

Mob Justice and 'The Civilized Commodity'

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Developing a theory around ‘the civilized commodity’ we examine agrarian crises and the resulting ‘mob violence’ affecting high-value global commodities, including the vanilla market boom of Madagascar. We illustrate how producers labour under fraught conditions of violence, uncertainty, and contradictory claims of moral economy and ‘street justice’. The underlying question - what counts as justice and to whom - highlights broader arguments regarding the ‘moral hyper-proximity’ of producer-consumer relations, and the strategies of state and market actors to circulate ‘civilized’ visions for the systemic and future governance over commodity landscapes. Calls by state and market agencies for a return to ‘law and order,’ however, obscure the structural, political, and economic inequities faced by smallholders in their ‘everyday’ production of commodities under periodic crisis.

1. Introduction: Commodity Theft, Justice and ‘The Mob’

It was July of 2017, and we were packed into a village home located in the heart of Madagascar’s northeast ‘vanilla triangle’ trying to get some idea of the effects of the price spike on local vanilla growers.¹ Vanilla bean prices had reached upwards of \$600 a kilogram, representing nearly a 16-fold price increase to rural vanilla producers since 2013. As may be expected in such a boom market, the first thing we noticed about the price spike was the new wealth it brought to the area, as everywhere we looked we saw recently purchased consumer goods, including off-mark Chinese motorbikes, flashy neon-colored sofas, tin roofing and solar panels.²

However, alongside this newly found wealth came a wave of insecurity and anxiousness, as farmers spoke of sleepless nights in their vanilla fields attempting to ward off thieves who wanted to cash in on the high prices. In fact, security concerns overwhelmed our conversations. The head of one growers’ association, Joseph, stressed, ‘...that when there’s a lot of money in the area, there is theft’, and when a thief is caught, more times than not, farmers are compelled to ‘...take matters into their own hands’.³ When asked why they do not just call the police (*gendarmes*), another grower, Henri, grumbled: ‘we do not trust the *gendarmes*...they are the ones who sell guns to the *dahalo* [local bandits]’. We then asked what they do if they caught a

¹ The ‘we’ here includes the first and fourth author, only. The northeast coastal towns of Sambava, Antalaha, Vohemar and Andapa (SAVA) are center of vanilla-production in Madagascar.

² It is the country’s primary export crop with proceeds of up to \$800 million. For more on the material effects on local consumption patterns of the vanilla price spike see Zhu 2018.

³ Anonymous interviews (July 16 2017).

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3 dahalo stealing their vanilla. Joseph replied with a straight but rather deadpan expression, ‘dead
4 immediately’.
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6 Although Joseph’s statement was particularly blunt, there is no shortage of such stories of
7 ‘extra-judicial’ killings and other acts of violence from smallholders across the SAVA region of
8 Northeastern Madagascar. Since the price spike began in 2016, there have been reports of
9 increased incidents of *vindicté populaire* (or *fitsaram bahoaka* in Malagasy), acts we refer to in
10 this discussion as ‘street’ or ‘mob justice’ to denote the contextual realities of village streets,
11 where violence motivated by vanilla theft is taking place sometimes by individuals, but also in
12 groups. While vigilante justice is not a new phenomenon in rural Madagascar (e.g. Sharp 1990),
13 with the current price spike, these events are now more frequent and violent.⁴ In 2017 alone, it
14 was reported that over 100 people, both thieves and farmers, were killed in the vanilla producing
15 region of Andapa, located in the western part of the vanilla triangle.
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17 While this uptick in violence is disturbing, it would be simplistic to chalk up such violent
18 responses by smallholders as ‘irrational’ or ‘chaotic’ actions taken by a desperate and precarious
19 peasant class. On the contrary, the almost mundane descriptions of reprisals to vanilla theft, and
20 the lack of response by Malagasy state authorities, signals a desire to seek out alternative forms
21 of justice in the wake of the price spike. In the absence of state and market mechanisms of
22 support, many farmers currently regard ‘taking matters into their own hands’ as the most
23 effective avenue to safeguard their livelihoods. Farmers look towards street justice primarily as a
24 means of protecting their crops, but also as a form of ‘symbolic resistance’ against the
25 gendarmes who smallholders suspect of deputizing thieves to steal from farmers on behalf of
26 state officials. These acts of vigilante justice by smallholders effectively challenge the state’s
27 legitimacy over the use of force (Weber 2013; Mbembé 2003).
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29 In such ways, mob violence is situated as a question of agrarian moral economy within
30 which, despite differences in gender, class, and ethnicity, ‘a broader solidarity emerges’ in
31 response to structural injustices imposed by the state and market forces (Neumann 2002, 42; see
32 also Edelman 2005; Wolford 2010). In Madagascar, the moral economic relationships of
33 smallholder vanilla farmers are embedded within the neoliberal market reforms and deregulation
34 of the vanilla market during the mid-1990s (McMichael 2009). While smallholders have been
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⁴ For example, in some areas of Madagascar, there is a tradition of mob violence for certain serious infractions, such as stealing bones from ancestral tombs.

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3 dealing with price variations for nearly twenty-five years, the current price spike has precipitated
4 a crisis for rural communities that has engendered particularly acute levels of violence and
5 mistrust. Thus, smallholders who are facing the loss of their livelihoods recalibrate their moral
6 sensibilities around violence within the context of ‘boom and bust’ dynamics. This recalibration
7 is breaking down certain existing moral economic relationships within communities, including
8 creating heightened suspicions between neighbors, and even between members of the same
9 family. At the same time, the vanilla crisis is also reinforcing other collective relationships, as
10 individual farmers work together to organize patrols and mobilize shared security measures,
11 including mob violence events.

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19 The moral economy of rural street justice also influences, and is influenced by, multiple
20 intersecting relationships of power that extend beyond local levels of production, however. For
21 example, acts of mob violence are becoming increasingly visible to those living outside of rural
22 Madagascar, as accounts of ‘vanilla violence’ reach a global audience through high profile media
23 outlets. These accounts are similar to international news stories that highlight the violence
24 connected with other high value commodities, such as ‘blood diamonds’ (Le Billon 2000), cacao
25 (Dhariwal 2012), and avocados (Brown 2013). Reading these depictions in the media,
26 downstream market actors, such as multinational companies and commodity suppliers, become
27 anxious that consumers will turn away from products that use ‘blood’ vanilla.⁵

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34 The circulation of these stories illustrate what we call a ‘moral hyper-proximity’ of global
35 commodities – the changing dynamics of producer-consumer relations in an age of high-speed
36 media, where information about commodity production travels faster and in a greater diversity of
37 forms (c.f. Goodman et al. 2017; Anderson 2014; Goodman et al 2016). Moral hyper-proximity
38 brings ideas of what producers and consumers each believe to be ‘fair’ dynamics of commodity
39 production and trade relationships into more immediate contact through diverse social media
40 platforms (Besky 2008; Moberg and Lyon 2010; West 2012). For example, many stories on mob
41 violence in the vanilla market emphasize the preference for ‘law and order’ structures to prevail,
42 linking this outcome with best serving farmers.⁶ The international attention surrounding
43 Madagascar’s vanilla industry is forcing the Malagasy government to take action to reclaim

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54 ⁵ For example, see: <https://old.danwatch.dk/en/undersogelseskapitel/du-risikerer-at-koebbe-stjaalen-vanilje-i-supermarkedet/>

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56 ⁶ This notion of justice commonly aligns with discussions of literature largely based on western traditions
57 of moral individualism (c.f. Rawls, 2005).

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3 authority and moral legitimacy over law enforcement, including through the increased
4 militarization of the spaces of commodity production.
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6 We elaborate on the concepts of moral economy and moral hyper-proximity in the
7 context of street violence of the vanilla boom. We argue that power struggles over defining the
8 just governance of commodity relationships emerge, in attempts to delineate how people
9 involved in commodity production and trade ‘should’ behave (Cavanaugh 2018, 405; Goodman
10 et al. 2017). To bridge these diverse concepts, we mobilize Norbert Elias’ (2000; vol. 1; 1969;
11 vol 2 1982) classic work, *The Civilizing Process*, to illustrate the historical and political
12 conditions through which societies are managed. Elias signals micro-level changes in human
13 behavior alongside periods of economic transformation and specialization in the late 18th
14 Century (Durkheim 1893), when labour shifts brought social classes (e.g., the ‘village’ cobbler
15 and the Bourgeois merchant), normally kept apart, in more frequent contact. This new proximity
16 altered how people acted and presumably instilled a ‘civilizing processes’ of learned behaviors
17 from the courtly social classes ‘downward.’⁷ In his later work, Elias (1982) thought of the
18 civilizing process as essential to building the nation-state, with newly formed governments
19 reinforcing ‘appropriate behaviors’ to bolster state legitimacy, enforce tax collection, and most
20 noteworthy, to maintain a monopoly on violence.
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32 Working from Elias, we explore ‘the civilized commodity,’ or the systemic governance
33 over life under the fraught moral conditions of increasingly violent commodity circulation (Le
34 Billon 2005). Placing *the civilized commodity* in conversation with street justice, moral economy
35 and moral hyper-proximity highlights connections between liberalized boom/bust markets and
36 the structural political economic inequities of ‘everyday’ production under periodic crisis. To
37 many, commodity violence and street justice contrasts with the ‘civilized’ versions of how
38 commodity production should look – transparent, controlled by state and market forces, and
39 connected to the delivery of economic and social benefits (West 2012). Thus, farmers in
40 Madagascar taking matters into their own hands becomes for downstream market actors an
41 unseemly and ‘un-civilized’ way to resolve disputes.⁸
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51 ⁷ These behaviours included the capacity of foresight, rationalization, self-restraint, and the internalization
52 of negative emotions such as anxiety and disgust. The state reified these behaviours over time through
53 social sanctions and other disciplining tools (Foucault 1998; Weber 1993).

54 ⁸ Alongside Elias, our use of civilizing here is not meant to be teleological or progression towards a
55 superior model of behaviour or values, rather to show a critique to such thinking in a period of sped up
56 and deregulated trade.
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3 Below we first provide a brief overview of moral economic theory within the agrarian
4 studies tradition. We bring this literature into conversation with work on street justice in urban
5 settings and with other forms of commodity violence, and argue for the potential for further work
6 examining the parallels of street violence between rural and urban settings. Drawing mainly from
7 ethnographic work with Malagasy smallholder vanilla farmers, we provide a detailed account of
8 the material relations, historical dynamics, and cultural meaning of vanilla production and trade
9 in the region. We consider the commodity crisis from the smallholders' perspective in
10 comparison to other market actors, including middlemen collectors and larger exporters. We
11 draw on over 288 socio-economic surveys with both male and female vanilla growers of
12 different levels of income and 40 semi-structured interviews with collectors, exporters,
13 government officials and industry experts.⁹ We discuss the heterogeneity of vanilla growers and
14 their different perspectives of violence, and consider various media accounts describing
15 Madagascar's vanilla boom and street justice events. We demonstrate that in a period of sped up
16 consumer producer relations, the state and market react to peasant violence with 'civilized' law
17 and order style responses meant to discipline the behavior of farmers, landscapes, and
18 commodities. Actions, we show, that are meant to demonstrate state legitimacy and to maintain
19 the state monopoly of violence in rural landscapes.
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34 **2. Moral Economy and the limits of the state**

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36 It has been over fifty years since EP Thompson's adoption of the term 'moral economy' in his
37 seminal essay (1971) 'The moral economy of the English working crowds in the eighteenth-
38 century.' In the essay, Thompson explores the 'bread-wage nexus' and the condition of the 'rural
39 underclasses' who rioted against uneven taxation and unfair pricing of grain. These 'bread riots'
40 represented for Thompson, 'direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives' against
41 market injustices and not thoughtless 'rebellions of the belly' caused by angry 'mobs'.
42 Thomson's view is that the riots were a function of a 'moral economy' among the peasant classes
43 based on identifiable and agreed upon '...social norms and obligations, of the proper economic
44 functions' which were infringed upon within changing political economic conditions (1971, 79;
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54 ⁹ This work was conducted over the 2016-17 vanilla campaign within the region of SAVA and in the UK
55 and USA. The survey was administered by CURSA, a regional University based in Antalaha,
56 Madagascar.
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3 see also Wolford and Keene 2015, 576). For Thompson, there was little doubt that the bread riots
4 had popular support and were legitimized by an overwhelming belief that ‘in times of dearth, the
5 regulation of prices ought to be enforced, and those responsible in doing so must be held
6 accountable’ (1971, 113).
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10 Thompson’s treatise on moral economy laid the foundation for future scholars concerned
11 with social movements of peasants, particularly in times of dearth and economic change. James
12 Scott, for example, examined how peasants navigated a similar moral terrain of rights and
13 expectations to that of Thompson. Rather than mob justice, Scott’s analysis displayed tensions
14 between landlords and farmers which boiled over due to subtle pressure points, especially the
15 unfair extraction of rent. As a result, peasants engaged in ‘small’ acts of ‘everyday resistance’ –
16 from work slowdowns to petty theft – as a way to express their own brand of ‘economic justice’
17 (1976, 3).’ Similarly to Thompson, this peasant response was ‘...not just a problem of calories
18 and income but [a] question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of
19 reciprocity’ (Scott, 1976, vii). Scott’s work was instrumental in critical agrarian studies.
20 According to Edelman, one of Scott’s transformative contributions was to bridge critical
21 scholarship focused on states and structure with that of the peasant’s everyday social
22 reproduction and labour allocation (2005, 334). As Edelman explains:
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34 Scott maintains that village level systems of reciprocity produce, over long historical
35 time, widely held moral expectations.¹⁰ Market forces (sometimes in combination with
36 environmental ones) pose challenges to these expectations and may, when thresholds
37 of what is culturally acceptable are crossed, produce rebellion and collective
38 resistance.
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41 To varying degrees each of these contributions described peasant conceptions of local struggles
42 within a changing political economy and how peasant navigate changing ethical and moral issues
43 of reciprocity, values and justice within a shifting ‘subsistence ethic’ (Scott, 1976 see also
44 Chayanov 1966). This subsistence ethic went beyond the quotidian requirements of meeting
45 ‘brute physiological needs’ to also encompass the subjective experiences accumulated in periods
46 of political economic crisis (1976, 17).
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54 ¹⁰ Others such as Eric Wolf, Benjamin Moore and scholars in the French school of Agricultural Sciences,
55 more generally used the concept of moral economy in calling out of ‘markets’ as spaces of political
56 contestation and struggle.
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Critical scholars have since applied the concept of moral economy to a variety of geographic spaces and across multiple scales, including landless farmers in Brazil (Wolford 2010), shifting cultivators (Kull 2004) and agropastoralists (Gingembre 2015) in Madagascar, and Fair Trade markets South Africa (McEwan et al 2017). Many of these scholars diverge in their conceptual usage of moral economy, yet all in some way draw attention to what Neumann (2002, 37) remarks as the shifting ‘...norms, values, and expectations related to the livelihoods of subordinate classes during major economic transformations’ (see also: McCarthy 2002; Moore 1998).

Moral economy and street violence

Less effective, however, has been the adoption of moral economy to understand its close association with diverse forms of ‘justice,’ in particular, the less understood concept of ‘street justice’ or *vindicta popolare*. Our discussion aims to bridge these two bodies of literature, by placing street justice as enacted by smallholders into moral economic framings that foreground the intersections of liberalized markets and state vulnerability. It is within such a context that Malagasy farmers resort to street violence to protect their vanilla resources— an act we understand to be, in part, a particular form of commodity violence. This violence is not random, however, but is situated within broader moral economic relationships between farmers, states, and commodity markets. As violence escalates, certain aspects of these moral economic relationships begin to break-down, as distrust grows between and among farmers, Malagasy state officials, and market actors.

The escalating violence associated with the vanilla boom parallels similar forms of violence associated with high value commodities, especially within largely deregulated markets. For example, cacao production in Africa has long been associated with violence and the exploitation of children (*Financial times* 2018), including a wave of rural violence in Madagascar in 2012 during the global cacao boom when armed thieves stole cacao pods from smallholders (Dhariwal 2012). The diamond trade is notorious for its reliance on "conflict" diamonds obtained through systematic violence and outright conflict and is often cited as an example of ‘resource wars’ (Le Billon 2004, 1). The liberalization of access and control to valuable commodities, such as conflict minerals, oil, timber, and commodity crops many times exacerbates historical tensions of uneven development and marginalization, which may also lead

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3 to widespread violence, including organized armed conflicts (Watts and Peluso 2001). Other
4 work on 'neoliberal commodity economies' points to the structural violence intrinsic to even
5 outwardly nonviolent trade relationship, especially for the low-wage, comparatively
6 disenfranchised individuals within international commodity relationships (Nevins and Peluso
7 2008).

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11 The 'street justice' killings of vanilla thieves in Madagascar are another form of
12 commodity violence, which presents both similarities and differences to the above examples. In
13 considering these forms of violence, we adopt the term 'street justice' for two main reasons.
14 First, the use of the word 'street' helps navigate the naturalizing connotations of 'mob mentality'
15 and its suggestion of irrational behaviors. Second, we aim to denote that village streets are
16 subject to social forms of violence similar to that noted within urban contexts, especially in
17 places subjected to periods of austerity and neglect (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2018). For
18 example, our study on the 'mobilizing of violence' in village streets somewhat follows
19 Karandinos et al. (2014) and Anderson's (1999) work on drug gangs in inner-city Philadelphia.
20 In this work, street violence is not necessarily random or chaotic, but often directed by individual
21 or groups following understood 'codes of the street' (Bourgois 2003). Karandinos et al. (2014, 1)
22 describe such codes as 'ethical norms and obligations which are recognized as legitimate'
23 reactions by locals as a way to navigate moral economic and social change and crisis.
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26 These reactions, however unseemly and 'uncivilized' to outsiders, are a way for localized
27 justice to take place when the main arbitrator of justice, the state, is absent (Spierenburg 2009).
28 The dynamics between weak states, changing neoliberal markets, and mob violence have been
29 described in other regions as well (Abrahams 1998). For example, a wave of street justice
30 violence and lynching in Bolivia was described as a mechanism for communities to 'take law
31 into their own hands' in frustration with the lack of state response against rampant crime
32 (Goldstein 2003). In this way, Goldstein argues, "vigilantism acts as a moral complaint against
33 state inadequacy, challenging state legitimacy and redefining ideas about justice, citizenship, and
34 law in the process (2003, 22)." Similarly Smith, writing of the vigilante justice group in Nigeria
35 known as the Bakassi boys notes that this group killed suspected criminals in response to
36 perceived failure of the state to safeguard citizen rights during a time of intensified market
37 reforms and economic change (2004).
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To bring together these frameworks – commodity violence, street justice, and moral economy - we turn to the empirical case of 'street justice' violence in Madagascar surrounding the vanilla boom, which illustrates how ideas of moral economy and street justice intersect in the context of commodity production and trade. We ask what the vanilla crisis can tell us about the intersections of moral economy and justice in the context of economic volatility and uncertainty, as Malagasy farmers increasingly take matters of justice 'into their own hands.'

3. Overview of vanilla cultivation and trade in Madagascar

The current dynamics of Madagascar's 'street violence' are situated within broader economic, political, and environmental contexts of global commodity production and trade. In particular, we see the crisis tied directly to the deregulation of commodities markets in the 1990s. While mob justice is not necessarily new form of violence in Madagascar, this deregulation is a key point of departure for us to better understand the connections between the political and moral economy of street justice, global commodity circuits, and the historical roll-back of state power and legitimacy in rural Madagascar.

Vanilla was thought to be introduced to Réunion, Mauritius, and then Madagascar in the early 1800s by the French who were looking to establish commercial plantations (Havkin-Frenkel et al. 2010). Their initial attempts were stymied, however, due of the lack of a natural pollinator found in vanilla's native regions of Mexico and wider regions of Central America. This all changed around the 1840s when a viable, but labour intensive, method of hand pollination was discovered.¹¹ With this discovery, the French were essentially able to monopolize vanilla cultivation in Madagascar and the neighbouring territories.

After Madagascar gained independence in 1960, the new socialist government instituted regulations on the vanilla trade, aimed at stabilizing prices and global supplies. Though providing some security for farmers during the ensuing decades, there also emerged entrenched alliances between political and economic interests, as the vanilla market became marked by corruption and opaque relationships of trade. Then, under pressure from international monetary agencies, Madagascar deregulated the vanilla trade in the 1990s, leading eventually to highly volatile market conditions marked by dramatic booms and prolonged bust periods (Laney and Turner 2015; Cadot et al. 2010). One of these price spikes occurred in the late 1990s and early

¹¹ In Mexico, the plant is pollinated by melipona bees and hummingbirds.

2000s, exasperated by a cyclone that destroyed much of Madagascar's vanilla harvest. This boom was followed by a rapid price crash, with prices falling to below \$40/kg (see Figure 1 below). While many vanilla farmers elsewhere around the globe abandoned vanilla cultivation during the prolonged bust market, which stretched the decade between 2005 and 2015, many Malagasy farmers continued to cultivate vanilla, dependent on the crop and with few other options (Osterhoudt 2017). The current boom market, with vanilla prices nearing 600/kg, thus arrives after a decade-long period of hardship and struggle for rural households in vanilla producing regions of Madagascar.¹²

Figure 1: Average Price for Vanilla from 1971 to 2017 (adopted from Nielsen-Massy Vanillas)

Today, Madagascar continues to dominate production in the global vanilla market. Its branded variety 'Bourbon,' is the industry's 'gold standard,' recognised for its unique and diverse flavour profile. It is Madagascar's leading agricultural export, valued at approximately \$800 million per year (OEC 2017). Madagascar's hold over the market is no accident; the region maintains the ideal microclimate for vanilla cultivation, with suitable conditions of moisture and temperature. Yet, its global dominance owes more to the availability of cheap labour essential for commercial production. Vanilla is a labour-intensive crop and its cultivation includes the incredibly arduous tasks of hand pollination, a long growing period, and a four-month process of sun-curing beans. Many Malagasy households depend on vanilla income to meet basic needs, and thus invest the time and labour into cultivation and curing. Peasants' dependence on the vanilla trade is no secret in the industry, as frequent discussions with exporters highlighted how in times of high or low prices, Malagasy farmers will continue to produce a vanilla harvest. As noted in a recent article in the Financial Times, '*Not only is its climate perfect, but it is also one of the few places on earth poor enough to make the laborious process of hand pollination worthwhile*'.¹³

This farmer dependence on vanilla income is seen in the villages that are the site of our ethnographic research. These rural communities are situated within the main site for vanilla production in Madagascar, known as the 'vanilla triangle' of the SAVA district. The region comprises of around 800 villages scattered across over 23 thousand km with two main ethnic

¹² In addition to market deregulation and cyclone events, vanilla price spikes are also connected with the increase in illegal rosewood trafficking in the region (Zhu 2018).

¹³ Access at: <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56> (July 12, 2018).

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3 groups – the costal ‘Betsimisaraka’ and the ‘Tsimihety’ who occupy the higher altitudes making
4 up the majority of the estimated 80-100 thousand vanilla farmers in the region.¹⁴ Even
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6 though this region remains one of Madagascar's wealthiest, and some farmers seem to be doing
7 well financially under the current boom, the majority of peasant smallholders, who have access
8 to less than 5 ha of land, still remain relatively poor and few economic choices, with many living
9 off less than \$2/day. Households in this area also struggled during the previous decade, with the
10 prolonged bust of the vanilla market – a situation further exasperated by cyclone events, political
11 uncertainty and government corruption that also beset the region during these years.
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19 **4. Theft and ‘Street Justice’ in the Vanilla Boom**

20 In this context of prolonged economic hardship, intense labor requirements, and decades
21 of collusion and corruption between certain state and market forces, the theft of vanilla hits
22 smallholder farmers particularly hard. Exasperating the challenge of vanilla security is the
23 materiality of the vanilla plant itself, which is a relatively easy crop to steal. It is an orchid grown
24 in multistoried ‘garden’ systems called *taniboly* located in relatively far distance from village
25 homes and under insecure customary tenure systems. Beans develop on the vines between
26 March and July, when they are vulnerable to theft, especially in May and June when the beans
27 are relatively ripe but the official vanilla market in Madagascar has not yet opened. Thieves take
28 advantage of this ‘lag time’ to steal green vanilla off the vine as the pods are easily swiped off
29 without much effort and depending on moisture content relatively light to haul away. We found
30 in our survey of 288 growers in the southern SAVA city of Antalaha, that over 58 percent
31 (n=167) sell their vanilla early and still immature, and over 55 percent (n=159) said they do so
32 that ‘*no one will steal it*’.¹⁵
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43 The distress of the theft and subsequent violence is having a severe effect on the social
44 and economic relations between individual vanilla growers. Over 62 percent (n=111) responded
45 that their life has become ‘*much more difficult*’ since the price spike began in 2014. Although the
46 somewhat sizable minority of 36% (n= 105) did say that having ‘*more money helped make life*
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52 ¹⁴ The French, the Chinese, Indo-Pakistanis and those of varied Arab descent arrived for the vanilla trade
53 starting toward the end of the 19th century. Many Chinese have since intermarried with the Betsimisaraka
54 and Tsimihety and occupy an outsized role in vanilla and other valuable commodities in the region (Zhu
55 2016).

56 ¹⁵ ‘n’ refers to the total number of the 288 respondents who choose this answer.
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3 *easier,*' the security situation was identified as the number one issue confronting all those
4 surveyed, with 69 percent (n=199) saying that '*security has gotten worse*' since the price spike.
5 Moreover, 81 percent (n=232) responded that they have had their vanilla stolen or were affected
6 by attempted theft.
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10 While vanilla theft is not a new phenomenon, the recent price spike has set off a
11 particular harshness to the violence not as often seen in this region in the past, as farmers
12 organize against potential vanilla bandits through measures that include direct and sometimes
13 deadly force through 'street justice' events. In this region of Madagascar, a street justice event
14 typically beings when a suspected thief is caught in someone's vanilla fields, usually at night.
15 Such thieves could be spotted by a farmer keeping watch over his or her field, by a community
16 patrol, or by a guard hired to secure particular fields. Once a thief is apprehended, people sound
17 the alarm through shouting and running through town, calling others to join the group. Many
18 times, the thief is badly beaten or killed. Thieves may be local to the area or from outside the
19 region. If the story of street violence '*stays local*' – meaning it does not get reported outside the
20 region - state officials usually do not punish those who participate. However, as we see below,
21 the state's response changes if reports of street justice get out into international news, as
22 Malagasy authorities need to maintain the appearance of legitimacy over market order.
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32 Many vanilla growers in Madagascar commented on the '*cozy*' relationships between
33 thieves and state authorities, including gendarmes and high court officials who either refused to
34 halt, or were in some way complicit in, vanilla theft. This belief led to a '*mistrust of the official*
35 justice system' and the subsequent perceived need for farmers to '*take matters into their own*
36 hands'. Only 21 percent (n= 61) of growers surveyed said that they felt thieves were ever
37 '*caught*', (meaning brought to some sort of official justice) while 72 percent (n=206) said that
38 '*nothing was ever done*' about reported vanilla thefts. Worse, some smallholders said that the
39 state police forces were '*colluding with local villagers and intermediaries, giving them the tools*
40 and protection to steal.' As Aina, one older male vanilla grower described, there are many
41 police, court and government officials who have a '*relationship*' to the thieves'¹⁶ and that,
42 '*...when thieves are caught they are let go soon after.*' Aina went on to say:
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56 ¹⁶ Anon July 2017
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Let me explain what happens here. When we have caught the thieves, we hand them over to the authorities (*Police National*). However, the problem is that the thieves have paid the responsible officers and they are liberated afterwards...¹⁷

This collusion often continues after thieves are meant to stand trial:

They (the thieves) are rich but that does not restrain them from stealing. What is more, when we have filed the case at the court of justice, they withdraw the case since the thieves and their bosses have the financial means (to corrupt the judges) and the poor cannot do anything about it.¹⁸

This is not to say that theft of vanilla was not always an issue – as 67 percent (n=192) of respondents say that ‘*theft has always been a problem*’. However, it seems that the mechanisms that were once in place to protect vanilla growers and punish thieves have broken down at the same time as the stakes of vanilla thefts have been raised. With vanilla prices at record highs, more people are taking the risk to steal.

The rise in thefts are disrupting local relationships, as many suspect that vanilla thieves are individuals from their own communities, or even their own family. As noted by Herimanoa, a male grower of organic certified vanilla, “*they [thieves] are those living close, commission agents as well as authorities distribute money among young people. It is this act which obliges them to steal.*”¹⁹ It was explained to us, that ‘*local recruits*’ have the advantage of knowing your movements and whereabouts and therefore know when you are away. Sometimes the practice of recruiting from local villages pits family members against each other: “*In my opinion it is our children who dare to steal vanilla from their own fathers in our own fields,*” responded Hery, a moderately-wealthy smallholder.²⁰ One common response we frequently heard was that local youth are more generally responsible for the act of stealing. Many said that they are actively recruited by both ‘*commissionaires*’ (middlemen) and financed by regional police. As expressed by Lalaina, a female grower living on the economic margins,

Commissionaires incentivize local people to steal, and it is them who then buy the stolen vanilla. In fact, there was a thief amongst us in this village who knew all our secrets and we did not even know that he was a bandit, but he knew all our actions and movements”²¹

¹⁷ Anon July 2017

¹⁸ Anon Aug 2017

¹⁹ Anon Aug 2017

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²¹ Anon Sept 2018

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5 The collusion of local youth with outside state officials against rural producers is
6 disrupting the more usual moral economic relationships in agrarian Malagasy communities,
7 whereby producer communities largely ‘stand together’ in the face of outside encroachment onto
8 their land and resources (Gezon 1999, Osterhoudt 2016, Sodikoff 2012). The stakes of state
9 corruption against farmers have also been raised; as the above quotes indicate, while state
10 officials may not have given much protection to producers in the past, the current presumed
11 complicity in vanilla theft crosses a moral and economic threshold for many farmers.
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17 In face of these shifting social relationships, vanilla farmers articulate the need for street
18 justice to protect their livelihoods. By mobilizing acts of mob violence, farmers seek to secure
19 their vanilla harvests in a way that protects them from state retribution, and which maintains
20 market relationships within local and regional systems of trade. Street justice events also work
21 within certain existing Malagasy social and moral economic systems, including framing
22 confrontation through the collective rather than through the individual (Lambek and Solway
23 2001; Sodikoff 2012) and through expression of rural solidarity against outside forces that
24 encroach upon local land and resources (Jeroz 1999, Osterhoudt 2016). Street violence also
25 prevents punishment by the state, by diffusing responsibility across a large, essentially
26 anonymous group (Goldstein 2003; Smith 2004).
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34 As described in classic work on moral economy as connected to group resistance and
35 violence, people perpetuating violence are not irrational or intrinsically violent individuals, but
36 are rather acting within social and moral boundaries to secure basic rights and livelihoods within
37 more informal spheres of solidarity (Metz et al. 2010). They are thus essentially rational actors
38 caught between powerful forces. Indeed, in Madagascar, farmers describe their position in these
39 terms: people note that they do not enjoy having to resort to street justice tactics, but feel the
40 economic stakes are too high to leave protection, or forms of retribution, to the mechanisms of an
41 absent or corrupt state.
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50 *Media narratives of street justice*

51 This unit of the collective as the locus of justice differs from western individualized
52 notions of moral justice (Rawls 1971). One might expect that the local conceptions in rural
53 Madagascar that farmers are performing *regrettable, but understandable*, acts of violence to
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secure their rights to property and subsistence may differ from many of the media narratives of street justice in the vanilla market. In reality, the international media has been quite sympathetic to the plight of the Malagasy grower, positioning them as reacting to a market over which they have little control, and turning to street justice as their last resort. However, for the most part, media reports at the same time have presented 'market actors' as not being at all complicit in the current market crisis. Companies and civil society institutions are usually cast as either victims of the breakdown of local market supply (just cannot get enough vanilla to fill your artisanal ice cream orders) and/or as 'saviors' who can circumvent the corrupt state officials and greedy middlemen to 'clean up' the supply chain.

Figure 2: Photo from lead story of vanilla from the Financial Times story 'The real Price of the vanilla boom:' <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56>

Thus, while sympathetic to small farmers' actions, these media accounts also assume that the best course forward is to eliminate violent forms of street justice, changing these practices primarily by improving the state control over institutionalized forms of security, poverty reduction, and legal accountability. As quoted in a leading UK newspaper:

As vanilla becomes worth more than silver, crime takes over the Madagascan trade. It's not the backbreaking work that makes growing vanilla near impossible, it's the security problem. As it grows in value, 'vanilla murders' are becoming more common, but despite the hike in price, thousands of farmers still remain poor.²²

And in French newspaper:

Dozens of thieves have been apprehended in recent weeks; and such is the anger some have ended up being brutally murdered. "People trust only the people's justice..."²³

Other media accounts of the violence are quite sympathetic to peasants' plight, even normalizing such acts in these areas:

Farmers often awake to find their vines stripped bare, carried off in the night by gangs of thieves filling orders for buyers in the far-off capital of Antananarivo, who in turn supply the markets of western Europe, the US and Asia. In some parts of Sava, say non-

²² Accessed at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/features/vanilla-farming-crime-madagascar-trade-a8520396.html> (02/12/2018)

²³ Accessed at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180420-madagascar-vanilla-price-trade-crime-crop-weather> (06/06/2018)

governmental organisations working in the region, vigilante groups have sprung up to mete out summary justice to the vanilla snatchers.²⁴

And another grower was depicted as describing moral equivalence in terms Western consumers could understand:

Soa [a vanilla grower] is plotting ever more dire punishments for anyone who does attempt to steal her current crop. At the moment vanilla thieves face 3-4 years in prison. As far as she is concerned, that's not enough. She wants a life sentence. "You invest all your life in growing the vanilla. Stealing it is the same thing as killing someone."²⁵

Figure 3: Photo from *Ft* article of executives from Mars Inc. who have come to Madagascar on their first trip ever to plan development initiatives in order to stabilize farmers' livelihoods and the market

As the above headline illustrates, international companies are sometimes presented as 'saviors':

Emmanuel Faber, chairman and chief executive of Danone... recently travelled to Madagascar for the first time to find out why it is so expensive and what can be done to secure supplies and improve farmers' lives.²⁶

These headlines are effective in reaching the global market, and provoke potentially strong reactions from ethical consumers. In the case of vanilla, for example, consumers drawn to Fair Trade labels to help smallholder farmers may balk at their purchase if they learn that these same farmers are involved in brutal mob killings – even if these mob events are motivated by the desire of farmers to safeguard their agrarian livelihoods.²⁷ If anything, the 'globalizing' effect of these news stories moving them from the rural streets of vanilla growing villages to the supermarket shelves forces the 'visible hand' of the state to have to intervene on the 'invisible

²⁴ Accessed at: <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56> (02/12/2018)

²⁵ Accessed at: <http://time.com/5308143/vanilla-price-climate-change-madagascar/> (02/12/2018)

²⁶ Accessed at: <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56> (02/12/2018)

²⁷ It may be worth noting the role of the people identified with vanilla industry and market more generally. While smallholder vanilla farmers do not articulate resistance against market forces per se, the entrenched history of vanilla trade as imbricated in shady state practices becomes relevant. Many vanilla industry representatives remark that they must secure the loyalty of farmers in a supply-driven market, while also not falling out of favor with Malagasy government entities (who are empowered to revoke export licenses) or of international consumers, who may be upset by associations of violence with vanilla products.

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3 hand' of the violent vanilla market both to ensure stability and to regain legitimacy under the
4 banner of 'law and order'.
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8 *State legitimacy and militarizing a broken market*
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10 Circulating media headlines on vanilla violence do not only potentially influence
11 consumers – they are also forcing representatives in Madagascar's government into action.²⁸ In
12 response to international criticism, the state, with donor and market support, selected some of the
13 hardest hit villages to 'securitize vanilla' through militarized-style defense trainings and the
14 surveillance of smallholders. A pilot project was conducted in six communes across each of the
15 four districts of the region. The most well-known of these initiatives was the village of
16 Ambodivohitra Kobahina (Andapa Region) - also dubbed the "Zero Theft" village. In this
17 village, specific trainings were given to smallholders on topics including monitoring crops,
18 securing paths leading to and from the fields, camouflaging, placing suspects under arrest, and
19 transporting suspected thieves to police stations.²⁹ Alongside new village security groups,
20 known by villagers as "police fokonolo" (the villager's police), the state installed barricades at
21 village entrances and exits, as well as curfews.³⁰
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31 The security associations established through these projects consisted of armed men from
32 the village who patrolled the fields day and night (especially at night) during the dangerous
33 months of February through August. While some members dutifully handed over the bandits
34 they apprehended to the police, others decided to forego these official channels and pursue street
35 justice measures. In these cases, people typically beat thieves, in order to deter others from
36 stealing.³¹ This continuation of violence has not necessarily instilled confidence in the state to
37 handle these matters, as stories of vicious acts in rural communities continued to circulate well
38 after the scheme ended in 2016. Overall, the projects of militarization and 'zero theft' villages
39 represent elaborate attempts by the state to restore a 'civilized commodity production landscape'
40 most palatable to global consumers.
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50 ²⁸Beyond vanilla theft, the media was also now investigating rumors that 'new vanilla buyers' were
51 laundering money from illegally trafficked rosewood. Accessed on:
52 [https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/31/madagascars-vanilla-wars-prized-spice-drives-](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/31/madagascars-vanilla-wars-prized-spice-drives-death-and-deforestation)
53 [death-and-deforestation](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/31/madagascars-vanilla-wars-prized-spice-drives-death-and-deforestation) (02/12/2018).

54 ²⁹ Interview with SAVA/Development Coordination Unit (DCU) 11/20/2018.

55 ³⁰ Interview HoS/AK 02/12/2018 and DCU11/20/2018.

56 ³¹ Interview Head of Security in Ambodivohitra Kobahina (HoS/AK) 02/12/2018.
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3 International development groups have also gotten involved in ‘law and order’ vanilla
4 initiatives. For example, in 2017, the German Development Agency, GIZ, and the Regional
5 SAVA government, drafted a new village ‘*Dina Be*,’ or the re-writing of ‘local codes of
6 conduct,’ which are meant to be written in-sync with existing national laws and regulations and
7 be applied across multiple villages in the region (GIZ 2017). This approach seems to resonate
8 with many Malagasy village leaders, including mayors and pastors, who commonly advocate
9 against public justice, encouraging their constituents to pursue justice through state-sanctioned
10 means.³²

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12 Industry groups comprised of vanilla firms have also lent their support to campaigns
13 against vanilla theft and street justice, launching aggressive anti-theft campaigns, such as the
14 ‘*One-way Ticket for Thieves*’ and a second lobbying effort to ‘*Ban Vigilante Justice Outright*’.³³
15 International trading companies are motivated in part through their understanding of the intricate
16 links between being able to secure enough high-quality vanilla and maintaining their long-
17 standing relationships with growers. They have also supported security efforts at the local and
18 national levels, by giving security related material to farmers (e.g., raincoats, torches, first aid
19 kits, and blankets) and paying to transport the thieves to Antananarivo to stand trial away from
20 regional networks which are seen as more corrupt. Farmers, with support of firms, have also
21 revived the traditional labor-intensive technique of stamping each vanilla pod with their
22 individual ‘ID code’ registered with the village commune.

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24 In sum, regional and national Malagasy authorities condemning mob killings implore
25 rural residents to adopt strategies of ‘law and order’ sanctioned by the state. Government
26 initiatives ‘militarize’ vanilla farmers through state-led trainings with public-private
27 contributions. International aid organizations and private vanilla businesses often support these
28 efforts. For the regional and national Malagasy government, violence does not denote self-
29 correcting moral economic relationships but rather a breakdown in the ability to maintain a
30 civilized moral order in the margins, thereby indicating the need for the state to take back control
31 over violence in rural areas.

32 Interview HoS/AK 02/12/2018.

33 Interview DCU11/20/2018. This included a large workshop on ‘sensitization on the popular verdict’ held in Sambava, financed by the UNDP, and organized by the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Public Security, the Secretary of State of National Gendarmery, and the Ministry of Public Security and the Interior and Decentralization.

5. Discussion: Bringing together street justice, moral hyper-proximity and the civilized commodity

With vanilla prices at historic highs, and incidences of vanilla theft from fields widespread, peasant smallholders in Madagascar are experiencing a moral economic repositioning between the state and market. Rather than providing protection, state police are suspected of exploiting farmers through collusion with thieves. The vanilla market, deregulated since the 1990s, also does not offer support to farmers, and instead encourages people to find illegal means to profit from the lucrative boom. Farmers resist state and market power in part by taking ‘matters into their own hands’ through acts of street justice. Thus, despite differences in gender, wealth, and ethnicity, many smallholder producers are finding a broader solidarity emerging in the vanilla crisis. This solidarity draws from moral economies that emphasize collective action and local autonomy in order to protect land and resources from outside encroachment.

As we note, the actions of smallholder farmers in this context present conceptual and empirical links with the existing literature on moral economy and subsistence ethics traditionally found within critical agrarian studies (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976; Edelman 2005; Wolford 2010). This work has been instructive for understanding uneven development between rural peasant livelihoods and state and markets. However, our work on the rural moral economies of ‘street justice’, we argue, also connects more broadly with scholarship characterizing violence in urban ‘street’ settings (Pavoni and Tulumello 2018; Karandinos et al. 2014; Anderson’s 1999; Bourgois 2003), especially the localized forms of justice materializing in the absence of institutional and official forms of adjudication (Spierenburg 2009). Considering moral economic change through the lens of street justice can help build a conceptual bridge between rural and urban moral economies, especially during periods of economic and social crisis.

This work also expands the analysis of rural moral economies to extend farther across the commodity chain, and highlights the iterative relationships between producers and consumers. Such interactions in part stem from the changing realities of global commodity relationships and new media platforms, whereby consumers have – or believe that they have – access to a greater quantity of accurate information about conditions of production (West 2012). With the proliferation of social media market narratives, block chain technologies, and certifications,

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3 Northern consumers feel ever closer to the people producing their products (Goodman 2004;
4 Moberg 2014). As we demonstrate, Madagascar vanilla provides a case where potential
5 consumers may encounter both positive and negative narratives about production. It is this very
6 tension that worries industry experts. While our study does not focus on the behavior or
7 decisions of consumers of vanilla, we do examine how downstream market actors in the
8 intersecting moral economies of Madagascar's vanilla boom *imagine* the possible reactions of
9 distant consumers, especially if vanilla becomes known as a 'blood' commodity. Indeed, one
10 Madagascar vanilla industry expert worried that the widespread condemnation of the incidence
11 of violence surrounding the vanilla boom would cause "Madagascar vanilla [to] be the next
12 'blood diamond' example" for consumers, leading to vanilla boycotts.³⁴

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21 Government officials and private companies react to escalating rural street violence, and
22 the possible market fallout, by imposing stricter discipline on people and agrarian landscapes,
23 including surveillance. These 'civilized' law and order style responses are meant to discipline the
24 behavior of farmers, and to maintain the state monopoly of violence in rural landscapes. This
25 process models for farmers the 'correct' way to act in a global commodity marketplace,
26 according to the beliefs of private businesses, governments, and consumers as to what falls
27 within, and outside of, moral limits of behaviors.³⁵ Overall, governments and markets aim to
28 fashion the 'unruly' and 'violent' vanilla bean into a more 'civilized commodity.'

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34 The stakes of defining what a civilized commodity looks like – how they are produced,
35 circulated, consumed and governed – are high. This is clearly true for smallholder farmers who
36 engage in acts of life and death against thieves, but also for consumers as well who are
37 increasingly urged to 'vote with their dollar.' Thus, just as Elias noted that projects of societal
38 rule consistently shift what is considered 'correct' behaviors for civilizing individuals, so too are
39 there shifting expectations for the 'behavior' of commodities that circulate in global markets - as
40 well as for the consumers of these commodities. Beyond Elias, Foucault's use of 'bio-power' is
41 instructive of how disciplinary tools of power and knowledge normatively prescribe behavior
42 and to exercise sovereignty over 'life itself' (Cavanagh 2018, 405). As Mambe and Meintjes
43 (2003, 12) note, '...to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life

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53 ³⁴ Anon Aug.2018

54 ³⁵ the increased use of certification schemes in specialty commodity chains have developed standards by
55 which normative behaviors, such as strict working conditions, child labour, quality control, environmental
56 and organic standards have been applied to peasant farmers by a northern consumer base (Besky 2013).

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3 as the deployment and manifestation of power'. These instruments of disciplinary power emerge
4 as a way to legitimize state, and market, control over individuals and populations.
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7 Yet, this process of commodity 'civilization' largely overlooks the unruly spaces of
8 materiality and sociality that mark trade of all sorts, many of which draw from alternative forms
9 of power relationships (Dove 2011). In circulating narrow discourses of how 'civilized'
10 commodities should behave, these alternate ecologies, economies, and epistemologies can be
11 lost, as well as the particular forms of power and meaning that connect with them (Li 2014).
12 Further, fashioning a 'civilized commodity' can result in a situation where a commodity system
13 outwardly seems to conform with Northern, individualistic notions of justice and morality, while
14 obscuring other different types of systematic, structural, and economic violence and injustice
15 faced by smallholder farmers (Brown 2013; Alvarez and Coolsaet 2019).
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19 Critically examining the circulating moral discourses centered on how commodities (and
20 farmers) 'should' behave can help inform work to create more equitable arrangements for global
21 markets. By locating the moral nexus of the smallholder, state, and the market, individuals can
22 better locate sites of resistance, especially in our current period when the rise of rural populism
23 seems to coincide with new forms of authoritarianism (Bosworth 2018; Mouffe 2018; Scoones et
24 al., 2018). Indeed, much of the work of contemporary peasant activists consists of trying to name
25 and put in the spotlight the institutional agency - and responsibilities - behind the increasingly
26 hard to place state and market entities (Edelman 2005, 332; Scott 1976). The fraught relations of
27 the vanilla commodity boom – and the forms of violence it engenders – demonstrates collision of
28 market forces, state politics, and agrarian production within increasingly volatile - and
29 compressed - relationships of global commodity chains.
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Figure 1: Average Price for Vanilla from 1971 to 2017 (adopted from Nielsen-Massy Vanillas)

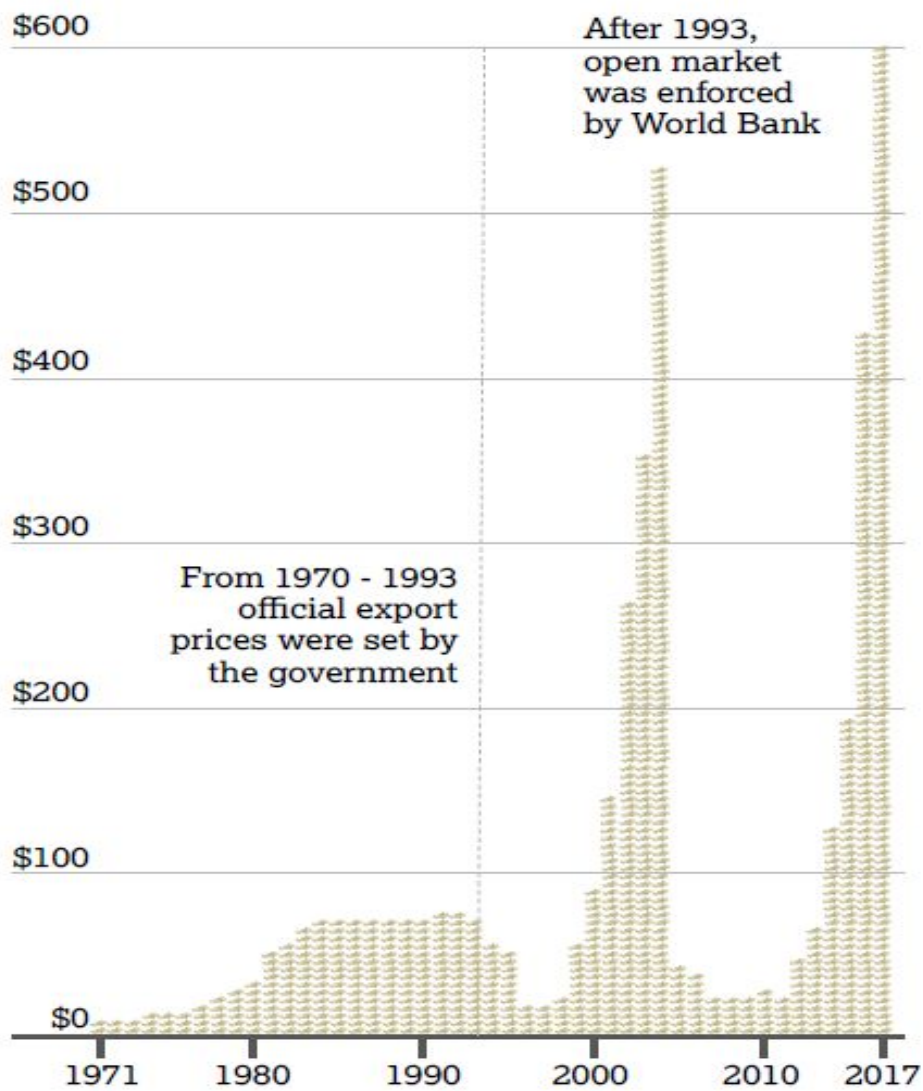


Figure 2: Photo from lead story of vanilla from the Financial Times story 'The real Price of the vanilla boom:' <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56>



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Armed guards watch over a vanilla harvest in Bemalamatra municipality, Madagascar © AFP

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Figure 3: Photo from *Ft* article of executives from Mars Inc. who have come to Madagascar on their first trip ever to plan development initiatives in order to stabilize farmers' livelihoods and the market



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Victoria Mars, left, who inherited an 8 per cent stake in Mars, visits vanilla plantations as part of the Livelihoods Project

Mob Justice and 'The Civilized Commodity'

~~Developing a theory around 'the civilised commodity' we expose agrarian crises and 'mob violence' affecting global high value products, including the global vanilla price spike in Madagascar. We illuminate producers' labour under such violence, uncertainty, and contradictory claims of justice. The underlying question - what counts as justice and to whom - illustrates broader arguments regarding producer-consumer 'moral hyper-proximity' in an age of social media and the systemic and future governance over life under fraught conditions of commodity circulation. Calls for a return to 'law and order,' albeit important, obscure the structural political economic inequities of the 'everyday' production of commodities under periodic crisis.~~

Developing a theory around 'the civilized commodity' we examine agrarian crises and the resulting 'mob violence' affecting high-value global commodities, including the vanilla market boom of Madagascar. We illustrate how producers labour under fraught conditions of violence, uncertainty, and contradictory claims of moral economy and 'street justice'. The underlying question - what counts as justice and to whom - highlights broader arguments regarding the 'moral hyper-proximity' of producer-consumer relations, and the strategies of state and market actors to circulate 'civilized' visions for the systemic and future governance over commodity landscapes. Calls by state and market agencies for a return to 'law and order,' however, obscure the structural, political, and economic inequities faced by smallholders in their 'everyday' production of commodities under periodic crisis.

1. Introduction: Commodity Theft, Justice and 'The Mob'

It was July of 2017, and we were packed into a village home located in the heart of Madagascar's northeast 'vanilla triangle' trying to get some idea of the effects of the price spike on local vanilla growers.¹ Vanilla bean prices had reached upwards of \$600 a kilogram, representing nearly a 16-fold price increase to rural vanilla producers since 2013. As may be expected in such a boom market, the first thing we noticed about the price spike was the new wealth it brought to the area, as everywhere we looked we saw recently purchased consumer goods, including off-mark Chinese motorbikes, flashy neon-colored sofas, tin roofing and solar panels.²

However, alongside this newly found wealth came a wave of insecurity and extreme anxiousness, as many farmers spoke of sleepless nights in their vanilla fields attempting to ward off thieves who wanted to cash in on the high prices. In fact, security concerns overwhelmed our

¹ The 'we' here includes the first and fourth author, only. The northeast coastal towns of Sambava, Antalaha, Vohemar and Andapa (SAVA) are eentrecenter of vanilla-production in Madagascar.

² It is the country's primary export crop with proceeds of up to \$800 million. For more on the material effects on local consumption patterns of the vanilla price spike see Zhu 2018.

conversations. The head of ~~the-one~~ growers' association, Joseph, stressed, '...that when there's a lot of money in the area, there is theft', and when a thief is caught, more times than not, ~~farmersthey~~ are compelled to '...take matters into their own hands'.³ When asked why they do not just call the police (*gendarmes*), another grower, ~~Henri~~, grumbled: 'we do not trust the gendarmes...they are the ones who sell guns to the *dahalo* [local bandits]'. We then asked what they do if they caught a dahalo stealing their vanilla. Joseph replied with a straight but rather deadpan expression, 'dead immediately'.

Although Joseph's statement was particularly blunt, there is no shortage of such stories of 'extra-judicial' killings and other acts of violence from smallholders across the SAVA region of Northeastern Madagascar. ~~Ever-s~~Since the price spike began in 2016~~2~~, there have been reports of increased incidents of *vindicta populaire* (or *fitsaram bahoaka* in Malagasy), acts we refer to in this discussion as 'street' or 'mob justice' to denote the contextual realities of village streets, where ~~historically~~ violence motivated by vanilla theft is taking place sometimes by individuals, but also in groups.⁴ ~~While vigilante justice is not a new phenomenon in rural Madagascar (e.g. Sharp 1990), with the current price spike, these events are now more frequent and violent.~~⁵ In 2017 alone, it was reported that over 100 people, both thieves and farmers, were killed in ~~the vanilla producing region of Andapa, located in the western part of the vanilla triangle. the most western city of the vanilla producing region of Madagascar, Andapa.~~

While this uptick in violence is ~~deeply~~ disturbing, it would be simplistic to chalk up such violent responses by smallholders as 'irrational' or 'chaotic' actions taken by a desperate and precarious peasant class. On the contrary, the almost mundane descriptions of reprisals to vanilla theft, and the lack of response by Malagasy state authorities, signals a desire to seek out alternative forms of ~~soeial~~ justice in the wake of the price spike. In the absence of state and market mechanisms of support, ~~many~~ farmers currently regard 'taking matters into their own hands' as the most effective avenue to safeguard their livelihoods. Farmers look towards street justice primarily as a means of protecting their crops, but also as a form of 'symbolic resistance'

³ Anonymous interviews (July 16 2017).

⁴ ~~We want to stress that vigilante justice is a not a new phenomenon in rural Madagascar (e.g. Sharp 1990), as~~For example, in some areas of Madagascar, there is a tradition of mob violence for certain grave infractions, such as stealing bones from ancestral tombs, but as we show is now more frequent, violent and much more visible by a global audience with the onset of new media.

⁵ For example, in some areas of Madagascar, there is a tradition of mob violence for certain ~~grave-serious~~ infractions, such as stealing bones from ancestral tombs.

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against the gendarmes who smallholders suspect of deputizing thieves to steal from farmers on behalf of state officials. These acts of vigilante justice by smallholders effectively challenge the state's legitimacy over the use of force ~~and over delineating sanctioned punishments against crime~~ (Weber 2013; Mbembé 2003).

~~In such ways, m~~ Mob violence is situated as a question of agrarian moral economy within which, despite differences in gender, class, and ethnicity, 'a broader solidarity emerges' in response to structural injustices imposed by the state and market forces (Neumann 2002, 42; see also Edelman 2005; Wolford 2010). ~~In Madagascar, t~~The moral economic relationships of smallholder vanilla farmers are embedded within the neoliberal market reforms and deregulation of ~~the vanilla market during~~ the mid-1990s (McMichael 2009). While smallholders have been dealing with price variations for nearly twenty-five years, the current price spike has precipitated a crisis for rural communities that has engendered particularly acute levels of violence and mistrust. ~~Thus, In the vanilla market, as with peasant commodity production more generally,~~ smallholders who are facing the loss of their livelihoods recalibrate their moral sensibilities around violence within the context of 'boom and bust' dynamics. ~~In the case of rural Madagascar, t~~This recalibration is breaking down certain existing moral economic relationships ~~within communities, including creating heightened suspicions between neighbors, and even between members of the same family. At the same time, the vanilla crisis is also reinforcing other collective relationships, as individual farmers work together to organize patrols and mobilize shared security measures, including mob violence events. For example, in a few cases, younger individuals are stealing vanilla from the fields of elder members of their family, upending Malagasy moral codes of respecting elders.~~

The moral economy of rural street justice ~~also~~ influences, and is influenced by, multiple intersecting relationships of power that extend beyond local levels of production, ~~however~~. For example, acts of mob violence are becoming increasingly visible to those living outside of rural Madagascar, as accounts of 'vanilla violence' reach a global audience through high profile media outlets.⁶ These accounts are similar to international news stories that highlight the violence connected with other high value commodities, such as 'blood diamonds' (Le Billon 2000), cacao (Dhariwal 2012), and avocados (Brown 2013). Reading these depictions ~~in the media,~~ downstream market actors, such as multinational companies ~~and,~~ commodity suppliers,

⁶Examples are NYTimes, Guardian, the Economist.

~~experience their own moral narratives of street justice in Madagascar's villages become anxious, and consumers in U.S. and Europe, that consumers will turn away from products that use 'blood' vanilla.⁷ experience their own moral narratives of street justice in Madagascar's villages.~~

The circulation of these stories illustrate what we call a 'moral hyper-proximity' of global commodities – the changing dynamics of producer-consumer relations in an age of high-speed media, where information ~~about of the conditions of~~ commodity production travels faster and in a greater diversity of forms (c.f. Goodman et al. 2017; Büseher and Igoe 2013; Anderson 2014; Goodman et al 2016). Moral hyper-proximity brings ideas of what producers and consumers each believe to be 'fair' dynamics of commodity production and trade relationships into more immediate contact through diverse social media ~~platforms platforms~~ (Besky 2008; Moberg and Lyon 2010; West 2012). ~~For example, m~~Many of the circulating media stories ~~on mob violence in the vanilla market~~ emphasize the preference for 'law and order' structures to prevail, linking this outcome with best serving farmers.⁸ ~~These these accounts, and the international attention surrounding they are bringing to Madagascar's vanilla industry is forcing the Malagasy Madagascar's government to take action to reclaim authority and moral legitimacy over law enforcement, including through the increased militarization of the spaces of commodity production. While well-meaning, media accounts that frame commodity violence through a lens of 'law and order' – and that advocate for the better enforcement through courts and draconian state measures – also obfuscate the deeper structural issues of the price spike, most namely, the historical economic marginalization of a peasant class (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976). We refer to these conditions as moral hyper-proximity. Hyper-proximity compresses differing frameworks for morality as consumers are increasingly exposed to the idea that their purchasing decisions are simultaneously an avenue to comment what forms of exchange are fair and desirable (Moberg and Lyon 2010). Moral hyper-proximity compresses not only the economic spaces of trade – eliminating certain nodes of middlemen exchange between producer and consumer (Harvey 2002) – but also ideological spaces (Tsing 2015; Anderson 2014; Bair and Werner 2014). Through social media and other outlets, consumers can quickly learn about forms of production connected with the products, and to imagine themselves as imbricated in the lives of producers~~

⁷ For example, see: <https://old.danwatch.dk/en/undersogelseskapitel/du-risikerer-at-koebe-stjaalen-vanilje-i-supermarkedet/>

⁸ This notion of justice commonly aligns with discussions of literature largely based on western traditions of moral individualism (c.f. Rawls, 2005; Martinez-Alier et al. 2016; Temper et al 2015).

(West 2012). Many times, these messages emphasize positive effects of trade, such as the community benefits of Fair Trade or the environmental benefits of organic certification. However, in the cases the messaging can be disturbing, detailing the exploitation and harm brought by existing systems with more powerful entities subjecting people, and environments, to forms of violence (c.f. Le Billon 2000). Making visible the harmful aspects of commodities can lead to successful organization of consumer activism that exerts public and financial pressure on corporations to improve labour conditions for smallholder farmers, or factory workers (Bair and Werner 2014).

Below, we elaborate on the concepts of moral economy and moral hyper-proximity in the context of street violence of the vanilla boom. We argue that power struggles over defining the just governance of commodity relationships emerge in part as struggles over the right to claim moral authority over the disciplining of material and discursive landscapes, in order to in attempts to delineate how people involved in commodity production and trade 'should' behave (Cavanaugh 2018, 405; Goodman et al. 2017; Death and Gabay 2015). In attempts to bridge these diverse concepts, Specifically, what counts as justice, and morality, and to whom? What if the outcomes considered 'just' by smallholder farmers are not the ones many expect? Can extra-judicial killings be justified, or even glorified, in the name of smallholder justice?

We mobilize Norbert Elias' (2000, vol. 1; 1982; 1969, vol 2 1982) classic work, *The Civilizing Process*, to illustrate the historical and political conditions through which societies are managed, ed and, and apply these concepts to explore the theory of 'the civilized commodity' or the systemic governance over life under the fraught moral conditions of increasingly violent commodity circulation (Le Billon 2005). Elias signals micro-level changes in human behavior alongside periods of economic transformation and specialization in the late 18th Century (Durkheim 1893); when labour shifts brought social classes (e.g., the 'village' cobbler and the Bourgeois merchant), normally kept apart, in more frequent contact. This new proximity contact between 'unlike social classes' altered how people acted and presumably instilled when in closer proximity, and thus, instilled a 'civilizing processes' of learned behaviors from the

courtly social classes 'downward'.⁹ These behaviors included, such as and, state reified the over time. In his later work, Elias (1982) thought of the civilizing process as essential to building of the nation-state, with newly formed governments both reinforcing 'appropriate behaviors' to reinforce bolster state legitimacy, and enforce tax collection, and most noteworthy, to maintaining a monopoly on violence. This governance aims to regulate commodity landscapes both now, and pre-emptively for future conditions of production and consumption (Massumi 2015; Büscher 2018). Such debates intersect with the cultural norms of what people believe to be appropriate individual and societal behaviors. In the mid-20 Century, Elias (1939: Vol. 1, 1969: Vol 2, 1982) detailed changes in social behavior and psychology in the social structures of European societies over the *longue durée* between the European Middle Ages and 18th Century. Elias exhibited how societal expectations of 'appropriate behavior' or how 'one should act' has changed over time. This surrounded everything from table manners, bodily functions, nose blowing and spitting, sleeping, to sexual relations and aggression.

Elias makes a point in signaling periods of economic transformation and specialization in the late 18th Century (Durkheim 1893); when labour shifts brought social classes (e.g., the 'village' cobbler and the Bourgeois merchant), normally kept apart, in more frequent contact. This new contact between 'unlike social classes' altered how people acted when in closer proximity, and thus, instilled a 'civilizing processes' of learned behaviors, such as the capacity of foresight, rationalization and self-restraint; and the internalization of negative emotions (e.g. anxiety, disgust), originating from courtly societies and upper classes downward onto the general population. These behaviors were over time subsequently reified through social sanction and other disciplining tools by the state (Foucault 1998; Weber 1993). For instance, in his later work, Elias (1982) thought of the civilizing process as essential to building of the nation-state with newly formed governments both reinforcing 'appropriate behaviors' to reinforce state legitimacy and enforce tax collection, and most noteworthy, maintaining a monopoly on violence.

Although Elias details the social psychological changes of societies over time, Foucault's use of 'bio-power' describes how disciplinary forms of power and knowledge have come to 'normatively prescribe how both individuals and populations should behave' (Cavanagh 2018,

⁹ These behaviours included the capacity of foresight, rationalization, self-restraint, and the internalization of negative emotions such as anxiety and disgust. The state reified these behaviours over time through social sanctions and other disciplining tools (Foucault 1998; Weber 1993).

405) and to exercise sovereignty in order to have the power to 'define life' itself. As Mambe and Meintjes (2003, 12) note, '...to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power'. Similar to Elias' later work on the nation-state, Foucault (1991) draws on the sovereign state and its populations in the post-Enlightenment period and the emergence of scientific measurement and regulation as instruments to foster progress in health and living conditions. These new instruments of disciplinary power emerge as a way to legitimize the state control over individuals and of broad swaths of the population more generally (Cavanagh 2018).

Working from Elias, we explore the theory of 'the civilized commodity,' or the systemic governance over life under the fraught moral conditions of increasingly violent commodity circulation (Le Billon 2005). We use *Placing the civilized commodity* in conversation with street justice, moral economy and moral hyper-proximity and highlights connections between liberalized boom/bust markets and the structural political economic inequities of the 'everyday' production under periodic crisis. To many, commodity violence and street justice contrasts with the 'civilized' versions of how commodity production should look – transparent, controlled by state and market forces, and connected to the state and market control and the delivery of economic and social benefits and development (West 2012). — and thereby Thus, farmers in Madagascar taking matters into their own hands becomes for downstream market actors an unseemly and 'un-civilized' way to resolve disputes.¹⁰

Below Specifically, what counts as justice, and morality, and to whom? What if the outcomes considered 'just' by smallholder farmers are not the ones many expect? Can extra-judicial killings be justified, or even glorified, in the name of smallholder justice?

To consider these questions, we first first provide a brief overview of moral economic theory within the agrarian studies tradition. We bring this literature into conversation with work on street justice in urban settings and with other forms of commodity violence, and argue for the potential for further work examining the beyond-vanilla which we argue has potential for future work drawing on important, yet less studied, parallels of street violence between rural and urban

¹⁰ Alongside Elias, our use of civilizing here is not meant to be teleological or progression towards a superior model of behaviour or values, rather to show a critique to such thinking in a period of speed up and deregulated trade.

settings. Drawing mainly from ethnographic work with Malagasy smallholder vanilla farmers and other actors in the vanilla industry, we provide a detailed account of the material relations, historical dynamics, and cultural meaning of vanilla production and trade in the region. We consider the commodity crisis from the smallholders' perspective in comparison to other market actors, including middlemen collectors and larger exporters. In addition to participant observation research, we draw on over 288 socio-economic surveys with Malagasy vanilla growers, small-scale farmers, and 40 semi-structured interviews with collectors, exporters, government officials and industry experts.¹¹ We consider the commodity crisis from the smallholders' perspective in comparison to other market actors, including middlemen collectors and larger exporters. We draw on over 288 socio-economic surveys with both male and female vanilla growers of different levels of income and 40 semi-structured interviews with collectors, exporters, government officials and industry experts.¹² We discuss the heterogeneity of vanilla growers and their different perspectives of violence, on smallholders and consider various media accounts describing Madagascar's vanilla boom and street justice events. We demonstrate that in a period of sped up consumer producer relations, the state and market react to peasant violence with 'civilized' law and order style responses meant to discipline the behavior of farmers, landscapes, and commodities. Actions, which we show, that are meant to demonstrate state legitimacy and to maintain the state monopoly of violence in rural landscapes. We also consider various media accounts describing Madagascar's vanilla boom and street justice events connected with vanilla. Overall, despite ethnicity repositioning, and market A-TRY: Overall, despite differences in gender, wealth, ethnicity and other factors, peasant smallholders find a broader solidarity emerge in the vanilla boom crisis. Farmers are experiencing a moral-economic repositioning between the peasantry, state, and market. Rather than providing protection, state police are exploiting farmers and the spaces left in 'the market' since deregulation. Street justice is one form of peasant resistance to the state. However, as we show, in a period of sped up consumer producer relations, the state and market react to peasant violence with 'civilized' law and order style responses meant to discipline the behavior of

¹¹ This work was conducted over the 2016-17 vanilla campaign within the region of SAVA and in the UK and USA. The survey was administered by CURSA, a regional University based in Antalaha, Madagascar.

¹² This work was conducted over the 2016-17 vanilla campaign within the region of SAVA and in the UK and USA. The survey was administered by CURSA, a regional University based in Antalaha, Madagascar.

~~farmers, landscapes, and commodities. These actions are also meant to demonstrate state legitimacy and to maintain the state monopoly of violence in rural landscapes. To close we put forward the concept of *the civilized commodity* that places conceptions of street justice and moral economy into the context of the moral hyper-proximity of compressed relations of global commodity production and trade. We highlight connections between boom markets, street justice, and the structural political-economic inequities of the ‘everyday’ production of commodities under periodic crisis. n.~~

2. Moral Economy and the limits of the state

It has been over fifty years since EP Thompson’s adoption of the term ‘moral economy’ in his seminal essay (1971) ‘The moral economy of the English working crowds in the eighteenth-century.’ In the essay, Thompson explores the ‘bread-wage nexus’ and the condition of the ‘rural underclasses’ who rioted against uneven taxation and unfair pricing of grain. These ‘bread riots’ represented for Thompson, ‘direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives’ against market injustices and not thoughtless ‘rebellions of the belly’ caused by angry ‘mobs’.¹³ Thomson’s view is that the riots were a function of a ‘moral economy’ among the peasant classes based on identifiable and agreed upon ‘...social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions’ which were infringed upon within changing political economic conditions (1971, 79; see also Wolford and Keene 2015, 576). For Thompson, there was little doubt that the bread riots had popular support and were legitimized by an overwhelming belief that ‘in times of dearth, the regulation of prices ought to be enforced, and those responsible in doing so must be held accountable’ (1971, 113).

Thompson’s treatise on moral economy laid the foundation for future scholars concerned with social movements of peasants, particularly in times of dearth and economic change. James Scott, for example, examined how peasants ~~resisted-navigated~~ a similar moral terrain of rights and expectations to that of Thompson. ~~Rather than mob justice, Scott’s analysis displayed tensions between landlords and farmers which boiled over due to subtle pressure points, especially and mainly in the unfair extraction of rent. As a result, peasants engaged in ‘small’ acts of resulting in subtle forms of~~ For Scott, small acts of ‘everyday resistance’ – from work slowdowns to petty theft – ~~whereas~~ a way ~~for peasants in Southeast Asia~~ to express their own

¹³ ~~This was not against wages as expressed in more nineteenth-century direct action (1971, 79).~~

brand of 'economic justice' (1976, 3).¹⁴ Similarly to Thompson, this [peasant response](#) was '...not just a problem of calories and income but [\[is a\]](#) question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity' (Scott, 1976, vii). Scott's work was instrumental in critical agrarian studies. According to Edelman, one of Scott's transformative contributions was to bridge critical scholarship focused on states and structure with that of the peasant's everyday social reproduction and labour allocation (2005, 334). As Edelman explains:

Scott maintains that village level systems of reciprocity produce, over long historical time, widely held moral expectations.¹⁴ Market forces (sometimes in combination with environmental ones) pose challenges to these expectations and may, when thresholds of what is culturally acceptable are crossed, produce rebellion and collective resistance.

To varying degrees each of these contributions described peasant conceptions of local struggles within a changing political economy and how peasant navigate changing ethical and moral issues of reciprocity, values and justice [around-within](#) a shifting '[subsistence substance](#)-ethic' (Scott, 1976 see also Chayanov 1966). This [subsistence substance](#)-ethic [went beyond the quotidian requirements of meeting 'brute physiological needs'](#) to also encompass the subjective [experiences accumulated in periods of formed the subjective experiences to political economic crisis that peasants build up over time, in addition to what is required to meet their every day everyday 'brute physiological needs'](#) (1976, 17). [In Scott's analysis tensions between landlords and farmers boiled over at subtle pressure points, mainly in the unfair extraction of rent. Thompson's analysis which describes in detail how, groups of angry peasant resisted in organized mobs signaling to the predatory state that they were not providing protection for its peasantry from market exploitation.](#)

[Critical scholars have since applied Since, the concept of moral economy has been applied by critical scholars](#) to a variety of geographic spaces and [across](#) multiple scales, including landless farmers in Brazil (Wolford 2010), [and](#) shifting cultivators ([Kull 2004](#)) [-and agropastoralists \(Gingembre 2015\) in Madagascar, and \(Kull 2004\) to drug traffickers in Northern Philadelphia \(Karandinos et al. 2014\) to and Fair Trade markets South Africa \(McEwan et al 2017\).](#) Many of these scholars diverge in their conceptual usage of moral economy, yet all

¹⁴ Others such as Eric Wolf, Benjamin Moore and [other scholars](#) in the French school of Agricultural Sciences, more generally used the concept of moral economy [the-in](#) calling out of 'markets' as spaces of political contestation and struggle.

in some way draw attention to what Neumann (2002, 37) remarks as the shifting ‘...norms, values, and expectations related to the livelihoods of subordinate classes during major economic transformations’ (see also: McCarthy 2002; Moore 1998).

Moral economy and street violence

Less effective, however, has been the adoption of moral economy to understand its close association with diverse forms of justice, in particular, the less understood concept of ‘street justice’ or *vindicta popolare*.¹⁵ Our discussion aims to bridge these two bodies of literature, by placing street justice as enacted by smallholders into moral economic framings that foreground the intersections of liberalized markets and state vulnerability.

It is within such a context that Malagasy farmers resort to street violence to protect their vanilla resources— an act we understand in this case to be, in part, a particular form of commodity violence. This violence is not random, however, but is situated within broader moral economic relationships between farmers, states, and commodity markets. As violence escalates, certain aspects of these moral economic relationships begin to break-down, as distrust grows between and among farmers, Malagasy state officials, and market actors.

—The escalating violence associated with the vanilla boom parallels similar forms of violence associated with high value commodities, especially within largely deregulated markets. For example, cacao production in Africa has long been associated with violence and the exploitation of children (*Financial times* 2018), including a wave of rural violence in Madagascar in 2012 during the global cacao boom when armed thieves stole cacao pods from smallholders (Dhariwal 2012). The diamond trade is notorious for its reliance on “conflict” diamonds obtained through systematic violence and outright conflict and is often cited as an example of ‘resource wars’ (Le Billon 2004, 1). The liberalization of access and control to valuable commodities, such as conflict minerals, oil, ~~or~~ timber, and commodity crops many times exacerbates historical tensions of uneven development and marginalization, which which at times may also leads to widespread violence, including organized armed conflicts (Watts and Peluso 2001). Other work on ‘neoliberal commodity economies’ points to the larger structural

¹⁵ Originally understood in the French Ag. School as ‘mentalities populaire’; while Thompson uses ‘mob,’ we also adopt the term ‘street’ in order to navigate the naturalizing connotations of ‘mob mentality’ and denote that village streets are subject to violence similar to social connections found also within urban contexts (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2018; Karandinos et al. 2014).

violence intrinsic ~~within-to~~ even outwardly nonviolent trade relationship, especially for the low-wage, comparatively disenfranchised individuals within international commodity relationships (Nevins and Peluso 2008).

~~The ‘street justice’ killings of vanilla thieves in Madagascar are another form of commodity violence, which presents both similarities and differences to the above examples. In considering these forms of violence, we adopt the term ‘street justice’ for two main reasons. First, the use of the word ‘street’ helps we wish to in order to navigate the naturalizing connotations of ‘mob mentality’ and its suggestion of irrational behaviors. Second, we aim to denote that village streets are subject to social forms of violence similar to social connections found also that noted within urban contexts, especially in places which have been subjected to periods of austerity and neglect (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2018). For example, our study on the ‘mobilizing of violence’ in village streets, somewhat follows Karandinos et al. (2014) and Anderson’s (1999) work on drug gangs in inner-city Philadelphia. In this work, street violence is not necessarily random or chaotic, but often directed by individual or groups following understood ‘codes of the street’ (Bourgois 2003). ~~or as~~ Karandinos et al. (2014, 1) describe ~~such codes as a~~ ‘ethical norms and obligations which are recognized as legitimate’ reactions by locals as a way to navigate moral economic and social change and crisis.~~

~~These reactions, however unseemly and ‘uncivilized’ to outsiders, are a way for localized justice to take place when the main arbitrator of justice, the state, is absent (Spiereburg 2009). violence that~~The dynamics between weak states, changing neoliberal markets, and mob violence have been described in other regions as well (Abrahams 1998). For example, a wave of street justice violence and lynching in Bolivia was described as a mechanism for communities to ‘take law into their own hands’ in frustration with the lack of state response against rampant crime (Goldstein 2003). In this way, Goldstein ~~demonstrates that argues,~~ “‘vigilantism acts as a moral complaint against state inadequacy, challenging state legitimacy and redefining ideas about justice, citizenship, and law in the process (2003, 22).’” Similarly Smith, writing of the vigilante justice group in Nigeria known as the Bakassi boys notes that this ~~violent vigilante~~ group mobilized to killed suspected criminals in response to perceived failure of the state to safeguard citizen's ~~property and basic~~ rights during a time of intensified market reforms and economic change (2004). ~~we also adopt the term ‘street’ in order to navigate the naturalizing connotations of ‘mob mentality’ and denote that village streets are subject to violence similar to social connections found also within urban contexts (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2018; Karandinos et al. 2014).~~

To [bring together these frameworks – commodity violence, street justice, and moral economy](#) - we turn to the empirical case of 'street justice' violence in Madagascar surrounding the vanilla boom, which illustrates how ideas of moral economy and [street ideas of justice](#) intersect in the context of commodity production and trade. We ~~then~~ ask what the vanilla crisis can tell us about the intersections of moral economy and justice in the context of economic volatility and uncertainty, [as Malagasy farmers increasingly take matters of justice 'into their own hands.'](#)

3. Overview of vanilla cultivation and trade in Madagascar

The current dynamics of [Madagascar's](#) 'street violence' [need to beare](#) situated within broader economic, political, and environmental contexts of global commodity production and trade. In particular, we see the crisis tied directly to the deregulation of commodities markets in the 1990s. [Albeit While](#) mob justice is not necessarily new form of violence in Madagascar, this deregulation is a key point of departure for us to better understand [the connections between just how connected](#) the political and moral economy of street justice, ~~is to~~ global commodity circuits, and the historical roll-back of state power and legitimacy in rural Madagascar.

Vanilla ~~was~~ thought to be introduced to Réunion, Mauritius, and then Madagascar in the early 1800s by the French who were looking to establish commercial plantations (Havkin-Frenkel et al. 2010). Their initial attempts were stymied, however, due of the lack of a natural pollinator found in [vanilla's](#) native regions of Mexico and wider regions of Central America. This all changed ~~in~~ around the 1840s when a viable, but labour intensive, method of hand pollination was discovered.¹⁶ With this [discovery](#), the French were essentially able to monopolize vanilla cultivation in Madagascar and [the](#) neighbouring territories.

After Madagascar gained independence in 1960, the new socialist government instituted regulations on the vanilla trade, aimed at stabilizing prices and global supplies. Though providing some security for farmers during the ensuing decades, there also emerged entrenched alliances between political and economic interests, as the [vanilla](#) market became marked by corruption and opaque relationships of trade. Then, under pressure from international monetary agencies, Madagascar deregulated the vanilla trade in the 1990s, leading [eventually](#) to highly volatile market conditions marked by dramatic booms and prolonged bust periods (Laney and

¹⁶ In Mexico, the plant is pollinated by melipona bees and hummingbirds.

Turner 2015; Cadot et al. 2010). One of these price spikes occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s, exasperated by a cyclone that destroyed much of Madagascar's vanilla harvest. This boom was followed by a rapid price crash, with prices falling to below \$40/kg (see Figure 1 below). While many vanilla farmers elsewhere around the globe largely abandoned vanilla cultivation during the prolonged bust market, which stretched the decade between 2005 and 2015, many Malagasy farmers continued to cultivate vanilla, dependent on the crop and with few other options (Osterhoudt 2017). The current boom market, with vanilla prices once again rising overnearing \$500/kg, thus arrives after a decade-long period of hardship and struggle for rural households in vanilla producing regions of Madagascar.¹⁷

Figure 1: Average Price for Vanilla from 1971 to 2017 (adopted from Nielsen-Massy Vanillas)

Today, Madagascar still continues to dominates production in the global vanilla market. Its branded variety 'Bourbon,' is the industry's 'gold standard,' recognised for its unique and diverse flavour profile. It is Madagascar's leading agricultural export, valued at approximately valued annually at roughly over \$800 million per year (OEC 2017). This Madagascar's hold over the market is no accident; the region maintains the ideal microclimate for vanilla cultivation, with suitable conditions of moisture and temperature for vanilla flowering. Yet, its global dominance owes more to the its availability of cheap labour essential for commercial production. Vanilla is a labour-intensive crop and its cultivation. This includes the incredibly arduous tasks of hand pollination, a long growing period, and a lengthy four-months process of traditional sun-curing beans without which, some say, it loses its quality. Many Malagasy households depend on vanilla income to meet basic needs, and thus invest the time and labour into cultivation and curing. Peasants' dependence on the vanilla trade is no secret in the industry, as frequent discussions with exporters highlighted how in times of high or low prices, Malagasy farmers will continue to produce a vanilla harvest. As noted in a recent article in the Financial Times, 'Not only is its climate perfect, but it is also one of the few places on earth poor enough to make the laborious process of hand pollination worthwhile'.¹⁸

This farmer dependence on vanilla income is seen in the villages that are the site of our ethnographic research. These rural communities are situated within the main site for vanilla

¹⁷ In addition to market deregulation and cyclone events, vanilla price spikes are also connected with the increase in illegal rosewood trafficking in the region (Zhu 2018).

¹⁸ Access at: <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56> (July 12, 2018).

production in Madagascar, known as the ‘vanilla triangle’ of the SAVA district. The region comprises of around 800 villages scattered across over 23 thousand km with two main ethnic groups – the costal ‘Betsimisaraka’ and the ‘Tsimihety’ who occupy the higher altitudes making up the majority of the estimated 80-100 thousand vanilla farmers in the region.¹⁹

Nevertheless, even though the vanilla region remains growing region remains one of Madagascar's wealthiest, and some farmers seem to be doing well financially under the current boom, the majority of peasant smallholders, who have access to less than 5 ha of land, still remain relatively poor and few economic choices, with many living off less than \$2/day. Households in this area also struggled during the previous decade, with the prolonged bust of the vanilla market – a situation further exasperated by cyclone events, political uncertainty and government corruption that also beset the region during these years. ~~The region comprises of around 800 villages scattered across over 23 thousand km with two main ethnic groups – the costal ‘Betsimisaraka’ and the ‘Tsimihety’ who occupy the higher altitudes making up the majority of the estimated 80-100 thousand vanilla farmers in the region.~~²⁰

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4. Theft and ‘Street Justice’ in the Vanilla Boom

In this context of prolonged economic hardship, intense labor requirements, and decades of collusion and corruption between certain state and market forces, the theft of vanilla hits smallholder farmers particularly hard. Exasperating the challenge of vanilla security in the absence of reliable state and legal institutions is the materiality of the vanilla plant itself,

¹⁹ The French, the Chinese, Indo-Pakistanis and those of varied Arab descent arrived for the vanilla trade starting toward the end of the 19th century. Many Chinese have since intermarried with the Betsimisaraka and Tsimihety and occupy an outsized role in vanilla and other valuable commodities in the region (Zhu 2016).

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²¹ Access at: <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90e2-9563a0613e56> (July 12, 2018).

which is a relatively easy crop to steal. It is an orchid grown in multistoried 'garden' systems called *taniboly* located in relatively far distance from village homes ~~and -under customary and very insecure customary tenure systems.~~ Beans develop on the vines between March and July, when they are vulnerable to theft, especially in May and June when the beans are relatively ripe but the official vanilla market in Madagascar has not yet opened. Thieves take advantage of this 'lag time' to steal green vanilla off the vine as the pods are easily swiped off without much effort and depending on moisture content relatively light to haul away. We found in our survey of 288 growers in the southern SAVA city of Antalaha, that over 58 percent (n=167) sell their vanilla early and still immature, and over 55 percent (n=159) said they do so that '*no one will steal it*'.²²

The distress of the theft and subsequent violence is having a severe effect on the social and economic relations between individual vanilla growers. Over 62 percent (n=111) responded that their life has become '*much more difficult*' since the price spike began in 2014. Although the somewhat sizable minority of 36% (n= 105) did say that having '*more money helped make life easier*,' the security situation was identified as the number one issue confronting all those surveyed, with 69 percent (n=199) saying that '*security has gotten worse*' since the price spike. Moreover, 81 percent (n=232) responded that they have had their vanilla stolen or were affected by attempted theft.

While vanilla theft is not a new phenomenon, the recent price spike has set off a particular harshness to the violence ~~unforeseen not as often seen in this region in~~ the past, as farmers organize against potential vanilla bandits through measures that include direct and sometimes ~~even~~ deadly force through 'street justice' events.

In ~~this region of~~ Madagascar, a street justice event typically beings when a suspected thief is caught in someone's vanilla fields, usually at night. Such thieves could be spotted by a farmer keeping watch over his or her field, ~~or~~ by a community patrol, or by a guard hired to secure particular fields. Once a thief is apprehended, people sound the alarm through shouting and running through town, calling others to join the group. Many times, the thief is badly beaten ~~up or killed~~. Thieves may be local to the area, or from outside the region. ~~Usually, if~~ the story of ~~such reported street~~ violence 'stays local' – meaning it does not get reported outside the region - ~~s~~State officials usually do not punish those who participate. However, as we see below, ~~the state's is response~~ ~~changesing if~~as reports of ~~street justice~~ get out into international news, ~~as~~

²² 'n' refers to the total number of the 288 respondents who ~~shoeschoose~~ this answer.

Malagasy authorities need to ~~act and~~ maintain ~~what seems to be a question of their~~ the appearance of legitimacy over market order.

There were many vanilla growers in Madagascar who commented on the ‘cozy’ relationships between thieves and state authorities, including gendarmes and high court officials, who ~~both either~~ refused to ~~step in~~ halt, or were in some way complicit in vanilla theft. This belief led to a which lead in some way to ‘mistrust of the official justice system’ and the subsequent perceived need for farmers to ‘take matters into their own hands’. Only 21 percent (n= 61) of growers surveyed said that they felt thieves were ever ‘caught’, (meaning also meant brought to some sort of official justice) while 72 percent (n=206) said that ‘*nothing was ever done*’ about it, about reported vanilla thefts, and even worse, some smallholders went on to say that ~~that~~ the gendarmes (state police forces) were are ‘*colluding with local villagers and intermediaries, giving them the tools and protection to steal*’.²³ One farmer noted: “There are plenty of personnel of the State Executive (National Police and Court of Justice or even Government Officials) who have as Aina, one an older male vanilla grower described it, who there are many police, court and government officials who have a ‘*relationship*’ to the thieves’.²³ and another noted that, ‘*...when thieves are caught they are let go soon after*.’ Aina They went on to say:

Let me explain what happens here. When we have caught the thieves, we hand them over to the authorities (*Police National*). However, the problem is that the thieves have paid the responsible officers and they are liberated afterwards...²⁴

This collusion often continues after thieves ~~Ever after, they are~~ arrested and are meant to stand trial:

They (the thieves) are rich but that does not restrain them from stealing. What is more, when we have filed the case at the court of justice, they withdraw the case since the thieves and their bosses have the financial means (to corrupt the judges) and the poor cannot do anything about it.²⁵

This is not to say that theft of vanilla was not always an issue – as 67 percent (n=192) of respondents say that ‘*theft has always been a problem*’. However, it seems that the mechanisms that were once in place to protect vanilla growers and punish thieves bring those caught to justice

²³ Anon July 2017

²⁴ Anon July 2017

²⁵ Anon Aug 2017

have broken down at the same time as the economic stakes of vanilla thefts have been raised. With vanilla prices at record highs, more people are taking the risk to steal. ~~sue to the sheer severity of violence during the boom~~

The rise in thefts are disrupting local relationships, as many suspect that vanilla thieves are individuals from their own communities, or even their own family; ~~in particular, before market reforms took hold in the 1990s.~~ As noted ~~by some local by~~, Herimanoa, a male grower of organic certified vanillagrowers, "they [thieves] are those living close, commission agents as well as authorities distribute money among young people. It is this act which obliges them to steal."²⁶ It was explained to us, that 'local recruits' have the advantage of knowing your movements and whereabouts and therefore know when you are away. ~~And s~~ Sometimes the practice of recruiting from local villages pits ~~sting~~ family members against each other: "In my opinion it is our children who dare to steal vanilla from their own fathers in our own fields." ~~responded Hery, a moderately-wealthy smallholder.~~²⁷ One common response we frequently heard was that local youth are more generally responsible for the act of stealing. Many said that they are actively recruited by both 'commissionaires' (middlemen) and financed by regional police. As ~~expressed noted by Lalaina, a female another~~ grower ~~who at times just gets by financially living on the economic margins,~~

Commissionaires incentivize local people to steal, and it is them who then buy the stolen vanilla. In fact, there was a thief amongst us in this village who knew all our secrets and we did not even know that he was a bandit, but he knew all our actions and movements"²⁸

The collusion of local youth with outside state officials against rural producers is disrupting the more usual moral economic relationships in agrarian Malagasy communities, whereby producer communities largely 'stand together' in the face of outside encroachment onto their land and resources (Gezon 1999, Osterhoudt 2016, Sodikoff 2012). The stakes of state corruption against farmers have also been raised; as the above quotes indicate, while state officials may not have given much protection to producers in the past, the current presumed complicity in vanilla theft crosses a moral and economic threshold for many farmers.

²⁶ Anon Aug 2017

²⁷ Anon July 2017

²⁸ Anon Sept 2018

~~In face of these shifting social relationships, As such statements illustrate, vanilla farmers articulate the need for street justice to protect their livelihoods against the lack of state control and the rising threat of insecurity, specifically in relation to their vanilla harvests. By mobilizing acts of mob violence, farmers seek to secure their vanilla harvests in a way that protects them from state retribution, and which maintains market relationships within local and regional systems of trade. Street justice events also work within certain existing Malagasy social and moral economic systems, that emphasize collective action and local autonomy, including framing confrontation through the collective rather than through the individual (Lambek and Solway 2001; Sodikoff 2012) and through expression of rural solidarity against outside forces that encroach upon local land and resources (Jeroz 1999, Osterhoudt 2016). Street violence also prevents punishment by the state, by diffusing responsibility across a large, essentially anonymous group (Goldstein 2003; Smith 2004). In such ways, as we discuss below, street justice acts fit within certain components of local moral economic systems.~~

As described in classic work on moral economy as connected to group resistance and violence, people perpetuating violence are not regarded as irrational or intrinsically violent individuals, but are rather acting within social and moral boundaries to secure basic rights and livelihoods within more informal spheres of solidarity (Metz et al. 2010). They are thus acting as essentially rational actors caught between powerful forces. Indeed, in Madagascar, farmers describe their position in these terms: people note that they do not enjoy having to resort to street justice tactics, but feel the economic stakes are too high to leave protection, or forms of retribution, to the mechanisms of ~~the an absent or corrupt~~ state.

~~In targeting street justice, moreover, rural communities draw from Malagasy cultural forms of moral behavior, including framing confrontation through the collective rather than through the individual (Keenan 1974; Lambek and Solway 2001; Sodikoff 2012). Mob violence stresses the solidarity of the group in mobilizing collective punishment and protection, while also preventing effective state punishment by diffusing responsibility across a large, essentially anonymous group (Goldstein 2003; Smith 2004).~~

Media narratives of street justice

This unit of the collective as the locus of justice differs from western individualized notions of moral justice (Rawls 1971). One might expect that the local conceptions in rural Madagascar that farmers are performing *regrettable, but understandable*, acts of violence to

secure their rights to property and subsistence may differ from many of the media narratives of street justice in the vanilla market. In reality, the international media has been quite sympathetic to the plight of the Malagasy grower, positioning them as reacting to a market over which they have little control, and resort to a form of turning to street justice as their last resort. However, for the most part, media reports at the same time have presented ed 'market actors' as not being at all complicit in the current market crisis. Companies and civil society institutions are usually are cast as either victims of the breakdown of local market supply (just cannot get enough vanilla to fill your artisanal ice cream orders) and/or as 'saviors' who can circumvent the corrupt state officials and greedy middlemen to 'clean up' the supply chain.

Figure 2: Photo from lead story of vanilla from the Financial Times story 'The real Price of the vanilla boom:' <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56>

Thus, while sympathetic to small farmers' actions, these media accounts also assume that the best course forward is to eliminate violent forms of street justice, changing these practices primarily by improving the state control over institutionalized forms of security, poverty reduction, and legal accountability. As quoted in a leading UK newspaper:

As vanilla becomes worth more than silver, crime takes over the Madagascan trade. It's not the backbreaking work that makes growing vanilla near impossible, it's the security problem. As it grows in value, 'vanilla murders' are becoming more common, but despite the hike in price, thousands of farmers still remain poor.²⁹

And in French newspaper:

Dozens of thieves have been apprehended in recent weeks; and such is the anger some have ended up being brutally murdered. "People trust only the people's justice..."³⁰

Other media accounts of the violence are quite sympathetic to peasants' plight, however, even normalizing such acts in these areas:-

Farmers often awake to find their vines stripped bare, carried off in the night by gangs of thieves filling orders for buyers in the far-off capital of Antananarivo, who in turn supply

²⁹ Accessed at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/features/vanilla-farming-crime-madagascar-trade-a8520396.html> (02/12/2018)

³⁰ Accessed at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180420-madagascar-vanilla-price-trade-crime-crop-weather> (06/06/2018)

the markets of western Europe, the US and Asia. In some parts of Sava, say non-governmental organisations working in the region, vigilante groups have sprung up to mete out summary justice to the vanilla snatchers.³¹

And another grower was depicted as describing moral equivalence in terms Western consumers could understand:

Soa [a vanilla grower] is plotting ever more dire punishments for anyone who does attempt to steal her current crop. At the moment vanilla thieves face 3-4 years in prison. As far as she is concerned, that's not enough. She wants a life sentence. "You invest all your life in growing the vanilla. Stealing it is the same thing as killing someone."³²

Figure 3: Photo from *Ft* article of executives from Mars Inc. who have come to Madagascar on their first trip ever to plan development initiatives in order to stabilize farmers' livelihoods and the market

As the above headline illustrates, Evidence of international companies as are sometimes presented as 'saviors':

Emmanuel Faber, chairman and chief executive of Danone... recently travelled to Madagascar for the first time to find out why it is so expensive and what can be done to secure supplies and improve farmers' lives.³³

These headlines are both effective in reaching the global market, and provoke potentially strong reactions from ethical consumers. In the case of vanilla, for example, consumers drawn to Fair Trade labels to help smallholder farmers may balk at their purchase if they learn that these same farmers are involved in brutal mob killings – even if these mob events are motivated by the desire of farmers to safeguard their agrarian livelihoods.³⁴ If anything, the 'globalizing' effect of these news stories moving them from the rural streets of vanilla growing villages to the

³¹ Accessed at: <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56> (02/12/2018)

³² Accessed at: <http://time.com/5308143/vanilla-price-climate-change-madagascar/> (02/12/2018)

³³ Accessed at: <https://www.ft.com/content/02042190-65bc-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56> (02/12/2018)

³⁴ It may be worth noting the role of the people identified with vanilla industry and market more generally. While smallholder vanilla farmers do not articulate resistance against market forces per se, the entrenched history of vanilla trade as imbricated in shady state practices becomes relevant. Many vanilla industry representatives remark that they must secure the loyalty of farmers in a supply-driven market, while also not falling out of favor with Malagasy government entities (who are empowered to revoke export licenses) or of international consumers, who may be upset by associations of violence with vanilla products.

supermarket shelves forces the 'visible hand' of the state to have to intervene on the 'invisible hand' of the violent vanilla market both to ensure stability and to regain legitimacy under the banner of 'law and order'.

State legitimacy and militarizing a broken market

Circulating media headlines on [vanilla violence](#) do not only potentially influence consumers – they are also forcing representatives in Madagascar's government into action. ~~After the increased international media attention on vanilla violence, the state knew it had to act, and fast quickly.~~³⁵ In response to [international criticism](#), the state, with donor and market support, selected some of the ~~hardest hit~~ [hardest hit](#) villages to 'securitize vanilla ~~landscapes,~~' through militarized-style [defense trainings](#) and [the surveillance of smallholders](#). ~~Now with state support, A pilot project was conducted in six communes across all each of the 4 four districts of the region. The most well-known of these initiatives was the village of Ambodivohitra Kobahina (Andapa Region) - also dubbed the "Zero Theft" village. In this village, specific farmers have formed village police meant to professionalize and 'deputize' what were formally 'vigilante groups.'~~ This included the formation of farmers into paramilitary associations to secure their vanilla fields in six pilot communes in all 4 districts of the SAVA Region from 2015 onwards.³⁶ The campaign included trainings of existing or newly established village vigilante groups with *gendarmes* in military-style defense and surveillance. ~~Trainings were given to smallholders on topics including ed-monitoring crops, and securing paths leading to and from the fields, camouflaging, how to place [placings](#) suspects caught under arrest, and how to handle suspects [transporting](#) suspected and thieves how to follow through to make sure official justice is followed to [official](#) through police stations the courts.~~³⁷ Alongside new village security groups, known by villagers as "police fokonolo" (the villager's police), the state ~~have~~ installed barricades ~~in areas~~ at village

³⁵Beyond vanilla theft, the media was also now investigating ~~rumours~~ [rumors](#) that 'new vanilla buyers' were laundering money from illegally trafficked rosewood. Accessed on: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/31/madagascars-vanilla-wars-prized-spice-drives-death-and-deforestation> (02/12/2018).

³⁶GIZ actually published these rules in March 2017 and they are being distributed since in about 86 communes and 829 villages considered to be core vanilla producing areas. "Dinam Paritra Momba Ny Seha Pihariana Lavanio Faritra SAVA. It touched all 4 districts of the SAVA region. The project officially ended in February 2017.

³⁷ Interview with SAVA/Development Coordination Unit (DCU) 11/20/2018.

ances entrances and leaving the villages exits, as well as curfews.³⁸ There have also been Farmers have also evicted the traditional their with

Yet, R-Farmers forming paramilitary associations have already existed in a handful of villages when the project started in 2015. The most well-known of these is the village of Ambodivohitra Kobahina (Andapa Region) – also dubbed the "Zero Theft" village. But not in all villages across the SAVA, which took these trainings, growers established village-based security associations that go beyond the village patrols (vigilante) groups erecting checkpoints (barricades) at the village entry. for security trainings based on the This is only happening where there is a lot of quantity of vanilla produced, where whether the community of vanilla farmers group in solidarity to defend their economic assets.³⁹ The sSecurity associations established through these projects consisted of armed men from the village who patrolled the fields day and night (especially at night) during the dangerous months of (February through August). While some members dutifully handed over the bandits they apprehended to the police, others decided to forego these official channels and pursue street justice measures. In these cases, people typically beat thieves the thefts, in order to deter others from stealing thieves They put up traps, and hand over thieves that they have caught to the police. Yet, rather than using official channels, sSome of them also decided on direct justice measures (typically beating up of thieves) – such as the one from Ambodivohitra Kobahina – to set an example to deter further theft.⁴⁰ This continuation of violence has not necessarily instilled the confidence in the state to handle these matters, as stories of vicious acts in rural communities of violence and reprises continued to circulate well after the scheme ended in 2016. An extreme example of such a story includes is the account of an extra-judicial killing of a child in the Antalaha Region, who was murdered by a bandit during an act of vanilla theft. [[and reflects the pressure the state now feels to act on vanilla violence: 'There was a child who guarded a vanilla field whom the thieves have cut into pieces. It looked as if they had cut off the feet of a slaughtered cow. The thieves were caught and are at prison right now.']] Overall,

——the projects of militarization and 'zero theft' villages represent Stories of such extreme violence are less rare, nonetheless. These new village security groups, who received

³⁸ Interview HoS/AK 02/12/2018 and DCU 11/20/2018.

³⁹ Interview DCU 11/20/2018.

⁴⁰ Interview Head of Security in Ambodivohitra Kobahina (HoS/AK) 02/12/2018.

paramilitary training, have installed barricades in areas entering and leaving the villages, and village curfews. They are known by villagers as “police fokonolo” (the villager’s police).⁴¹ There have also been a renewal of a very longstanding technique of stamping (scarring) each vanilla pod with an individual ‘ID code’ which is registered in the village commune. While this was once a widespread practice, for years it fell out of favour due to the increased labour time it took. The state, donor organisations and market actors, all have in their own ways both appropriated some of these village level techniques at security and created their own measures in other villages throughout the region. Yet by far the most elaborate attempts by the state to restore a ‘civilized commodity production landscape’ most palatable to their global consumers.

International development groups have also gotten involved in ~~through~~ ‘law and order’ vanilla initiatives ~~has been to~~ of that kind has been the ~~rampping up of securitization through and creating ‘local~~ localized ‘codes of conduct’, which are meant to provide a more recognizable, albeit more militarized and in some cases quite draconian measures that are meant to resemble ‘law and order’ which both the state and market find most palatable to their global consumers.

For example, in 2017, the German Development Agency, GIZ, and the Regional SAVA government, in 2017, ~~drafted~~ created a new village ‘*Dedina Be*,’ or the re-writing of ‘local codes of conduct,’ which are meant to be written ~~written in sync in line with~~ existing national laws and regulations ~~and be applied across multiple villages in the region in matters pertaining to vanilla~~ (GIZ 2017). This ~~approach seems to resonate for the most part, seems more~~ ‘normalizing’ ~~with many~~ as Malagasy village leaders, including mayors ~~and~~ pastors, who commonly advocate against public justice, encouraging their constituents to pursue justice through state-sanctioned means. ~~The individuals who participate in street justice violence themselves often acknowledge that such mob acts are not ideal mechanisms to stop thefts, but they state that without effective state protection, farmers are left with no other choice to protect their livelihoods, members of vigilante groups are seldom punished by state authorities, although regional and national governments have issued proclamations strongly encouraging farmers to turn in suspected vanilla thieves to the police instead of pursuing street justice measures.~~⁴²

While there were varying degrees of success of these village security sites, in terms of vigilante group cohesion and organization, around the clock surveillance and even aspects of

⁴¹ Interview HoS/AK 02/12/2018 and DCU11/20/2018.

⁴² Interview HoS/AK 02/12/2018.

self-financing, it represents an attempt of the state to re-gain control and retain some appearance of control over rural areas. Yet the state is not alone in this effort. At the National level, industry groups comprising of vanilla firms private sector actors⁴³ have also lent their support to campaigns against vanilla theft and street justice, launching aggressive anti-theft campaigns, such as the *'Un Billet sans Retour pour Les Voleurs de la Campagne'* [*'One-way Ticket for Thieves'*] and a second lobbying effort to important initiative to *'Bban public verdicts' (vindiete populaire or Vigilante Justice) Ooutright'*.⁴⁴ International trading companies are motivated in part through their understanding of the intricate links between being able to secure enough high-quality vanilla and maintaining their long-standing relationships with growers. They too have also stepped up supported security efforts at the of local and national levels, by giving security related material to farmers (e.g., raincoats, torches, first aid kits, and blankets) and. Additionally, due to demands from the smallholders, some large vanilla trading companies have begun to pay up to US\$500 paying toto transport the thieves to Antananarivo to stand trial —away from regional networks which are seen as more corrupt. Farmers, with support of firms, have also revived the traditional labor-intensive technique of stamping (scarring) each vanilla pod with their individual 'ID code' registered with the village commune. The logic here is that the thieves caught have no social network in the capital and will not be released by the gendarmerie so quickly. Finally, on the consumer level, they must secure their product quality and reputation. Albeit sympathetic to the plight of the Malagasy smallholder, they also understand that their own businesses are on the line with the continual increase of early harvested vanilla, the reputation of the once-prized Malagasy bourbon vanilla bean is in danger of being tarnished beyond repair. Thus, many in the industry express concern with the security situation of smallholder farmers most directly in relation to the decrease in vanilla bean quality.

In sum, regional and national Malagasy authorities condemning mob killings, implore rural residents to adopt strategies of 'law and order' sanctioned by the state. Government initiatives 'militarize' vanilla farmers through state-led trainings with public-private contributions. [International aid organizations and private vanilla businesses often support these](#)

⁴³ *'Groupement des exportateurs et acheteurs de vanille'* (GPAS) and the *'Association des Collecteurs de Vanille'* (ASCOVA).

⁴⁴ Interview DCU11/20/2018. This included a large workshop on 'sensitization on the popular verdict' held in Sambava, financed by the UNDP, and organized by the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Public Security, the Secretary of State of National Gendarmerie, and the Ministry of Public Security and the Interior and Decentralization.

[efforts](#). For the regional and national Malagasy government, violence does not denote self-correcting moral economic relationships but rather a breakdown in the ability to maintain a civilized moral order in the margins, thereby [indicating the need for the state to](#) take back control over violence in rural areas.

5. Discussion: ~~Bringing together Discussion: street justice, m~~Moral hyper-proximity and ~~commodity trade~~the civilized commodity

[With vanilla prices at historic highs, and incidences of vanilla theft from fields widespread, p](#)[Peasant smallholders in Madagascar are experiencing a moral economic repositioning between the state and market. Yet overall, despite differences in gender, wealth, and ethnicity, find a broader solidarity emerging in the vanilla crisis.](#) ~~Rather than providing protection, state police are suspected of~~ [observed-exploiting farmers through collusion with thieves. The vanilla market, deregulated since the 1990s, also does not offer support to farmers, and instead encourages people to find illegal means to profit from the lucrative boom, and theft as a way to regain their footing in the lucrative vanilla market lost since deregulation. Farmers resist state and market power in part by taking ‘matters into their own hands’ through acts of street justice.](#) ~~Yet overall~~ [Thus, despite differences in gender, wealth, and ethnicity, many smallholder producers are finding a broader solidarity emerging in the vanilla crisis. This solidarity draws from moral economies that emphasize collective action and local autonomy in order to protect land and resources from outside encroachment.](#)

[As we note, the actions of smallholder farmers in this context present conceptual and empirical links with the existing literature on](#) ~~However, as we show, in a period of sped up consumer-producer relations, the state and market react to such high-profile peasant violence with ‘civilized’ law and order style responses meant to discipline the behavior of farmers and to demonstrate state legitimacy and maintain the state monopoly of violence in rural landscapes.~~

~~The conceptual and empirical links we make in this paper to moral economy and concerns around subsistence ethics traditionally found within critical agrarian studies (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976; Edelman 2005; Wolford 2010). This work has have been instructive for a variety of scholars understanding uneven development between rural peasant livelihoods and state and markets. However, ~~Albeit~~ ~~Despite~~, such as experienced in the current boom market-our work ~~surrounding on the rural moral economies~~ of village ‘street justice’, we argue, [also connects more broadly with scholarship characterizing violence in urban ‘street’ settings \(Pavoni and Tulumello 2018; Karandinos et al. 2014;](#)~~

Commented [NB1]: Can also go here or below

Anderson's 1999; Bourgois 2003), and in particular, especially the localized forms of justice materializing in the absence of institutional and official forms of adjudication (Spierenburg 2009). We feel this ~~is~~ Considering positioning of moral economic change through the lens of diverse forms of street justice can help build a conceptual bridge between rural and urban moral economies, especially during periods of under-economic and social crisis, and similar dynamics concerning violence and commodity production.

This work also expands the analysis of rural moral economies to extend farther across the commodity chain, and highlights the iterative relationships between producers and consumers. Such interactions in part stem from the changing realities of global commodity relationships and new media platforms, whereby consumers have – or believe that they have – access to a greater quantity of accurate information about conditions of production (West 2012). With the proliferation of social media market narratives, block chain technologies, and certifications, Northern consumers feel ever closer to the people producing their products (Goodman 2004; Moberg 2014). As we demonstrate, Madagascar vanilla provides a case where potential consumers may encounter both positive and negative narratives about production. It is this very tension that worries industry experts. While our study does not focus on the behavior or decisions of consumers of vanilla, we do examine how downstream market actors in the intersecting moral economies of Madagascar's vanilla boom *imagine* the possible reactions of distant consumers, especially if vanilla becomes known as a 'blood' commodity. Indeed, one Madagascar vanilla industry expert worried that the widespread condemnation of the incidence of violence surrounding the vanilla boom would cause "Madagascar vanilla [to] be the next 'blood diamond' example" for consumers, leading to vanilla boycotts.⁴⁵

Government officials and private companies react to escalating rural street violence, and the possible market fallout, by imposing stricter discipline on people and agrarian landscapes, including surveillance, and boom and bust. One takeaway here is that differences in moral sensibilities tend to coalesce against the market and state. Malagasy seem to find ways to navigate changes in moral economy. Since deregulation of the vanilla market, the state, normally the arbitrator of injustices has been absent and therefore not

These As commodity businesses and Madagascar's government react to the escalation of smallholder street justice, they are also responding to how they believe consumers of

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Madagascar vanilla may respond if vanilla becomes known as a ‘blood’ commodity. Indeed, one Madagascar vanilla industry expert worried that the widespread condemnation of the incidence of violence surrounding the vanilla boom would cause “Madagascar vanilla [to] be the next ‘blood diamond’ example” for consumers, leading to vanilla boycotts.⁴⁶ ‘civilized’ law and order style responses are meant to discipline the behavior of farmers, and to maintain the state monopoly of violence in rural landscapes. Their concerns in part stem from the changing realities of global commodity relationships and new media platforms, whereby consumers have—or believe that they have—access to a greater quantity of accurate information about conditions of production (West 2012). and as we demonstrate

~~We refer to these conditions as moral hyper-proximity. Moral hyper-proximity compresses not only the economic spaces of trade—eliminating certain nodes of middlemen exchange between producer and consumer (Harvey 2002)—but also ideological spaces (Tsing 2015; Anderson 2014; Bair and Werner 2014). Through social media and other outlets, consumers can quickly learn about forms of production connected with the products, and to imagine themselves as imbricated in the lives of producers (West 2012). Many times, these messages emphasize positive effects of trade, such as the community benefits of Fair Trade or the environmental benefits of organic certification. However, in the cases the messaging can be disturbing, detailing the exploitation and harm brought by existing systems with more powerful entities subjecting people, and environments, to forms of violence (c.f. Le Billon 2000). Making visible the harmful aspects of commodities can lead to successful organization of consumer activism that exerts public and financial pressure on corporations to improve labour conditions for smallholder farmers, or factory workers (Bair and Werner 2014).~~

Madagascar vanilla provides a case where potential consumers may encounter both positive and negative narratives about production. As prompted by many marketing campaigns, vanilla consumers are only just a few quick links away on their smartphone to hear of the marvels of the vanilla orchid, Fair Trade projects that build village schools, or the generations of farmers benefiting from trade initiatives.⁴⁷ A bit more digging on Madagascar vanilla, however, and what comes into focus may be much less appetizing, as one encounters the many international media accounts describing the Malagasy vanilla economy in crisis—a crisis that

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⁴⁷ examples

includes farmers killing suspected thieves through mob violence. In this way, the 'ugly' stories of trade that consumers encounter through media and marketing narratives does not cast the usual players as representing negative forces of trade, such as multinational conglomerates or greedy middlemen. Instead, it is often the peasant farmer—and not the powerful institutions of global capitalism—using violence against others in order to protect their fields and resources.

The result is that engaged consumers eager to 'vote with their dollar' may face conflicting messages if consumers learn that the smallholder farmers who they feel in solidarity with are acting in unexpected ways—for example, not as empathetic resisters of state power, but rather as themselves engaging in violent acts. The very tension that worries industry experts. While our study does not focus on the behavior or decisions of consumers of vanilla, we do examine how downstream market actors others in the intersecting moral economies of Madagascar's vanilla boom imagine the possible reactions of distant consumers. In such imaginations, and responses by businesses, media, and governments, we see a common ground of firms attempting to fashion the 'unruly,' 'violent vanilla bean' into a more 'civilized commodity. This process models for farmers the 'correct' way to act in a global commodity marketplace, according to the beliefs of private businesses, governments, and consumers as to what falls within, and outside of, moral limits of behaviors. ⁴⁸ Overall, governments and markets aim to fashion the 'unruly' and 'violent' vanilla bean into a more 'civilized commodity.'

The stakes of defining what a civilized commodity looks like – how they are produced, circulated, consumed and governed – are high. This is demonstrably clearly true for smallholder farmers who engage in acts of life and death against thieves, but also and for consumers, as well who are increasingly urged to 'vote with their dollar.' Thus, just as Elias noted that projects of societal rule consistently shift what is considered 'correct' behaviors for civilizing individuals, so too are there shifting expectations for the 'behavior' of commodities that circulate in global markets - as well as for the consumers of these commodities. Such debates intersect with the cultural norms of what people believe to be appropriate individual and societal behaviors. In the mid-20 Century, Elias (1939: Vol 1, 1969; Vol 2, 1982) detailed changes in social behavior and psychology in the social structures of European societies over the *longue durée* between the European Middle Ages and 18th Century. Elias exhibited how societal expectations of 'appropriate behavior' or how 'one should act' has changed over time. This surrounded

⁴⁸ the increased use of certification schemes in specialty commodity chains have developed standards by which normative behaviors, such as strict working conditions, child labour, quality control, environmental and organic standards have been applied to peasant farmers by a northern consumer base (Besky 2013).
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everything from table manners, bodily functions, nose-blowing and spitting, sleeping, to sexual relations and aggression.

Elias makes a point in signaling periods of economic transformation and specialization in the late 18th Century (Durkheim 1893); when labour shifts brought social classes (e.g., the ‘village’ cobbler and the Bourgeois merchant), normally kept apart, in more frequent contact. This new contact between ‘unlike social classes’ altered how people acted when in closer proximity, and thus, instilled a ‘civilizing processes’ of learned behaviors, such as the capacity of foresight, rationalization and self-restraint, and the internalization of negative emotions (e.g. anxiety, disgust), originating from courtly societies and upper classes downward onto the general population. These behaviors were over time subsequently reified through social sanction and other disciplining tools by the state (Foucault 1998; Weber 1993). For instance, in his later work, Elias (1982) thought of the civilizing process as essential to building of the nation-state with newly formed governments both reinforcing ‘appropriate behaviors’ to reinforce state legitimacy and enforce tax collection, and most noteworthy, maintaining a monopoly on violence.

Although Elias details the social psychological changes of societies over time, Foucault’s use of ‘bio-power’ describes how disciplinary forms of power and knowledge have come to ‘normatively prescribe how both individuals and populations should behave’ (Cavanagh 2018, 405) and to exercise sovereignty in order to have the power to ‘define life’ itself. As Mambe and Meintjes (2003, 12) note, ‘...to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power’. Similar to Elias’ later work on the nation-state, Foucault (1991) draws on the sovereign state and its populations in the post-Enlightenment period and the emergence of scientific measurement and regulation as instruments to foster progress in health and living conditions. These new instruments of disciplinary power emerge as a way to legitimize the state control over individuals and of broad swaths of the population more generally (Cavanagh 2018).

This disciplinary power gains particular relevance when looking at peasant populations and their current and emerging conditions in disciplinary global relationships of commodity production.⁴⁹ As illustrated with the vanilla boom and street justice, various constituencies –

⁴⁹ the increased use of certification schemes in specialty commodity chains have developed standards by which normative behaviors, such as strict working conditions, child labour, quality control, environmental and organic standards have been applied to peasant farmers by a northern consumer base (Besky 2013).

farmers, traders, businesses, governments, consumers—fashion an idea of what is within and outside of moral limits of their behaviors. This differing moral economies are not produced and enacted in isolation, but interact and influence one another.

Beyond Elias' analysis of 'civilizing projects' as discussed above, Foucault's use of 'bio-power' is instructive hereof how disciplinary tools of power and knowledge normatively prescribe behavior and to exercise sovereignty over 'life itself' (Cavanagh 2018, 405). As Mambe and Meintjes (2003, 12) note, '...to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power'. These instruments of disciplinary power emerge as a way to legitimize the state, and now the market, control over individuals and of broad swaths of the populations, population more generally.

The stakes of defining what a 'just' commodity looks like—how they are produced, circulated, consumed and governed—are high. This is demonstrably true for smallholder farmers who engage in acts of life and death against thieves. For consumers, as well, stakes of civilizing commodity relationships also appear high. For example, at a coffee shop in Indiana, where one of the co-authors lives and works, there is a display of Madagascar vanilla granola bars, each which declares in large block letters, "THIS BAR SAVES LIVES!" Such marketing narratives reflect the increasing moral stakes of consumption: where the choice of one's granola bar carries life and death implications.

Finally, both of the previous research themes contribute to the broader project to produce, circulate, and regulate *the civilized commodity*. Just as Elias noted that projects of societal rule consistently shift what is considered 'correct' behaviors for civilizing individuals, so too are there shifting expectations for the 'behavior' of commodities that circulate in global markets—as well as for the consumers of these commodities. With hyper-proximity and emerging forms of onto-power embedded in new commodity relationships, there is also more opportunity for different people situated across commodity chains to comment on one another's behavior, which is often framed in moralizing terms of fairness and justice (Moberg and Lyon 2010). Yet, this process of commodity 'civilization' largely overlooks the unruly spaces of materiality and sociality, and exchange that mark trade of all sorts, many of which draw from alternative forms of power and cultural relationships (Dove 2011). In circulating narrow discourses of how 'civilized' commodities should behave, these alternate ecologies, economies, and epistemologies can be lost, as well as the particular forms of power and meaning that connect with them (Li 2014). Further, fashioning a 'civilized commodity' can result in a situation where a commodity system outwardly seems to conform with Northern, individualistic notions of justice and morality, while obscuring other different types of systematic, structural, and economic violence and injustice faced by

smallholder farmers, such as policies of targeted violence, empowerment of elite classes, de-regulation of market safeguards, and environmental pollution (Brown 2013; Alvarez and Coolsaet 2019).

Critically examining the circulating moral discourses centered on how commodities (and farmers) 'should' behave can help inform work to create more equitable arrangements for global markets. Intertwine with state, market governance, and labour relationships (Moberg 2014). Each of these entities are positioned differently in their ability to define and controlling the "just" circulation of commodity trade. By locating the moral nexus of the smallholder, state, and the market, individuals concerned with creating more equitable arrangements for global markets can better locate sites of resistance, especially in our current periods when the rise of rural populism seems to also be coinciding with new forms of authoritarianism (Bosworth 2018; Mouffe 2018; Scoones et al., 2018). Indeed, much of the work of contemporary peasant activists consists of trying to name and put in the spotlight the institutional agency - and responsibilities - behind the increasingly hard to place state and market entities (Edelman 2005, 332; Scott 1976). The fraught relations of the vanilla commodity boom - and the forms of violence it engenders - demonstrates collision of market forces, state politics, and agrarian production within increasingly volatile - and compressed - relationships of global commodity chains.

Who and what is being civilized across what scale and to what ends? What happens when these 'projects' contradict one another? What ecological and cultural systems are lost or undermined within projects to create a single form of 'civilized' commodity?

68. Conclusion

Recent discussions in critical agrarian studies have begun to coalesce around how to incorporate multiplicity of justice conceptions emanating from the global south (Álvarez and Coolsaet 2019) and shortcomings that account spatial and historical complexity or recognition (J. Fraser 2018). There are many questions surrounding justice and commodities and trade, however, and is particularly acute since the global commodities spans multiple forms of justice which include different scales and spaces and across cultural, social, political and environmental contexts. What understandings of justice does global trade of commodities bring as it moves along the chain - particularly around changing smallholder's commodity relationships?

As we demonstrate, at times of global commodity crisis, peasants are under acute periods of stress and seek out their own brand of moral and environmental justice, sometimes leading to what downstream actors and the state observe as 'un-civilized' forms mob violence and other tools of resistance to both state power and market exploitation. While our discussion highlights vanilla, a similar weight is given to any number of commodities today, which carry with them

disturbing accounts of forced child labor (Nkamleu and Kielland 2006), environmental destruction (Koh and Wileove 2008), and organized acts of violence (Frazier 2018). While it is an overall positive and productive development that Northern consumers are recognizing how their products trace back to the lives of real producers (Raynolds 2000), there remains glaring disconnects between how consumers imagine these far-off producers' lives, and how the producers themselves experience them (Brown 2013; Moberg 2014; West 2012). In the case of Madagascar vanilla, while consumers of a Fair Trade granola bar may picture their purchase 'saving lives' by helping to build a village hospital, vanilla farmers articulate that the largest immediate threat to maintaining their livelihoods is escalating theft, and the acute atmosphere of fear and violence that it brings to everyday life.

——— Moral discourses centered around how commodities (and farmers) 'should' behave intertwine with state, market governance, and labour relationships (Moberg 2014). Each of these entities are positioned differently in their ability to define and controlling the "just" circulation of commodity trade. By locating the nexus of the smallholder, state and the market, individuals concerned with creating more equitable arrangements for global markets can better locate sites of resistance, especially in our current periods where the rise of rural populism seems to also be coinciding with new forms of authoritarianism (Bosworth 2018; Mouffe 2018; Scoones et al., 2018). Indeed, much of the work of contemporary peasant activists consists of trying to name and put in the spotlight the institutional agency—and responsibilities—behind the increasingly hard to place state and market entities (Edelman 2005, 332; Scott 1976). The fraught relations of the vanilla commodity boom—and the forms of violence it engenders—proves an instructive case to analyze the collision of market forces, state politics, agrarian production, and ethical consumption within increasingly volatile—and compressed—relationships of global commodity supply chains.

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