

“Getting By” at the Urban Periphery: Everyday Struggles of Informal Merchants in Tunisia

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The article examines the significance of informal economic practices, e.g. street vending and informal commerce, for young merchants from Ettadhamen, a neighborhood situated in the northwestern periphery of the Greater Tunis area. It further addresses cross-border trade in the Tunisian-Libyan and Tunisian-Algerian border regions in which some of these merchants are indirectly involved. Peripheralization therefore does not imply complete socio-spatial exclusion. Peripheries rather offer important, albeit limited possibilities, to acquire resources through

practices that are situated in the interstices between legality and illegality. As these possibilities often avoid state regulation and control, the article also addresses the ambivalent nature of the state-society relations that shapes everyday encounters between inhabitants and state agents, especially the police.

Keywords: Tunisia; Urban Periphery; State-Society Relations; Post-Revolutionary Transformation; Informal Commerce

This article examines different tactics among young, informal traders in Tunisia coping with insecurity from a peripheral position in urban life. Such tactics (De Certeau) involve multiple forms of informal economic practices, such as street vending and cross-border trade. These tactical practices must be seen in light of changing structural conditions, which have resulted in the wake of the revolution that followed the revolts in December 2010 and January 2011. The article analyzes both everyday forms of popular agency as well as their relationship with the government and the effects of state power. The empirical case studies result from field research in the popular, peri-urban neighborhood of Ettadhamen, in the northwestern fringes of the Tunisian capital. The research was conducted between 2012 and 2013.¹

Peripheries and Marginality: A Conceptual Approach

Although Loïc Wacquant's concept of advanced marginality draws upon insights from the American ghetto and the French banlieue, i.e. zones of urban relegation within societies of the Global North, several of his outlined dynamics can also be applied to urban peripheries in Tunisia. In the case of Ettadhamen, this holds for the territorial containment of lower and mid-

dle class populations in a peri-urban district that is insufficiently integrated into the national economy and the regular wage labor sector. Peripheralization is thus the effect of a spatially ingrained social order that has been produced through both uneven economic development and the governmentality of the Tunisian state. While this order was shaped under the regimes of Ben Ali and Habib Bourguiba, it has roots in the colonial period.

Aside from its spatial dimension, peripheralization and marginalization have particularly affected specific societal groups. In a society characterized by deeply entrenched inequalities, instead of maintaining one homogenous working class, processes of neoliberal restructuring have produced fragmented forms of precariousness, social differentiation and exclusion. Unemployed youth, female household workers, casual informal workers and street children belong to such “precarized” groups. They not only face unemployment or unstable and precarious employment conditions. They are also positioned on the margins of the otherwise solid social security system in Tunisia (Destremeau; Ben Cheikh 2). Since they lack both formalized employment conditions and a sufficient and stable income, which would allow them to make contributions to social security

funds, they often do not have access to social protection.

Peripheries can also be spaces where everyday informal practices take root in the niches of a dominant socio-political order that is maintained by powerful social groups and their interests. Looking at everyday modes of tactical action, one can discover the creativity of peripheries and margins as they not only entail passive submission but also employ different forms of popular agency from below (Bayat, “Marginality” 19). Based on her important study on Favelados in Rio de Janeiro, Janice Perlman argues that marginality constitutes a myth in the sense that it mistakes systematic exclusion and stigmatization for being passively marginal (131). By the same token, she also points out that in spite of systematic exclusion, different forms of internal socio-political organization and cooperation, which are based on solidarity, exist in the proximity relations between friends and neighbors in the Favelas (142). Marginalization and peripheralization are not only a curse but also as an opportunity where excluded groups can survive and overcome economic constraints (Bayat, “Marginality” 14). The constitution of the marginal or the peripheral does not necessarily follow the logic of total exclusion (Yúdice 214). Despite their marginalized positions, peripheries are often sites

where the state’s power and its borders are contested and reconfigured and where informal channels, parallel networks and transnational economic flows perpetuate connections with the global world economy (Roitman 195). Albeit on a small scale, the empirical cases of informal merchants in the wake of the Tunisian revolution will demonstrate that informal practices can persist despite the center’s dominance. Although these informal practices primarily aim at coping with the insecurities, risks and constraints that result from a peripheral position, they produce forms of survivalism and self-organization that largely avoid dominant structures and institutions. Such informal economic practices and the formal system, which is to a greater extent structured by official rules, exist side by side in Ettadhamen.

Ettadhamen: Contested Urban Space in the Periphery of Greater Tunis

Ettadhamen was created under the rule of Bourguiba in 1966 as a public program that provided social housing for rural migrants and was given the name *al-taḍāmun* (“solidarity”). Between 1975 and 1984 it witnessed considerable population growth due to the influx of intra-urban migrants who came from the Medina and from *gourbivilles* (“spontaneous agglomerations”) inside the city of

Tunis (ARRU 24). This development was in contrast to the situation of older informal neighborhoods that had come into being through rural exodus. It was thus the result of a redistribution of populations within the capital (Laroussi 45). Most of these residential migrants (56.4 percent) were also former rural migrants who originated from northwestern Tunisia, a traditional agricultural region, which contains the High Tell Mountains along with Beja, Jendouba and Le Kef as the most important cities (Chabbi, "L'Habitat spontané" 25; "Une Nouvelle forme" 90; "Urbanisation spontanée" 181). In view of this historical background, Ettadhamen serves as an example for the proliferation of "fringe urban communities" (Ali and Rieker 3) whose members were situated in the peripheries of larger cities negotiating and reproducing the rural-urban nexus (2). In the late 1970s, the insecure conditions of habitation in the neighborhood prompted the Tunisian state agencies to implement a number of urban planning projects that aimed to regulate real estate and improve infrastructure. These projects were partially financed through a credit from the World Bank (Chabbi, "Pratiques et logiques"). Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher were the priority zones of these policy efforts that now put a greater emphasis on the development of the

republic's *zones d'ombre* ("shadow zones") and the integration of marginalized, *sha'abī* ("popular") classes. However, despite significant infrastructural improvements, problems such as unemployment, crime, insufficient housing, and the socio-spatial segregation of the neighborhood not only persisted but rather increased (ARRU 55).

In 2012, the population of Ettadhamen in the Ariana governorate was 142,000 while the surrounding neighborhoods Douar Hicher and Mnihla counted 157,000 inhabitants. In total, these three neighborhoods comprised 300,000 inhabitants, which made it one of the most populated peri-urban agglomerations in North Africa (Chabbi, "Une Nouvelle forme" 168). In January 2011, it was one of the first neighborhoods within the capital where mobilizations of youth, most of whom were unemployed, targeted local police stations. The protests also entailed acts of pillage and sabotage. The three major industrial sites and the *maison des jeunes* ("youth center") were burned down by protesters. Moreover, a number of stores were looted and destroyed. However, in the aftermath of the protests, local youth took responsibility for security in the neighborhood by organizing local committees. These informal patrols called *lijān sha'abiyya* ("popular committees") used

the already existing networks in the neighborhood (Allal 59). They temporarily adopted a policing function in an effort to control the neighborhood's unsafe conditions. Ever since the fall of the regime enforcement of both security measures and public services that should be provided by local authorities such as the police and the municipality have been neglected. Self-organization and local networks, for example organizations belonging to the Salafi movement, constitute parallel structures of social regulation and control. Clashes between young, unemployed people and security forces have given Ettadhamen the label of a lawless zone where control mechanisms by state agents and institutions are limited (Belhassine). However, since August 2013, when the organization *Ansar al-Sharia* was classified as a terrorist group, security measures have been reinforced and several activists belonging to the militant branch of the Salafi movement have been arrested.²

Ettadhamen is predominantly a residential area due to modest infrastructure and lack of industrial production (ENDA 12). Spatial segregation and the proliferation of informal housing structure through illegal subdivisions did not favor the attraction of economic investments. Therefore, as public sector jobs were inaccessible for the

majority, the neighborhood Ettadhamen-Douar Hicher had already witnessed the dispersion of informal activities and services by 1980. By 1995, a rising number of households had invested in commercial activities. Many transformed one room of their house into an economic establishment for a particular kind of activity, mostly commerce-related. Most of the retail stores and commercial establishments are now concentrated around the main streets, 105th Street, 106th Street, Ibn Khaldun Street and the road leading from Tunis to Bizerte. 105th Street is characterized by a great number of informal side streets and ambulant vendors who mostly come from the vicinity. They predominantly sell vegetables, fruits, decor, household equipments, electronic appliances and *friperie* (very cheap, second-hand clothing which is distributed in bales). Local clients frequently buy from these vendors because they can negotiate cheaper prices. The small stores primarily offer low-value goods of modest quality that are suitable to the resources of the low-income strata in a popular neighborhood. If casual labor has regressed, commerce activities have greatly increased in the neighborhood, especially among the younger generation. According to a 2014 survey among 714 youth aged between 18-34 from Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen,

27.8 percent were self-employed as artisans or small merchants, and 20.3 percent were employed in commerce (International Alert 11). Moreover, the informal economy plays a significant role in Ettadhamen (Lamloum and Ben Zina 15). Like in many other popular neighborhoods informal commercial activities are connected to translocal circuits and flows of economic goods that extend to other areas and markets in the country.

The police in Ettadhamen tolerate these activities, which are illegal in terms of state regulations, and turn a blind eye towards the fact that these informal vendors do not hold the proper licenses to legalize their business (Police officer). One of the reasons why the state, to a great extent, tolerated informal economic activities, specifically informal commerce, before the Tunisian revolution in 2011, can be seen in its determination to depoliticize and appease poor populations in order to contain social unrest (Meddeb, "La Tunisie" 73). Although informal practices undermined the rule of law and bureaucratic norms, they were mostly in accordance with the logic of the police state and the security order. As Béatrice Hibou points out, the state's *laissez-faire* approach was one of the disciplinary techniques of power that was deeply entrenched in the patronage-system under Ben Ali (187).

However, to the Tunisian regime tolerating informal commerce also implied controlling it. Since the ruling family clan of the Trabelsi was keen on siphoning off profits for itself, the Tunisian authorities occasionally intervened. The municipal police in Tunis would carry out raids against street vendors and confiscate their products or take away scales from merchants selling fruits and vegetables if they were not willing to pay bribes. Ibrahim, a 23 years old retail trader working in the store of his parents on 105th Street in Ettadhamen refers to the situation prior to January 14, 2011:

Q: How did the authorities deal with independent commerce before the revolution?

A: Commerce was allowed, but the Trabelsi family intervened in it. They were the big ones who delivered all kinds of goods to the other small merchants. They were the ones who imported these kinds of goods. From China. They also demanded bribes (*rashwa*). First they were the ones who sold you their goods. And then they would also demand bribe money. They were big traders. We didn't deal with them directly. The police demanded the bribes every month. (Ibrahim)

The revolution brought about a greater degree of freedom in public life. The retrenchment of the security apparatus

allowed for the expansion of informal commerce as the enormous spreading of street vendors, many of them very young, in public places, e.g. squares, big avenues and around mosques, demonstrates (Ben Mahmoud). Controversial discussions about how to regulate the informal economy have been occurring ever since the fall of the regime in January 2011 and the beginning of the political transition process that followed. While most state officials see informality as a necessary evil, tradesmen from the formal sector complain about the negative effects on their own businesses; although, they sometimes benefit from the informal distribution networks as well. Since May 2011, the official policy of the government aims to curb informal activities due to their negative effects on the productive sectors and the price level (SlateAfrique). On August 26 2011, the ministry of the interior passed a resolution that banned illegal street vending starting in September 2011. Any street vendor selling goods would be forced to pay a fine (Gamha). However, restrictive laws and regulations are often not implemented on the ground.

Everyday Struggles of "Getting By:" Individual Cases

The following cases are meant to illuminate the everyday struggles of local inhab-

itants from Ettadhamen as they work to make a living (*al-ma'īsha*) and to secure their economic survival at the urban periphery. At the same time, they point to the ambivalent relationship with the state, in particular its local manifestations such as the municipality (*al-baladaiyya*), fiscal authorities (*qabāḍa māliyya*), the police (*al-ḥākim*) or the employment center (*maktab al-tashghil*). At the local level of peripheral areas, the boundaries between state and society are often more porous and permeable (Mitchell), which may lead to both immediate conflict and mediation. Despite the fact that they occupy marginal positions and belong to a marginalized population, the actors are capable of developing informal tactics that use the few economic opportunities available in a spatially segregated and economically relegated neighborhood at the periphery. Furthermore they draw from access to local networks of solidarity based on kinship, friendship and vicinity. The high significance of work as a fundamental social value and as an obligatory source of revenue explains why many young people resort to informal activities, even if the absorptive capacities of the informal economy are thereby increasingly stretched.

Economic Survival in Face of State Control in Everyday Life

The situation of street vendors in Ettadhamen, like in other neighborhoods and informal markets of the city, has always been highly insecure, especially under the regime of Ben Ali. Informal vending circuits are widespread across the city since they allow for the circulation of perishable foodstuffs such as fruits and vegetables or low quality goods, for example cheap clothing and household equipment, which the formal circuits cannot easily provide at such localities. While street vending is often practiced without any kind of formalization or licensing and provides a source of income for those who are unqualified and do not have a chance to find a regular and formal job, it involves the risk of facing controls by the municipality police.³ The French expression for street vendors *vendeurs à la sauvette* ("vendors on the run"), which is widely used in Tunisia, alludes to this risk and the need to run away from the police. The account of Abderrahim shows the severe impact of such controls on the livelihood of a self-employed, informal merchant. Being the son of a construction worker from a town in northern Tunisia, he went to primary school until the age of 14. He then quit school and started searching for a job due to financial constraints within the fam-

ily. However, he could only find jobs as a *'āmil yaumī* ("casual laborer") and was unemployed most of the time before he started working as a painter. One of his colleagues put him into touch with a private company employing 45 workers. Abderrahim obtained a permanent employment contract, but it did not include social security benefits. Through this job, he earned a monthly salary of 480 DT—slightly above the SMIG⁴—for working eight hours per day.⁵ However, when he became exhausted through this kind of hard, physical work he searched for an alternative. He invested the savings from his job (500 DT) into the creation of a street vending business for selling fruits. Every other day he rented an informal transport car and went to the wholesale market in Bir Qas'ā in the southern suburb of the capital Ben Arous, where he bought peaches, bananas, apples and almonds in order to sell them on a public square near Ettadhamen. However, he always feared controls by the authorities which, before January 2011, regularly interfered in this kind of informal, non-licensed street vending. The police of the municipality came four times to disperse his vending stall and confiscate his goods and scales. Knowing that the police sometimes accepted bribes he unsuccessfully tried to stop them by offering

money: "What else can I do if not this kind of work? Where can I work if not here? Why did they come to disperse? It's not reasonable" (Abderrahim). Afterwards, Abderrahim was compelled to start from scratch again and spend his savings on acquiring new equipment and new goods. He mentioned that since the regime collapsed, there were no more raids by the municipality police. However, it has become much more difficult for him to make a living through this activity because of an overall higher price level in the country and because of a decrease in profit margins. Abderrahim's case shows how visible informal practices, which take place openly in public space and which the authorities usually tolerate, can at certain instances be subdued by controls and repressive measures. His perspective also reveals that local actors consider these practices, which are illegal according to official law, as legitimate or licit for the simple reason that they constitute their sole source of income. Therefore, the degree of toleration by the authorities has increased since the regime's collapse. Controls, bribe extortions, dispossessions and other repressive measures have been reduced but have not completely vanished. Ibrahim, the retail trader on 105th Street, explains what he thinks

are the reasons for this changed policy vis-à-vis street vendors:

Because of the economic situation, the state does not persecute them very much. Unemployment has increased after the revolution. It's better they do street vending than stealing things. There are priorities and there are concessions. The state allows for *intiṣāb faḍawī* ("street vending"), so that crime and thefts won't increase in the country. Before the revolution there was more control on street vending. It was part of the suppressive regime under Ben Ali. All the people had to be afraid of the police. (Ibrahim)

Between Control and Laissez-Faire: Stakes and Risks of Cross-Border Trade

While the majority of street vendors do not hold a permit and thus occupy a completely informal status, most of the retail traders usually possess both a license from the municipality for their store and a permit for paying taxes. However, the goods they commercialize are often not formally acquired but rather originate from informal circuits that are connected to trans-local networks of cross-border trade and smuggling. The merchants from popular neighborhoods in the periphery of Greater Tunis—among them street vendors, ambulant vendors and retail trad-

ers—usually acquire these smuggled goods at local markets such as Sidi Boumendil or Melassine in Tunis. Some also travel to markets in cities close to the border, for example Ben Guerdane near the Tunisian-Libyan border and Kasserine near the Tunisian-Algerian border.⁶ At these markets they purchase cheap merchandise that is mostly produced in China and Southeast Asia (Meddeb, Courir ou mourir 36). In 1988, the opening of the frontier between Libya and Tunisia at the border posts, Ras Jedir and Dhhiba, considerably accentuated the exchanges of both economic goods and human beings between the two countries. This holds in particular for the activities of ambulant merchants, which has led to an explosion of informal commerce in the Tunisian-Libyan border region (governorates of Medenine and Tataouine) due to the importation of cheap manufactured products into Tunisia (tobacco, electronic devices, car equipment, beauty products, household equipment, decor, clothing). Having arrived on Tunisian soil, the goods are later distributed by wholesalers via extensive networks to informal markets—so-called *souk libya*—all across the country (Boubakri 242-43). These cross-border exchanges can reach outstanding monetary value. In 2013, the annual value

of goods loaded at the point of purchase that passed through the border post, Ras Jedir, was estimated at 467.47 millions DT (Ayadi et al. 17). As for the Tunisian-Algerian border region, smuggling has greatly increased since 2011, in particular the trafficking of Algerian fuels which are approximately ten times cheaper than Tunisian fuels (21).

Ibrahim refers to this ambivalent legal situation of commercializing goods that originate from cross-border trade in the case of his parents' retail business. When he was 23, he successfully passed the baccalaureate exam and pursued his studies at the University of La Manouba. After three months of studying, he quit university because he was unsatisfied with the studying conditions and the low value of the certificate that would have left him with poor job perspectives. Instead, he started working in a retail store on one of the major avenues in Ettadhamen, which is owned by his parents, and sold household equipment and decor materials to local clients from the neighborhood. He points out that before the Tunisian revolution he went to acquire the goods in Ben Guerdane. However, since the civil war in Libya in 2011 and the resulting deterioration of security conditions in the border regions, the supply of available goods has decreased, prices

for smuggled goods have risen considerably and border controls have intensified due to the proliferation of the illegal arms trade.⁷ Therefore, his family prefers to purchase the merchandise in Algeria or from the informal market in Kasserine. Ibrahim explains how the authorities regulate this form of retail trading business and how he deals with police controls:

Q: Do you have a permit for this store?

A: Yes, we have one. A *ruḥṣa* (“license”) from the municipality and a *batinda* (“permit”) for paying taxes. We pay taxes on the income. I give you an example. If your income is 2,000 DT you pay a percentage of it as a tax on your income. The police of the municipality or the price control can ask: “Do you have a license and bills?” If not, they confiscate your goods, saying that they are stolen because there is no what we call *legal origin*. They are considered stolen or smuggled goods. That's why you need the bills. If you buy goods from over there [Algeria] you ask them for a bill. The police waits at the customs. If you don't have bills they demand bribes from you. And the bills don't even have any value. You bring back the bills for two things. The other one is the *murāqaba iqtisādiyya* (“economic control”) of the store. Someone from customs comes here and carries

out a control. They ask for the bills for different goods. So you have to give them the bills. If you don't have a bill they will assume that the goods are either stolen or smuggled. (Ibrahim)

As Ibrahim insinuates, false documentation can be used as a means to give informal practices the appearance of legality. Similar to wholesale traders, who possess formal enterprises and deal with huge quantities of imported goods, retail traders partially operate in informally. Their businesses are formalized, but they frequently engage in informal practices such as irregular acquisitions of goods, non-declaration and tax evasion (Laroussi 182). Informal activities related to cross-border trade constitute both regional border economies and the networks of distribution and consumption of goods that reach across the republic. They are situated in an interstice between legality and illegality.⁸ Cross-border trade is considered legitimate in the eyes of the actors involved, who use it as a means to assure their *khobza* ("daily bread"), their economic security and a decent standard of living (Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir* 43). Although cross-border trade represents, for the majority, an economy of "getting by" and coping with insecurity rather than financial accumulation, it may also offer the chance to achieve social upward mobility. It is thus

less about opposing state regulation in general and rather more about the demand for the right to have an alternative to the state's monopoly (49). This, however, also implies that the border is not a marginalized, segregated space but rather a source of revenue and subsistence in the country's peripheries (44).

It is often not easy to distinguish between the different actors involved in the networks of cross-border trade, i.e. merchants, traffickers, transporters, carriers, consumers or simple travelers. In the case of the merchants from Ettadhamen many of them are part of the numerous street vendors, small, itinerant traders and occasional merchants with modest financial means called *fourmis* ("ants") (Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir* 59; World Bank 4). These small merchants travel individually or as part of an organized group trip to informal markets in the Tunisian-Libyan border region, where they carry out their purchases (Meddeb, "*Courir ou mourir*" 55). At these markets, they can seize spontaneous opportunities for lucrative sales offers. They mostly buy electronic devices, household equipment or clothing. The latter can be divided into fripes and high quality, fashionable prêt-à-porter outfits, which are sold on the *souk libya* for relatively attractive prices. Usama, a thirty years old ambulant merchant from

Ettadhamen, describes how such trips to Ben Guerdane are arranged and how he organizes his trading activity:

For buying the products, I always went to Ben Guerdane. The first time I went there was for three days. I went together with the other merchants, with a group. They rent a car, they go there and come back. Everyone spends the money he or she has and brings back the products. There are some people who organize trips to Ben Guerdane - people who offer you a bus and a driver to bring you there for a special sum. I paid 40 DT. Roundtrip. I got to know these merchants here in Hay Ettadhamen. For going to Ben Guerdane, you leave in the evening and you arrive there the morning after. You go to the big market over there, and you buy your goods. I always bought furniture, electronic devices, appliances that you need for houses, for example stereo systems, cooking systems, ovens, microwaves, sometimes also washing machines. All the things that you need for the house. People would give me money and ask me to bring back something for them, for example a washing machine. Whenever I went I made a list of the things that I needed to bring back. A friend or a neighbor would come and tell me: "Buy me a washing machine or a micro-

wave." I brought them the things and they paid me afterwards. I buy the washing machine for 60 DT and I sell it for 100 DT. Of course, I bought other things at the same time, for example clothing. I keep those goods in the house. I went many, many times to Ben Guerdane. More than thirty times. (Usama)

These kinds of commercial trips also bear the risk of getting caught in controls by the police, by customs or by the *garde nationale*. Under the regime of Ben Ali, the organizers of these group journeys had to legitimate such trips through licenses obtained from local cells of the ruling single party RCD (Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir* 174). Those who travelled without any form of legalization needed to be prepared to bribe police and custom agents. Usama recalls:

Before, I always had to pay bribes on the way back to Tunis. All the merchants have to pay. They give a sum of money to the custom service, so that they let you pass with your goods. Each time a sum like 300 DT. For all of the merchants. Me, I pay something like 50 DT each time, sometimes 100 DT. It happens on the road from Ben Guerdane to Tunis. Because when you leave Ben Guerdane, you don't talk to the custom service. The patrols stop you on the

road. Sometimes they even stop you in Kairouan. (Usama)

As Usama points out, controls and bribe extortions have decreased since the regime collapsed. Personalized exchange relations based on a clientelistic rapport between transporters or smugglers and state agents minimize the risk of having to face imposed penalties. The interaction between small merchants and state agents is ambivalent. Rather than following generalized, pre-defined rules, it is a negotiated bargain that results from face-to-face encounters. On the side of the authorities it involves both a strategy of *laissez-faire* as well as moments of control and intervention in order to partially reinstate state power. In the interactions among merchants, transporters and smugglers personal connections are built through repeated transactions in order to foster trust and overcome the risk of being cheated.

Conclusions

The case studies have illustrated multiple tactical modes of how informal merchants from Ettadhamen cope with insecurity at the urban periphery. They point to both challenges as well as possibilities to turn constraints into opportunities. Peripheralization, therefore, does not imply a complete socio-spatial exclusion but rather an

integration under unequal terms. Peripheries bear some potential to gain autonomy and acquire resources, even if in most cases these potentials are very limited. This holds true for those local street and ambulant vendors in Ettadhamen, who circulate across the urban system of Tunis or who travel to border regions in order to seek opportunities for purchasing merchandise. Such potential opportunities, however, come with high risks and new constraints as these merchants have to struggle with decreasing profit margins, limited capital for investment and controls by police and customs officers.

The informal practices that inhabitants from Ettadhamen engage in are situated on the margins of legality; the limited degree of state intervention in Ettadhamen or the porosity of the borders to Libya and Algeria can be seen as representing the peripheralization of state power, which thereby allows for the proliferation of informal practices positioned in an interstice between legality and illegality. The relation between the state or its local manifestations and the informal merchants are ambivalent. They may shift from one moment to another when external conditions change and arrangements are disturbed. Despite a weakening of the state apparatus in the wake of January 2011, it is far from being powerless as its

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agents continue to occasionally intervene in informal practices. Since 2013 the country has actually witnessed a gradual reinforcement of security measures, especially in the border regions. Even the most subordinated actors of the informal economy, young ambulant merchants or street vendors, who conceive state power at times as absent, inert, arbitrary or repressive, still interact in their everyday circulations with the state's local representatives and agents. Informal merchants do not necessarily refuse its authority in principle. Many

are willing to abide by the law, but they contest specific modes of power exertion (controls, confiscations, bribe extortions) or demand the re-adjustment of legal regulations, so that they can carry out practices that they consider to be licit in view of their material conditions. In particular, when these conditions are put at risk, subjectivities of dissent and even social unrest are likely to occur. For many informal merchants, inclusion into the formal system can be desirable if it provides access to social protection. However, it is only a via-

ble option if it does not entail a total loss of autonomy and deprivation of vital opportunities, which semi-legal practices in peripheral areas can offer. These microscopic social struggles over access to resources, although not directly linked to moments of open protest, constitute an everyday socio-spatial context in the urban peripheries from which local micro-politics can emerge.

Notes

¹ The data of this article consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews, which I conducted with informal workers and merchants in Ettadhamen in June and July 2012. More recent developments cannot be taken into account in this article.

² Salafis are part of local, territorialized networks of the neighborhood (*hūma*), which play an important role in organizing informal commerce. Due to space constraints, however, their role cannot be addressed in detail here.

³ According to a survey by the Tunisian Association for Management and Social Stability (TAMSS) and the Global Fairness Initiative (GFI), nearly 70 percent of independent, informal workers do not hold a license, and only 8 percent declared that they pay taxes (municipal or other taxes) (Global Fairness Initiative 42).

⁴ *Salaire minimum interprofessionnel garanti* ("minimum wage").

⁵ In July 2012, the SMIG was 320 DT (Business News). According to a study conducted by TAMSS and GFI with 1,203 informal workers from different regions in Tunisia, more than two-thirds (72.5 percent) of the households of informal workers earn a monthly income of less than 600 DT, 15 percent earn between 600 and 799 DT, 22.3 percent between 400 and 599 DT, 35.7 percent between 200 and 399 DT and 14.4 percent earn less than 200 DT (Global Fairness Initiative 13).

⁶ Unlike Ben Guerdane near the Tunisian-Libyan border or Kasserine near the Tunisian-Algerian border the neighborhood Ettadhamen, situated in the northwestern periphery of the Greater Tunis area, does not rank among the most significant centers for smuggling circuits. However, several informal merchants are directly or indirectly involved in informal transport and distribution networks. The smuggling of illegal goods such as drugs and arms is not dealt with in this article.

⁷ Smuggling of both narcotics and arms existed already before January 14th but has increased considerably since that time, because controls by police, custom officers and *garde nationale* have loosened or even disappeared in some areas of the border regions (International Crisis Group 15).

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→ ⁸ Van Schendel frames such a liminal status as "illegal but licit" and refers to the fact that they are illegal according to official law but considered acceptable ("licit") by the actors themselves while states simultaneously condemn and partake in them.

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