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“Asiatown” – A Post-Socialist Bazaar in the  
Eastern Part of Berlin

Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften



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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
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## Abstract

Prior to the collapse of communism, hundreds of thousands of migrants arrived in various localities throughout COMECON countries by way of programs of mutual cooperation and “socialist solidarity,” including in East Germany. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many of these former contract workers have become entrepreneurs mostly engaged in wholesaling and retailing. Local markets, increasingly comprised of diverse peoples, play key roles in post-socialist economic development while transnationally linking a variety of geographical and socio-cultural spaces. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a bazaar in the eastern part of Berlin, this paper addresses questions of (1) spatial continuities between the socialist past and the post-socialist present, (2) mobility and transnational social and economic practices, and (3) the negotiation of power and diversity in new marketplaces. I will argue that *socialist pathways of migration* and longstanding transnational ties established during the socialist period are still relevant to contemporary routes of migration and therefore to trade, business, and the global flow of money.

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Prior to the collapse of communism, hundreds of thousands of migrants arrived in various localities throughout COMECON<sup>1</sup> countries by way of programs of mutual cooperation and “socialist solidarity,” including in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many of these former contract workers have become entrepreneurs mostly engaged in wholesaling and retailing. Local markets, increasingly comprised of diverse peoples, play key roles in post-socialist economic development while transnationally linking a variety of geographical and socio-cultural spaces. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a bazaar in the eastern part of Berlin, this paper addresses questions of (1) spatial continuities between the socialist past and the post-socialist present, (2) mobility and transnational social and economic practices, and (3) the negotiation of power and diversity in new marketplaces. I will argue that *socialist pathways of migration* and longstanding transnational ties established during the socialist period are still relevant to contemporary routes of migration and therefore to trade, business, and the global flow of money. Nowadays, traders and customers in new bazaars in former COMECON countries are from various countries, such as India, Pakistan, China, and Turkey. Yet, as the market management and a considerable number of the sellers and buyers in these bazaars are of Vietnamese background, this paper focuses on former Vietnamese contract workers and their roles in the markets.<sup>2</sup> The main site of investigation is Berlin, Germany, however, I include two other places of fieldwork as sites of comparison, namely Warsaw and Prague, where many Vietnamese are engaged in trading, thereby maintaining and fostering social and economic networks across borders and connecting cities and people.

This essay adopts a transnational perspective (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) and takes into account recent critiques of “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer 2009), the tendency in migration research to limit the focus of analysis to the receiving country and to use the nation-state as a container, as the given framework from

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1 The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance was an economic organization comprising countries of the Eastern Bloc as well as a number of socialist states in Africa and elsewhere.

2 Parts of this essay were first presented at the conference on “Post-Socialist Bazaars. Markets and Diversities in ex-COMECON Countries,” organized by Steve Vertovec and Gertrud Hüwelmeier at the Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, February 23-24, 2012, and later that year at the EASA conference in Paris. This working paper is based on the research project “The Global Bazaar,” funded by the German Research Foundation (HU 1019/3-1). Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, and Hanoi in 2012 and 2013.

which to understand and assess the experiences of migrants. Moreover, I will focus on non-ethnic ways of living and working (Glick Schiller et al 2006), a research perspective that has rarely been taken into consideration in previous scholarship on post-socialist marketplaces. As Vietnamese form the majority in terms of traders and clients in the bazaars, there is an emphasis in this essay on this group and its transnational ties. However, by including Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis, Turks, Germans, Poles, Czechs, and many other groups who use the markets within its scope, this article aims to contribute to the research on diversification, mobility, cross-border economic practices, and marketplaces as locales of cultural encounter, new solidarities, and conflict in the post-socialist urban landscape. Finally, this paper sheds light on a different kind of transnationalism, one linked not to neoliberal capitalism but to cold war political alliances. By taking into account *socialist pathways of migration*, I will analyze how cross-border ties have changed over time with the implementation of new legal categories after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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As many scholars have highlighted (Hann and Hann 1992 on border markets in Turkey; Sik and Wallace 1999; Wundrak 2007 on Chinese markets in Romania; Hohnen 2003 on markets in Vilnius, Lithuania; Nyiri 2007 on Chinese bazaars in Budapest; Marcinczak and van der Velde on bazaars in Poland 2008; Nagy 2011 on the Red Dragon Market in Bucharest; among others) open air markets (OAM) already existed in the communist economy and were important places for the distribution of goods. They were also considered places where profit-making occurred through both legal and illegal activities, including pick-pocketing, speculation, and the resale of stolen or smuggled goods. As a result, during communist times, OAMs were constantly in danger of being raided by the police or, in the best case, were "tolerated as suspicious but irrelevant distortions of the production and distribution system" (Sik and Wallace 1999: 698). Nowadays, police raids and control by customs officers are part of the everyday experiences of traders and clients in bazaars in Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague.

While OAMs were to be found in many socialist countries, such bazaars did not exist in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (Hüwelmeier 2008). Nevertheless, people in East Germany found different ways of practicing exchange in order to deal with the economy of scarcity. A number of Vietnamese contract workers in the GDR,



for example, were quite active in the informal economy in the 1980s, producing and selling blue jeans and other textile items to locals. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many people in a variety of ex-COMECON countries turned to street trading in numerous cities, towns and villages. In eastern Germany, however, the people engaged in suitcase trading were not natives, but Vietnamese who had lost their jobs after the breakdown of communism. Contrary to some places in Eastern Europe, where thousands of people met in OAMs on a daily basis starting in the early the 1990s, such as in the bazaar in the Warsaw Stadium or in the container market in Odessa, Ukraine (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009), such huge markets were not established in Berlin until 2004 and 2005, although smaller markets run by Vietnamese migrants already existed in the 1990s.

## The transformation of urban space – “Asian” marketplaces in European capitals

Fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the *Dong Xuan Center* (which translates to “spring meadow”), the largest wholesale market run by Asian migrants in Berlin, opened its doors in the eastern part of the city.<sup>3</sup> Located on the grounds of a former state-owned enterprise, the bazaar is surrounded by large pre-fabricated apartment buildings, so-called *Plattenbauten*, built in the 1960s and 70s. Thousands of migrants, a large number of whom come from the former Soviet Union and from Vietnam, live in these places. The buildings are typical for the architecture of the late socialist GDR, a traveling architecture that can still be seen in former “socialist brotherlands” such as Vietnam, and other places such as Tanzania, where it was part of what was called “African socialism.” The area of the *Dong Xuan Center*, situated a few kilometers from today’s city center, was already being used as an industrial site in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Transformed into a global trade center in 2005, the wholesale market was mainly run by Vietnamese in the very beginning. However, nowadays people from China, India, Pakistan, Poland, Turkey, Germany, Mexico, and other countries are also to be found among the wholesalers and retailers.

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3 In Hanoi, the most famous wholesale market has the same name, “Dong Xuan Market.” Antonie Schmiz, a geographer, described “migrant economies” based on research in the Dong Xuan Center in Berlin. Her focus was mainly on questions of the inclusion of migrants into the German labor market.

Bazaars of this kind exist in many Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>4</sup> In Warsaw, the *Jarmak Europa*, called *Stadium* in the vernacular, Europe's biggest bazaar, was the melting pot of the city after the collapse of communism. Similar to other multi-ethnic bazaars, Vietnamese, Poles, and Russians sold goods in this market after the breakdown of the socialist economy, yet Africans, Chinese, Indians, and Central Asians were also represented among the traders. This trading location has since been transferred to the suburbs of the city as the *Stadium* market was recently closed down in order for the venue to be rebuilt for the European Soccer Championship in 2012, which took place in Poland and Ukraine. In Poland, as a result, Chinese, Vietnamese and Turkish investors purchased huge areas of land in a small village about 20 km south of Warsaw, literally on the meadows, and built new global trade centers, vast halls with several hundred people trading in each one. Some of the investors have never visited Europe and entrust all dealings to their co-ethnic representatives on the ground.

A similar situation can be found in Prague, where a global trade center opened in 1999. The *Sapa*<sup>5</sup> bazaar on the outskirts of the city is the largest and most famous migrant-run market in the Czech Republic. The majority of traders are of Vietnamese background, while about 20 per cent are Chinese, Turkish, Indian, and Pakistani. The bazaar is located about 15 km from the city center, and was built on the grounds of a former poultry processing enterprise and a meat company. According to the Czech gatekeeper of the Sapa bazaar, the locality, which opened in 1977, was one of the most modern slaughterhouses in Europe in the socialist period. It was purchased by Vietnamese investors in 1999. Other markets existed previously in the same district, Prague 4, near a residential home for "foreign workers", for example, but this bazaar was closed by local authorities in 1996 (Martinkova 2011:155).

Compared to the more "wild" markets in the beginning of the 1990s, the "new" bazaars in each of these cities are organized by a market management team on property that was purchased by foreign investors.<sup>6</sup> The market management represents the bazaar to the outside, negotiates with state authorities such as the mayor of the district, the police or the fire department. Inside the market, the management collects

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4 See, for example Nyiri 2007; 2004; Hann and Hann 1992; Sik and Wallace 1999.

5 This name refers to a small mountain town in northern Vietnam, Sapa, where a number of different ethnic groups live, trade, and encounter thousands of European tourists every year.

6 Who exactly the investors are, whether they live in China, Vietnam or elsewhere, was not easy to find out. In this article, I refer to the "management level" when talking about my contacts among market representatives.

the rent from the traders, guarantees security by hiring personnel and, for example, expelling those people from the locality who sell products without having a market license. The bazaars in Berlin, Warsaw and Prague are connected by various people and events: first, by Vietnamese managers who meet on a regular basis in one of the localities, second, by "cultural events" such as transnational beauty contests. Next, traders purchase across borders, and visit business partners, friends, and relatives in other cities. Furthermore, Buddhist monks from Vietnam travel between all of these places and perform religious rituals in the respective *bazaar pagodas* (Hüwelmeier 2013b). Thus, this paper focuses on post-socialist networks as circuits of traders and clients, which continuously connect people, cities and places.

However, the Dong Xuan Center in Berlin is different from new markets in several places in post-socialist spaces, such as the Seventh Kilometer Market (*Sed'moi*) near the port city of Odessa, Ukraine (Humphrey and Sivirskaja 2009). While the Sed'moi consists of shipping containers on the outskirts of Odessa, the bazaars in Berlin and Prague are part of the city. In Berlin, the Dong Xuan Center is made up of vast halls built on a former industrial site, while the bazaar in Prague was opened on the territory of a former slaughterhouse. The new bazaars near Warsaw are located outside the city at the intersection of various highways, after moving from the stadium in the center of the city. They were not built from containers; instead, large halls were erected on the meadows near a small village. Yet, a few shipping containers can also be found on the territory of the markets in Berlin and Prague: In the Dong Xuan Center, they are used as small warehouses, while in Prague, some merchants use containers, located on the grounds of the bazaar, as tax offices or nail studios.

## From industrial site to post-socialist bazaar

The Dong Xuan Center is a covered market with several large halls that opened its doors in the eastern part of Berlin, the former socialist part of the city, in 2005. About 250 people rent space for trading, while another 50 people are not wholesalers, but service providers, running businesses such as tax advice offices, a driving school, hair salons, and nail salons. According to the Vietnamese manager, a thousand people work on the grounds of the bazaar, making the Dong Xuan Center one of the largest employers in the district of Berlin-Lichtenberg. Wholesalers generate annual

revenue of about 3 million euro, thus the residents of this district profit from the tax-paying traders.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to other markets in socialist countries that were founded shortly after the collapse of communism, the eastern Berlin bazaars – of which there were three (one was closed in 2009) – did not open their doors until many years after the reunification of Germany.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the territory of the bazaar was used as an industrial site by the Siemens Company. Siemens is well-known to many people because of its modern-day involvement in global communication systems. As early as 1847, Werner von Siemens invented the pointer telegraph, later building part of the production site on the grounds of a village outside of Berlin, in the municipality of Lichtenberg, which became a part of Berlin in 1920 and is today the location of the Dong Xuan Center.<sup>8</sup> After 1880, the Siemens Company produced carbon brushes for electric motors. During the First World War, Siemens became an important armament enterprise, and in the Second World War, its carbon products were also of military importance. During the Second World War, the production was maintained by forced labor, first by Jewish workers, then by prisoners of war, and later by thousands of foreign forced workers (Badel et al 2009: 85). After the end of the Second World War, the territory and its industrial production were transferred to the Soviet zone. In the 1950s, the Soviets handed control over the industrial site to the newly founded socialist GDR, and it became a so-called *volkseigene Betrieb* (VEB) or state-owned enterprise in socialist East Germany. The VEB Elektrokohle, as the enterprise was called, employed about 3,000 workers and was one of the biggest factories in Berlin during the socialist period, producing, among other things, carbon brushes, which were necessary for the functioning of electric razors as well as for electric locomotives.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the *Treuhandanstalt*, a newly created state institution in reunified Germany, transformed all state-owned property in the former GDR into private property. Two thousand eight hundred workers in the VEB Elektrokohle lost their jobs. In 1996, a US company took over the site and the production; however, the factory was closed down soon after that.<sup>9</sup> Later, in 2005, the Dong Xuan Center opened its doors on the grounds of the former industrial site. Some of the former Vietnamese contract workers, who had been employed on exactly these grounds

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7 <http://www.dongxuan-berlin.de/gmbh.html>, accessed 1 July 2012.

8 [www.siemens.com/history](http://www.siemens.com/history), accessed 1 July 2012.

9 There is no official information about the investors of the place or about the monetary transactions involved in establishing the market.

by the East German VEB Elektrokohle, became entrepreneurs and wholesalers in the bazaar on the very same site, now located in reunified Germany.

Likewise, another place in the eastern part of Berlin was transformed into a global bazaar, right in the middle of thousands of apartments in pre-fabricated apartment towers. People living in these neighborhoods, Germans as well as Vietnamese, Russians and others, also visit the *Asia Pacific Center*, another bazaar that opened in 2004 on the grounds of a former building of the East German security service (*Staats-sicherheitsdienst*). This bazaar started out with about 100 wholesalers, but now only 40 to 50 traders are left. According to some informants in this bazaar, the competing Dong Xuan Center has attracted a number of wholesalers from the Asia Pacific Center, who terminated their rental contracts and switched to the other marketplace. Thus on these sites there is, following Sik and Wallace (Sik and Wallace 1999), at least some kind of continuity between capitalism in the past (industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), socialism in the past (GDR until 1990) as well as capitalism in the present.

## Socialist migrations and trading activities

Various forms of mobility in socialist countries already existed prior to 1989, due to agreements between "socialist brotherlands" (Hüwelmeier 2013a; 2011; 2010). Long-standing transnational ties in the socialist period are still relevant to contemporary routes of migration and therefore to trade, business, and the global flow of money. In the GDR, Vietnamese migrants in particular were producing so-called "irregular" goods, selling them to locals and, in addition, sending tons of wares to their home country (Dennis 2005; Hüwelmeier 2013a). Likewise, though not allowed officially, people in Ukraine (Transcarpathia), in particular local agricultural cooperatives, organized "tourist trips" to Prague and other cities in Bohemia and Moravia during the socialist period. People participating in these trips sold products to middlemen in Bohemia and bought other goods to be transported back to Ukraine (Uherek 2009: 278). Thus, cross-border ties in COMECON countries were forged and maintained between individuals taking part in the shadow economy prior to the breakdown of communism.

During the Cold War years, a number of Vietnamese migrated to countries in Africa and Asia to provide expertise in fields such as science and industry, and were therefore part of the global or "international socialist ecumene" (Bayly 2009: 125).

This term refers to imaginations of a "worldwide fraternal community forged by both states and individuals on the basis of enduring revolutionary solidarities and socialist 'friendships' " (Bayly 2009: 126). Today an "enduring socialism" (West and Raman 2009) exists in some of these countries due to former ties of "friendship" among socialist states. Such ties were also forged and maintained between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the GDR. Contrary to socialist countries such as Algeria, Mozambique or Angola, which required specialists and expertise to build up their economies, the GDR was in need of foreign manual labor to work in industrial production.

Various groups and cohorts of Vietnamese entered East Germany at different times.<sup>10</sup> By highlighting the diversity of Vietnamese in the GDR, it becomes clear that one cannot speak about a homogenous group of diasporic Vietnamese in the socialist period. A group of children, known as *the Moritzburger*, arrived as early as 1955, living and studying for many years in the socialist brotherland. Later they returned home, where many of them became influential intellectuals and politicians. Another group was made up of students, cohorts of about 300 per year, who left Vietnam during the American War between 1965 and 1975, studied in the GDR for some years, and then returned to their home country. These former students have excellent German language skills and many of them came back to the GDR in the 1980s to work as interpreters for the thousands of contract workers who came to East Germany because the economic situation in socialist Vietnam was worsening and the GDR was in need of workers.

In April 1980, the GDR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed a bilateral "Agreement on the Temporary Employment and Qualification of Vietnamese Workers in Companies of the German Democratic Republic" (Dennis 2005), and as a result, tens of thousands of Vietnamese migrants, most of them from North Vietnam, came to live and work in East Germany. The GDR signed similar agreements with Poland and Hungary in the 1960s, with Algeria, Cuba, Mozambique, and Angola in the 1970s, and with China and North Korea in the 1980s (Gruner Domic 1999).

While working in East German state enterprises, Vietnamese stayed for four or five years and eventually returned to their home country. Incorporation into the host society was not expected. Aside from a German language course of only two months, contract workers were not "integrated" at all. Living in specially designated housing, they were ghettoized, and watched over by the East German government and the

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10 For a detailed analysis of these three groups, see Hüwelmeier 2013a.



secret service. The socialist government of East Germany observed the activities of Vietnamese contract workers, namely smuggling and other "illegal" activities. However, the contract workers were not simply passive victims of the intelligence service, but also proactively participated in various economic activities in order to improve their living and working conditions in the GDR (Dennis 2005). For example, besides their jobs in East German companies, a number of them bought sewing machines in the GDR and sewed blue jeans and other clothes in their workers' homes for East German citizens. With their earnings, they purchased consumer goods such as textiles, electronics, and household items in the GDR and sent them back to Vietnam, where relatives sold these goods on the black market. Thus contract workers were able to support their spouses, children, and parents, who were not allowed to join them in the host country. In the socialist period, they used their personal and economic networks to maintain transnational connections with friends and relatives in Vietnam as well as with co-ethnics, kin, and former classmates in other socialist East European countries.

These global socialist networks, or what I have called "socialist cosmopolitanism" (Hüwelmeier 2011), were forged and maintained in particular by the sending of consumer goods to the country of origin, which was permitted due to the conditions of the agreement between the GDR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from April 11, 1980, and the new agreement from July 1, 1987. Mrs Ha Nguyen, a former contract worker whom I met in Hanoi, told me that every two years, contract workers prepared huge wooden boxes with consumer goods, such as motorbikes and bicycles, and sent them back to Vietnam. According to Mike Dennis (Dennis 2005: 21), each contract worker in the GDR was allowed to send a package worth 100 East German marks to Vietnam 12 times a year, one duty-free postal shipment without value limit six times a year, and a wooden box of at most two cubic meters and weighing one ton at the end of his or her stay in East Germany. Contract workers who spent their holidays in Vietnam were allowed to take along one crate with a volume of one cubic meter and a weight of half a ton. There were no limits on duty-free shipments sent home until 1989.

Besides their work in state enterprises, Vietnamese were quite busy and successful in "trading" during the socialist period. Similar processes took place in Poland, where thousands of Vietnamese, mostly students, were living before 1989. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) also signed bilateral agreements with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In the socialist period, "a characteristic feature of the Vietnamese ethnic group on the territory of the then CSSR became its illegal trading

in scarce commodities and attractive goods (digital watches, Walkmans, jeans, down jackets etc.), which they sold to the majority population" (Martinkova 2011:134). After 1990, Vietnamese continued to engage in trade in several former socialist countries, as they already knew the places of trade and the business partners.

In the German case, immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, former contract workers from Vietnam started trading on the streets of the eastern part of Berlin. Having lost their jobs as a result of the collapse of the East German socialist regime, they did not know what would happen in the near future, as they no longer had a legal status in the new country, and no money. According to the reports of Vietnamese, they put blankets on the sidewalks to sell everything they bought in the western part of Berlin in the early morning. As consumer goods and textiles were not available in the eastern part of the city, migrants traveled to the west, bought rice cookers, batteries, and electronics, and sold these items within a few hours to people living in eastern Berlin neighborhoods. A number of Vietnamese petty traders purchased their goods, in particular textiles, from Turks who had already established their businesses in the western parts of Berlin.

Before the reunification of Germany took place, in the first year after the fall of the Wall, when everything was "chaotic," trading in the streets of eastern German cities was very popular and, according to many Vietnamese, they earned a lot of money and even labeled it "gold rain." A few years later, a number of them opened small shops, such as food stores or nail studios, in various parts of eastern Berlin. Few Vietnamese established companies, invested money, and built covered markets. They then rented stalls to other traders, mostly to traders from Vietnam, but also from China, India, Pakistan, and Turkey. As a result, some of the Vietnamese became successful entrepreneurs in former socialist countries soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, while others became economically dependent on their former comrades as they were less successful, had limited networks, and only poor language skills.

The manager of the Dong Xuan Center is one such "capitalist." A former contract worker himself, he worked very hard after the collapse of the East German government, traveling to Poland on a regular basis and trading in textiles. During our meeting he also talked about his ideas with regard to a new name for the bazaar. The term *Dong Xuan*, he said, is closely linked to the largest wholesale market in Hanoi. A number of foreign traders in Berlin, however, who come from India or other regions, do not know anything about the Dong Xuan market in Vietnam's capital. In addition, for some traders and customers, Dong Xuan is not easy to pronounce, and so the manager was joking about people calling the market "Don Juan."



He conceptualized the marketplace and its surrounding *Plattenbauten* as a town, comparable to "Chinatown" in various global cities, and pointed to the manifold services in the market, such as hairdressers, tax offices, driving schools, restaurants. As the majority of wholesalers and clients, at least in the very beginning in 2005, were of Vietnamese background, some of them asked the manager to rename the bazaar "Vietnamtown." But, as he explained to me, about 60 per cent of traders are not of Vietnamese background any more, but are from various other areas, mostly from Asia. As a result, the market is a multiethnic place, and if he were to rename the market "Vietnamtown," many traders and customers would complain, and this would probably generate tensions in the marketplace. Instead, the manager was thinking about changing the name to "Asiatown," as this name incorporates various groups of people represented in the bazaar.

## Negotiating diversity and power in post-socialist bazaars

The date of arrival of different groups of migrants and the variety of residence statuses along with power relations in post-socialist bazaars, challenge the somewhat harmonious perspective on marketplaces as sites of encounter and social and economic exchange, as was described in regard to British marketplaces (Watson 2009). Multiethnic bazaars in Berlin, Warsaw and Prague are sites where frictions among various groups of people emerge, places where locals encounter Vietnamese, Chinese, Pakistanis, Indian, Turks, and other people with manifold interests, localities where tensions and frictions are negotiated. The last section of this paper deals with tensions and new solidarities in multi-ethnic surroundings.

Everyday life in post-socialist bazaars is about diversity or "superdiversity" (Vertovec 2007), class and gender issues (Leshkovich 2011), and about a variety of religious practices (Hüwelmeier 2008; 2013b). Further, these places are transnational trading points, linking cities, areas and people. In some of these localities, there is a "lack of transparency," which perhaps is "the essence of this kind of market space" (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009: 71). Post-socialist markets are places where conflicts and new solidarities emerge, as various agents, such as traders, locals, management or state authorities have divergent interests.

Irregular migrants arriving in Europe often visit markets as one of their first acts as they are likely to find somebody there who speaks their language. Similar to peo-

ple coming from Africa or Latin America, thus "resisting the Fortress Europe" (Zontini 2008), many Asians come to Europe illegally via human trafficking networks. It is said that some of the new Vietnamese migrants are working in the Dong Xuan Center in Berlin, and the same rumor has gone round the Warsaw bazaars and the Sapa market in Prague. For the last five years, most of the new Vietnamese migrants arriving in Europe have come from the very poor regions of the middle of Vietnam, and no longer from big cities. In Prague, certain people, in particular Vietnamese with longstanding "socialist connections," mostly those who worked as interpreters during the socialist period, act as middlemen for these migrations. Here again, *socialist pathways of migration* are quite relevant even today. Vietnamese interpreters who studied in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 80s have excellent language skills and to this day maintain distinguished connections to former Czech co-students who now hold high positions in the Czech government. Whether these Vietnamese interpreters still travel to Vietnam and arrange irregular trade routes, thereby cooperating with employees in the Czech embassy in Hanoi, is not clear. But, according to informants, to news magazines and online reports, thousands of visas were issued by the Czech embassy in Hanoi until 2008. Between 2006 and 2008, 14,000 out of 17,000 visas were issued based on bribes, while so-called mediators received 2700 US dollars per visa.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the Czech ministry of the interior stopped all visa assignments in Hanoi until the end of 2008.

For many traders, new dependencies and uncertainties have only recently emerged, partly as a consequence of the EU membership of Poland and the Czech Republic, among others, in 2004, and the extension of the EU's external borders to the Polish-Ukrainian border. I met traders in the Warsaw bazaars who had established their shop at the Polish-German border in the late 1990s, and met others in Prague who had been trading at the Czech-German border. They all complained that business had been quite bad over the last few years, and they ascribed this to the global financial crises and to the expansion of the EU. Today, their shops no longer exist and some of these former traders are now working as employees in the stalls of other traders in the Warsaw or the Prague bazaars.

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11 "Globus Visa Schlupfloch Aid", *FOCUS Magazin*, Nr. 52, 20 December 2008, [http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/globus-visa-schlupfloch\\_aid\\_357012.html](http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/globus-visa-schlupfloch_aid_357012.html), accessed 9 August 2012. See also [www.migrationonline.cz](http://www.migrationonline.cz), accessed 8 August 2012.

## State authorities and marketplaces

Power struggles between state authorities and people in the marketplace are part of the everyday life in bazaars. In Berlin, police raids happen in the Dong Xuan Center at night because of illegal gambling. During my fieldwork in 2012, I noticed police cars on the grounds of the bazaar and police officers in the Dong Xuan Center in Berlin, controlling people's passports. Simultaneously, but unnoticed by the police, Vietnamese, mostly women with small goods, entered the halls of the market to sell leather jackets, blue jeans, and other consumer goods in big bags in the aisles of the halls, without renting a stall. Everybody who is familiar with the market recognizes people with this kind of goods, and some even ask them whether they have special "deals" that day. Other people go so far as to place special orders, such as for watches, asking these "traders" to bring the wares another day. Some Vietnamese sit in front of the halls, outside, selling shampoo and beauty products such as lipsticks and nail polish hidden in plastic bags. For people without papers, this is one of the ways to economically survive in the host country. In Warsaw and Berlin, Vietnamese and other migrants are to be seen in the streets of the inner city or in special places, selling undeclared cigarettes hidden in plastic bags.

In Prague a number of conflicts arose between the market management and the mayor of the district in Prague Libus. For a long time, there was almost no contact between people working in the bazaar and locals living in the neighborhood. However, when Vietnamese began to purchase houses or apartments near the bazaar in the last few years, they got in touch with neighbors, schools, and kindergartens. According to Vietnamese traders, relationships to Czech neighbors are friendly. But some local politicians are quite critical towards the bazaar and the people working there. In particular due to a large fire in 2007, the bazaar became a big issue in the Czech press with negative reactions from some people. As the mayor told me in an interview, since then the bazaar has begun to slowly open its doors towards the public, in order to do damage control against negative press. Some events, such as a "children's day", are organized collectively by the market management and politicians for residents and traders in Prague Libus.

In order to further smooth the interactions between the traders and the host society, the district of Prague Libus organized, together with people responsible for integration issues, EU-financed economics courses for immigrants. The aim was to give more information on how to open a business, how to obey Czech rules with regard, for example, to hygiene, and how to deal with tax issues. All courses took place in

separate language groups, for Vietnamese, Chinese, and Russian speakers, respectively. I was part of a ceremony in which all participants, mostly traders, were present in order to receive their certificate for completing the course. The representatives of the Sapa market, the mayor, members of the embassies of the respective countries, and other official people took part as well. Each of the participants in the course I spoke with appreciated their participation and reported that they had learned many new aspects with regard to trading rules in the Czech Republic. Yet, although these courses aimed to improve economic integration as part of integration in general, the participants of the various language groups did not come into contact with the other groups during the courses and gathered collectively only for the closing ceremony.

While some of the local authorities approach Vietnamese and other immigrant entrepreneurs in markets in order to foster relationships between them and the city, others do not support the market or the presence of foreigners. The deputy mayor in Prague, for example, had been removed from office just two months before my visit due to xenophobic comments she made. She herself lives in the district in which the Sapa market is located, and complains about the thousands of cars that drive through the area on a daily basis to and from the market. According to the mayor of Prague Libus, many locals in his district complain about the noise and fumes from the many cars and trucks. The municipal administration is now planning a new bypass road so as to avoid these kinds of problems in the future. In other countries, such as in Ukraine, conflicts between the city of Odessa and market owners emerged about compensation for unpaid rent (about 100 Million US dollars) for what was supposedly city land (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009:70).

Security in particular is a big issue in post-socialist bazaars. In all of the places I visited, I noticed practices of surveillance, such as cameras being installed in the halls and in many stalls. In addition, security guards, hired by the market management and dressed in uniforms, can be observed throughout the markets. In Warsaw as well as in the Prague and Berlin bazaars, fences and gates symbolize the borders of the marketplace. While the security guards are part of the internal hierarchy of the bazaars, police and customs officers on the grounds of the markets are part of the external power structure, but still closely connected to the internal hierarchies, and as such their presence does have an impact on the internal hierarchies as well.

Conflicts within marketplaces challenge the sometimes "exotic" image of these localities. In the bazaars near Warsaw, for example, tensions between Chinese and Vietnamese emerged when the Chinese management of one of the three huge bazaars in this locality raised the prices for the rent of the stalls. As a result, market traders

organized protests in 2009, 2010, and 2011, and even carried out a strike for one day. On that day, Polish, Turkish, Vietnamese and even some Chinese traders participated in blocking the main road to the wholesale area. Security guards, financed by the Chinese management, used batons and teargas to break up the demonstrations. This protest highlighted the fact that migrants from various backgrounds are willing to gather collectively in a host country to protest against unjust rent increases by the management, in this case, against the Chinese manager of one of the wholesale markets in Poland. Political agency among migrants is well known from other countries and other sectors as well (Constable 2007; Zontini 2008). When it comes to issues such as power and class – in this case the Chinese management, on the one hand, and the political protest of a multi-ethnic group of traders, on the other hand – different status groups do not share the same interests.

## Conclusion

Different from open-air markets in communist times and from a number of markets that were established after the breakdown of communism in 1990 in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, new post-socialist bazaars in Berlin, Warsaw and Prague were established by migrants, not by locals. Although the current freedom of movement between countries and new technologies help people maintain and strengthen cross-border ties, many transnational connections in post-socialist marketplaces are based on previously established *socialist pathways of migration*. Prior to the breakdown of communism, economic transactions formed part of migrants' experiences in a number of socialist states, in particular between those countries that signed bilateral labor agreements, such as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the GDR. These agreements contributed to the emergence of transnational ties, not linked to neoliberal capitalism, but to cold war political alliances. Thus, ethnographic research in post-socialist bazaars highlights the relationship between transnational networks in the cold war period and post-socialism.

Cross-border relations continued to be quite important for Vietnamese migrants in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall due to networks previously created during the socialist period, which the migrants reactivated and intensified after the reunification of Germany, and have maintained and fostered up to the present. Multi-ethnic wholesale markets in the eastern part of Berlin as well as in Warsaw and Prague are

places where bargaining and trading take place among various groups of migrants and locals. Besides the goods on offer in the markets, a number of services also attract individual visitors. Manifold ways of encounter and exchange exist on the grounds of post-socialist bazaars, such as healing, performing religious practices, gambling, and celebrating wedding parties. Beauty shops, medical treatment, and economic exchange exist side by side in these cosmopolitan places. Hence, marketplaces in post-socialist countries are localities of intense social interaction. They are not "non places" (Augé 1995), where people are anonymous, "but are a new type of trading nexus and yet these huge sites are very much *places*" (Humphrey and Skivirskaja 2009: 62), where face-to-face relations between buyers and sellers, migrants and locals contribute to cooperation, conflict and new solidarities.

The fall of the Berlin Wall shifted transnational connections, as family reunion policies, new technologies, and travel resulted in new trade ties and the intensification of economic activities for many migrants in post-socialist countries. On the other hand, power relations emerged among various groups in marketplaces due to the implementation of new legal categories after 1990. Residence status, citizenship regimes, tax rules, business registration systems, money, and the arrival of different groups of new migrants altered social and economic relationships. Further ethnographic research in post-socialist bazaars will contribute to an understanding of the continuities and differences between the socialist past and the post-socialist present. Thus, post-socialist bazaars, conceptualized as nodes of cross-border activities and as localities of cultural diversity, play an important role in the process of coexisting across national, religious, and ethnic differences.

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