



Call for Papers

SASE Mini-Conference ‘Power and Conflict in Illegal Markets’ (MC18)

Sciences Po Bordeaux, France, 1-3 July, 2026

Submission deadline: December 16, 2025

Illegal markets blur the boundaries of legality and power. This mini-conference examines how actors operate through secrecy, coercion, and informal governance, exploring conflict, accountability, and institutional adaptation across illicit economies worldwide.

Organizers

Matías Dewey, University of St. Gallen

Gabriel Feltran, CNRS/Sciences Po

Annette Hübschle, University of Cape Town

Elena Butti, Geneva Graduate Institute

Meropi Tzanetakakis, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business

Call for Papers

Illegal markets are spaces of economic exchange in which the production, distribution, and/or consumption of goods and services fall outside the formal regulatory apparatus of the state. These markets do not merely coexist with legal economies but are often deeply entangled with them, sustained by complex forms of organization, negotiation, and coercion. The exercise of power in such contexts is profoundly shaped by the absence of formal oversight and the asymmetries of information that characterize illegal exchanges. This mini-conference invites scholars to engage with the dynamics of power and conflict in illegal markets, broadly understood, and seeks to foster interdisciplinary dialogue on how these dynamics are structured, reproduced, and contested.

A central point of departure is the recognition that information asymmetry is intrinsic to outlawed economies. Participants in illegal markets, whether producers, intermediaries, consumers, or protectors, operate under conditions of secrecy, deception, and strategic opacity. Unlike legal markets, where contracts, pricing mechanisms, and dispute resolution procedures serve to mitigate uncertainty, actors in illegal markets must rely on incomplete, hidden, or deliberately distorted information. This asymmetry is not a by-product of illegality but one of its defining characteristics. It shapes bargaining power, influences the capacity to exercise violence or coercion, and determines how alliances and dependencies are formed. Those who can control information—about routes, prices, enforcement risks, or identities—often gain disproportionate influence, leading to highly unequal and unstable power relations.

The second core theme concerns the emergence and management of conflict in the absence of formal regulation. In legal markets, conflicts over territory, pricing, access, and enforcement are mediated through courts, contracts, arbitration, or administrative authorities. By contrast, illegal markets lack recognized mechanisms to resolve disputes or prevent escalation. The absence of enforceable rules or legitimate authorities creates a structural predisposition to conflict. Disputes over territory, taxation, profit-sharing, or betrayal can easily trigger violence or coercion, particularly when claims cannot be settled through contracts or legal recourse. In this sense, conflict in illegal markets is not accidental but a systemic outcome of the institutional void produced by prohibition.

Nevertheless, illegal markets do not operate in a state of pure anarchy. Actors develop informal mechanisms of governance to manage disputes, allocate power, and regulate competition. These mechanisms may include the establishment of hierarchies within criminal organizations, the use of violence or intimidation as a mode of arbitration, and the reliance on reputation, silence, or corruption to enforce agreements. Mafias, protection rackets, clandestine brokers, complicit state officials, and community-based networks may function as de facto regulators. Such institutions, while often fluid and localized, shape access to resources, reduce certain transaction costs, and sustain long-distance illegal commodity chains. Yet they also generate new forms of exclusion, dependency, and conflict, particularly when competing authorities overlap or lose legitimacy.

This mini-conference welcomes proposals that investigate power relations and conflict dynamics in illegal economies across historical periods, geographic regions, and thematic domains. Studies may focus on the organization of criminal groups, the governance of contraband flows, the role of corruption and informal sovereignty, the management of disputes in clandestine networks, or the ways in which violence is deployed to enforce or contest order. Particular attention may be devoted to how hierarchies emerge within illegal supply chains, how informal institutions stabilize or destabilize illegal markets, and how state actors interact with or reshape these systems. By foregrounding the interplay of secrecy, coercion, and informal governance, the conference seeks to deepen scholarly understanding of the political and social logics that structure illegal economies and the conflicts they engender.

Submissions

Abstracts of approximately 1,000 words can be submitted until **December 16, 2025**. If your abstract is accepted, you will be asked (but not required) to submit a full paper prior to the conference in Bordeaux. In addition to the in-person conference from 1–3 July 2026, there will be one virtual session during the virtual conference days (22–24 June 2026). There will be no hybrid sessions during the on-site conference. Check out MC18!

Conference details: <https://sase.org/events/2026-bordeaux/#mini-conferences>



Submission guidelines: <https://sase.org/conference-submission-guidelines/>



Abstract submissions: <https://app.oxfordabstracts.com/stages/78125/submitter>

