pushed for an alternative morality in tune with their own needs and embodied habits. These vendors perceived that their traditional trading habits were just as appropriate, if not superior, in guaranteeing self-sufficiency.

In summary, our analysis suggests that the lived reality of the reform is constituted through a dynamic interaction between individual reflections and ongoing negotiations within communities of vendors, who ultimately enact the boundaries of what is acceptable, or not, as they conduct their daily activities. The three identified perceptions (moral correctness, moral incongruence, and moral equivalence) do not automatically lead to a specific performance of morality but serve as grounds for further ethical considerations of what is the right course of action for the individual and the community within or outside the boundaries of the moral reform. Thus, while the moral reform is an intentional and consequential effort of framing and sanctioning what is (non-)acceptable, the observed practices illustrate a situation of moral multiplexity (Reinecke et al., 2017) whereby the moral reform is not the only or prominent point of reference for the behaviors and attitudes toward street vending. This explains why different and seemingly contradictory practices coexist.

By performing moral correctness, some reinforce the moral reform narrative (although exceptionally defying agreed-upon guidelines). Others, by performing moral equivalence or incongruence, reframe or oppose the reform, thereby rendering visible alternative moralities based on what is understood as a good life; however, doing so also provides additional arguments to the moral reform proponents about the significance of the reform and control measures, such as raids. Together, this implies that all sorts of actors are involved in moral work and moralizing efforts by purposefully imposing new norms, reinterpreting them, conceiving alternatives, and sometimes improvising in unanticipated ways. The observed result is a rattled, contested, and negotiated moral order that brings to light the tensions between past habits, present concerns, and future aspirations of local actors.

DISCUSSION

This article examined a project of moral regulation of urban, traditional marketplaces, which typifies top-down attempts to bring order to a seemingly unstructured and chaotic world. Our analysis of the activities surrounding the moralization project designed and enforced by local authorities in Yaoundé around notions such as disorder, hygiene, and incivility in trading allowed us to develop a grounded theory on how moral orders emerge from the interchange between structures, norms, regulations, and social interactions—the “beating heart of institutions” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: 55). Through an ethnographic approach, we highlighted the recursive aspects of the process of moral regulation, which have been undertheorized in
extant work. Here we elaborate on our analysis to articulate our contributions. We also outline some of the limitations of our study and suggest directions for future research.

First, seeing moral regulation as inhabited makes space for practices enacted by a broader set of actors, albeit such practices are not always harmonious. This, which starts from Garfinkel’s (1967) insight that the “moral order” refers to the ways in which rules are accomplished as practices, counters the view of moral regulation as a one-directional practice (Hunt, 1999). Researchers have shown the intentional efforts by which moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963; Hampel & Tracey, 2016) set social expectations, rules, and norms that problematize the conduct and acts of a group of actors, thus establishing a certain type of moral order in a field of action (Durkheim, 1973). Our study documents how consequential the newly imposed moral norms are for the livelihood prospects of targeted individuals. We observed two sets of tasks accomplished by the local authorities that seem central to the process of moral regulation: problematizing and defining new norms of appropriateness. Yet, our study, which also focused on the targeted actors’ daily practices, documents how prescribed norms are not deterministic but a resource for moral agency (Lukes, 1974; Tronto, 1993). Our findings thus illustrate the continuous efforts by targeted actors to make the moral reform work by aligning their actions and producing a sense of co-orientation to the specific situations. They do so individually and collectively by reorganizing market activities (e.g., how and when to use street peddlers and to trade within designated stalls) and recreating different forms of social support (e.g., warning others of the presence of patrols). The prescribed norms were not automatically internalized nor outright refused or ignored but became resources that oriented and were used to organize vendors’ actions (Garfinkel, 1967). This is, for instance, illustrated by what we termed—following Duneier (2000)—the principle of exceptionality. Following the new norms, vendors in the Flower Market agreed that they would trade within their designated spaces and times and would use nonaggressive selling techniques. This served to make visible to others that they were not deviants. Yet, through the principle of exceptionality, these vendors also creatively set boundaries (i.e., moments, places, situations) for the temporary disrespect and breaching of those very same rules. Moreover, they defined why it was right to do so. Together, these different efforts reflect alternative values and beliefs about what constitutes a good life within coercive measures.

An inhabited moral regulation approach thus shifts focus from ruling as a form of governing behavior to how formal and informal rules, mores, and categories of actors are enacted by locally embedded actors. This accounts for the complexity and ambiguity of people’s efforts to forge life projects and how such efforts are tightly interwoven with imposed, embodied, and situationally defined values and beliefs about what constitutes a good life despite institutional constraints. Some, as we observed, accepted—even if not fully—the rules, this potentially leading to the reinforcement of the moral entrepreneur’s narrative that defines practices and identities in moral terms. Others, feeling the norms “divorced” (Fine, 2012:70) from their needs and the mechanisms of social life, partly or fully rejected the new norms, thereby questioning the morality of the imposed practices, categories, and spatial
and temporal boundaries of market activities. This meant that they engaged in licit and moral, but also illicit and immoral, practices. As such, our analysis sheds light on “how people adhere, ignore or creatively interpret” (Clegg et al., 2007: 113) existing moral regulations. Our findings also broaden the scope of who does moral work, to include not only the moral entrepreneur but also those who are themselves targets of moral regulation projects.

Second, our observations shed light on how morality is a “social practice” grounded in the daily experiences of “real people in their everyday life” (Tronto, 1993: 79). We show how actors’ moral work is built on individual reflections, seen through the prism of their own personal histories, but simultaneously negotiated through their relationships. The different practices actors enacted were not exclusively a reflection of and a reaction to the moral regulation project. Vendors’ moral work was also enacted in the everyday unfolding of their vending activities with points of reference, such as their personal histories and circumstances, for example, responsibilities to others, such as children or parents, and the ongoing negotiations within communities of vendors on behaviors considered acceptable or unacceptable. We posit that this is of particular relevance, as it addresses the criticism that both the ethics as practice and the inhabited institutions approaches might obscure wider structures and obfuscate the pattern of preexisting logics by putting the focus on situated activity (Fine, 2012) and radical undecidability (Derrida, 1992). Our combination of historical and real-time analysis (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013) shows how at the moment of moral decision-making—Shall I sell on the sidewalk or not? Shall I go to the market today even if it is closed? Shall I use peddlers to boost my sales?—different factors and “facts of social life” are taken into account to define “how things ought to be” (Garfinkel, 1967: 53). These questions illustrate the move from purely rule-based approaches to morality to a view of moral regulation as a social practice situated and contextual in character. This points to two different theoretical insights.

First, our findings show how understanding moral regulation as inhabited requires a sophisticated sense of human interdependence (Tronto, 1993). We observed the importance of different economic roles and partnerships that bypassed the boundaries of formality and informality (e.g., peddlers sharing information with storeowners), forms of support (e.g., temporarily sharing store space), an informal system of control within groups (e.g., safeguarding against the immorality of others), and principles of exceptionality indicating when the disregard of norms was permitted. We also observed the sense of responsibility toward their families and the need to provide for them. Some of these roles and partnerships existed before the moral reform, offering what Delbridge and Edwards (2013) name pathways of agential interaction, which differ from historical conditioning as they open ways to act and to morally legitimize preexisting patterns. Others resulted from people’s reactions to and enactments of the imposed regulations, leading to the emergence of new localized norms and models of behavior. As we observed, these heterogeneous actions of vendors were neither entirely dictated by or against the moral reform project, nor were they random or ahistorical. Rather, actors’ decisions were shaped by the institutional pressures to behave morally, the day-to-day practices, and the
learned routine of ways of doing things (Gordon et al., 2009). This implies seeing moral work as embedded in relational processes where not only universalistic moral frameworks but also one’s needs, history, and values, along with others’ needs, demands, and prospects, are considered.

The second theoretical insight accounts for the complexity and ambiguity of people’s efforts to forge life projects and how this is tightly interwoven with imposed, embodied, and situationally defined values and beliefs about what constitutes a good life despite institutional constraints (Millar, 2018). In our case, this meant paying attention to both individual and within-group reflections and focusing on how their interactions framed the capacity to enact what constitutes moral behavior. We identified three categories of such processes—performing moral correctness, moral incongruence, and moral equivalence—that served to justify selected actions as moral, even when these actions deviate, subvert, or ignore existing rules. This extends our understanding of how actors discursively construct the morality of situations (Gordon et al., 2009) and how they frame a particular action or practice as moral or immoral. For instance, those performing moral incongruence, when speaking about the pejorative labels of the administration, expressed in moral terms the incongruence between their experience of everyday life—which varied in terms of rhythms of life, desire for autonomy, or inability to make ends meet—and the demands of the reform. Their unruly operations in the market reflected an act of relinquishment or withdrawal from the demanded mores and categories so that other normative attachments could be retained. Yet, they also expressed determination to make an honest living, albeit at the margins, which led them to neutralize the derogatory terms by claiming, “At least I am not a thief” and “I am not a beggar.” Thus the three processes of organizing morality need to be seen in relation to the narrative of the moral reform as they manifest efforts in redoing and resignifying social relations, work, and different forms of support potentially transformed by the reform. A focus on such efforts highlights the move from description of lived moral dilemmas to prescription of expected behavior (Fine, 2012; Gordon et al., 2009).

Finally, our approach to moral regulation as a situated practice has two relevant corollaries that we see as avenues for future research. First, it warns against seeing the activities and practices of these actors, particularly those that deviate from the prescribed norms, as solely a form of survival strategy or a last resort but invites us to consider their potential in forging particular moral and life projects. We believe this insight needs to be taken into account particularly in discussions that pose that the poor act purely “out of necessity,” which leaves very little room to explain why they do what they do, be they garbage collectors (Millar, 2018), sidewalk sellers (Duneier, 2000), squatters (Desmond, 2016), or another marginalized category of actor. More research is needed to respond to the question of what else, beyond mere subsistence, is produced by their daily practices—how what they do permits them to derive pride, construct meaningful relations, and build better lifeworlds from “whatever cards they have been dealt” (Goffman, 2015: 141), thereby possibly forging particular, alternative moral life projects. This is important, as it offers insights on the emergence of rattled moral orders, which are to be seen as the intermediate product
of conflicts and contradictions among a multiplicity of affected actors whose actions have significant consequences (Reinecke et al., 2017). Furthermore, our conclusions can be extended to other people situated at the margins of society and targeted by different moral reform projects (e.g., the homeless, sex workers, squatters, beggars, or refugees). We cannot ignore the fact that they cannot be done away with so easily, which has moral significance (Duneier, 2000). Their activities, skillful creativity, and efforts to redo and resignify social relations, as well as their deployment of cultural knowledge, even if perhaps wrong and indecent, need to be seen as rendering visible and legitimate alternative moral frameworks through which they carve out their identities and relationships.

The second insight is that our findings provide an empirical path to consider more substantively how moral situations are complicated by power imbalances (Lukes, 1974; Tronto, 1993). In particular, our observations show the role of violence and threats in the work of moralizing a social world. Moral regulation implies an intentional effort to set a narrative on civic duty for orderly and hygienic conduct in marketplaces. But “words break no bones” (Barley, 2008: 507), and as we observed, bones needed to be—not only metaphorically—broken. As anthropologists studying the life of the urban poor have documented, ignoring the use of violence and threats in projects of moral regulation and reforms is assuming that individuals would conform “in a heartbeat” (Gandolfo, 2014: 285) to the newly imposed regulations (Duneier, 2000; Goffman, 2015). Thus forceful evictions, demolitions of stalls with bulldozers, arrests and expropriation, and forced relocation seem to be highly consequential. Likewise, the physical (re)design of the marketplace, clearing sidewalks, pavements, and alleys, provided an orderly appearance and eased monitoring, but these activities also helped identify those who engaged in rule breaking. For the nonconforming vendors, there are few spaces to hide, and there is limited room to do business “their own way,” which changed the way these vendors saw and oriented themselves in the market space. This created opportunities for bravery, defiance, and loyalty as they resisted forceful arrests, evictions, destruction of livelihoods, and pejorative labels. More research is needed to understand how the use of force, violence, and threats, frequently regarded as obsolete, rare, and analytically extreme (Martí & Fernández, 2013; Pina e Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2010), is likely to play a role in shaping the meaningful moral world people inhabit.

CONCLUSION

This study reported on the complex, contested, and lived process of morally regulating a specific social world (Becker, 1963) by examining a project of moral regulation in Yaoundé, Cameroon. While the specific conditions of this setting and case might restrict the generalizability and transferability of the findings, particularly with regard to more modern societies in which some of the central processes described here around civic duty for orderly and hygienic conduct are less relevant, we argue that such projects of moral regulation are observable, common, and ongoing in a large number of cities’ urban reform projects implementing politics.
of bringing order to the lived “urban chaos” (Millar, 2018). They are also very present in how we are fighting to regulate others and self-regulate against COVID-19. Furthermore, our analytical approach and theoretical insights on moral regulation as a situated practice provide a useful lens for researchers and decision makers studying a variety of phenomena. For example, the housing crisis and gentrification process in an increasing number of cities around the world present a pressing research opportunity for analyzing how phenomena like squatting are seen, lived, and justified by individuals and groups. We highlight the naïveté of overly abstract models of moral regulation, which “can never generate a functioning community, city, or economy” (Scott, 1998: 310). Our case is uncommon in the literature but common in the world.

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REFERENCES


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