In the Footsteps of Economic Anthropology. Trade As a Socio-Cultural Phenomenon in Post-Soviet Armenia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the socio-cultural transformations\(^1\) of the already independent Republic of Armenia in the early years of the Soviet Union’s collapse.

The first part of the paper is devoted to the theoretical literature which is the essential material for this article.

The second part of the paper represents the research itself and observes the process of commercialization of the society in post-Soviet Armenia. It includes the consideration of the reasons for the total elimination of the labour market resulting in the trading activity and the process of leaving for other countries as the society’s way of earning a living. Moreover, the spontaneous emergence of trading places in urban culture will be a matter of an important consideration.

The third part of the paper includes the research about street trade and bazaar

The paper also includes the conclusion and the bibliography.

Key words: post-Soviet transformation, bazaar (market), goods barter, commercialization of the society, post-Soviet trade.

1. INTRODUCTION

The literature about trade and commercialization of society is diverse in terms of the methods of economic anthropology, Traditional Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology. M. Weber

\(^1\) It should be mentioned, that in 1991 a number of countries of the former Soviet Union including the former Soviet Armenia gained independence.
in his observations about city refers to the bazaar and trade stating that “City is a residence in which trade and industry are more than highlighted; one of the important characteristics of the city is the market” (M. Weber, p. 653-659 original in Russian) and Kh. Shrader refers to trade as a repeated continuous goods barter that is an exchange with a certain regularity (Kh. Shrader p. 98-101).

Commercialization has also been discussed in Traditional Ethnography. For example, according to the Armenian ethnographer E. Karapetyan, every home had its scales, which meant that in the society trade was a domestic element both for elementary exchange and for trade in general, (E. Karapetyan p. 43).

Another Armenian ethnographer Yervand Lalayan also indirectly refers to the socio-cultural perception of trade in the 19-20th centuries stating that only a small fraction of the people was involved in the trade, which was nothing but an ordinary peddle (Y. Lalayan, p. 87).

Speaking about the trade and exchange, Marcel Mauss claims that exchange is a common social phenomenon which has not only economic but also a general characteristic. (Marcel Mauss, M. 1996).

According to M. Weber's theory barter is a compromise between the two sides due to which the product's or other item’s rights are transferred from one side to the other (Weber, p. 71-74): Barter includes not only goods and services; the most generalized definition implies that it is a formal or informal agreement which includes a lucrative offer against another lucrative offer. It should also be noted that the terms of the exchange can be traditional, partly traditional or non-traditional. (Weber, Max. p. 71-72):

According to the economic theory, the barter considers two separate processes-to take and transfer.

Furthermore, in Clifford Geertz’s theory “Bazaar economy” when describing Eastern Market, states that in this type of markets or as he says in bazaars, it is not the trading process but the social relations that are important. (Clifford Geertz, p.28).

In addition to this, we should refer to the Armenian ethnographer Aghasi Tadevosyan's research about the formation of post-Soviet market in urban environment by the example of Yerevan city. (Tadevosyan A. 25-26 January, 2011.)

The abovementioned scientific observations are the main indicators and guides for the literature used in this article.
2. THE BEGINNING OF THE SOCIETY’S COMMERCIALIZATION AND GOODS BARTER

In the 1980s a number of Soviet Union countries began a series of political processes that caused the Soviet Union's collapse, which was in the history for more than 70 years.

In the years of the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the post-Soviet period in Armenia, as almost in all the countries of the Soviet, began the reevaluation of the values. In this paper from these processes we are only interested in the process of commercialization, which has a direct connection to the collapse of the Soviet Union and to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict\(^2\) after it. Trade was the only occupation in post-Soviet Armenian society. It should also be noted that the main venues for trade were cities. (Kh. Grigoryan , p. 139).

If these general changes were not immediately noticeable in Yerevan (which was the capital of the newly-founded Armenia), in the cities of the regions both the absence of labour market and society’s commercialization connected with it started to be noticeable from the first day. Its first display were the activities of the staff of the already insolvent plants and factories. Workers of the textile products’ factories received some part of the textile material as salary and the process of realization was left to the individual sales opportunities.

As a rule these textiles were sold or in their houses just informing neighbours and friends that they have such products or these were exchanged in open-air markets or in bazaars as Clifford

\(^2\) The Nagorno-Karabakh War, known as the Artsakh Liberation War in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, was an armed conflict that took place after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 to May 1994, in the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in southwestern Azerbaijan, between the majority ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh backed by the Republic of Armenia, and the Republic of Azerbaijan. As the war progressed, Armenia and Azerbaijan, both former Soviet Republics, entangled themselves in a protracted, undeclared war in the mountainous heights of Karabakh as Azerbaijan attempted to curb the secessionist movement in Nagorno-Karabakh. The enclave's parliament had voted in favor of uniting itself with Armenia and a referendum, boycotted by the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno-Karabakh, was held, whereby most of the voters voted in favor of independence. The demand to unify with Armenia, which began anew in 1988, began in a relatively peaceful manner; however, in the following months, as the Soviet Union's disintegration neared, it gradually grew into an increasingly violent conflict between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis, resulting in claims of ethnic cleansing by both sides. http://www.cilicia.com/romo19e.html 06/02/2014
Geertz told. The criterion of price was the importance of the product in that period. For example, there was a time when three pairs or even a bundle of tights were equal to one kilogram peach. However, shirts or baby colored clothes had more expensive << Price >> especially if the buyer was from the rural environment. If in the first case the dictator terms of exchange was fruit and vegetable salesman, in the second case was the textile exchanger. This was more evident in the regions of the Republic of Armenia. In spite of this such sale of goods and the barter took place in Erevan city too. Society’s commercialization began with the simple barter of goods. According to K. Polanyi’s interesting speech about this barter is the reciprocal movement of the market system. ( Karl Polanyi., Economy as Instituted Process /<< The Great Transformation >> Karl Polanyi page 65). By K. Polanyi the social status can also leave its influence both the process of barter and the trade. If we follow this theory we can consider that the fruit and vegetable exchanger has social higher status. During the interview interviewer was mentioning.

- After the barter I was always counting and during the barter the prices of fabric were lower valued. We came to an agreement but all the same I was affected.

If we take into consideration the socio-economic conditions in these hard times this segment of interview with interviewer allows us to assume, that it is true that the fruit and vegetable seller will refuse the barter of textile and fruits because fruits and vegetables had a higher demand than tights and baby colored clothes.

For commercialized society product sales was primarily everything available at the time. About this I. Kopytoff has an interesting views according which the production of goods from the cultural perspective is cultural process. The product is perceived as a commodity not only being produced it should be reached the degree of perception as a product. A period of time the product can be considered as a product and at the same time, in another context the product can not be considered as a product. Product is perceived as a subjective point of view, for someone the product can be considered as a product for another, it just something. ( Kopytoff, I. p.134).

This observation is relevant to the abovementioned description. Perception of product is related to that the product is profitable or not. Methods of bargaining price is observation of product as no product and the opposite. Thus, in 2012 during the fair bazaar opened in Musaler’s festival the woman making and selling handmade wreaths was trying not to consider wreaths as a product because of it she did not want to pay taxes for them. She insisted that these were not products because she did not buy them in the store, she made them therefore she would not pay the money to the government.
This goods barter described above is the elementary one, which had a different development. The same textile products barter's next step was taking its product to consumers market as a barter. By interviewer the consumers market mostly were villages. Where the product was put on sale on a small table or chair generally in the more crowded places such as the central street of the village, near the store or village municipality.

In this case there was more advantageous barter, because the demand there was greater and in this case the same bundle of tights or baby colored clothes he could barter not one kg but two and more which not only provides the vital importance of the textile goods barterer but also the bartered product was soled in urban bazaars and outdoor seats for sale. This form of goods barter we can consider as a development. Which was even more motivating the public to commercialization.

Thus, if at the beginning the goods barter was regarded as a means of providing the vital requirements pertaining no gain in terms of economics as a result, in the second case they started barter the goods in such areas which had a large demand. Another problem for this goodsbarter was taking the goods to areas, villages having the greatest demand.

Another younger interviewer said that in village they produced cheese and bartered it with one or two kilos of apples, which was not very lucrative compared with his neighbour’s transaction who took the produced cheese to the city for barter and got a box of apples instead.. In the first case, the apples were not taken to the city, as according to the family traditions the woman who was to take the goods to the city had no right to get involved in these activities because she was not allowed by her husband or son. This allows us to refer to another layer of culture that has to do with commercialization as well. This barterer or trader had to reject some traditions to carry out a more lucrative sale which implied traveling to villages and cities to introduce the goods to the areas having the biggest demand. This is also connected with suitcase trade.

3. **THE STREET TRADE AND BAZAAR**

The transformation from a barter to a trade should occur spontaneously. The ones who used to exchange textile and other factory product showed new trading approaches becoming the founders of a new street trade. At first residential places were used as trading places, so the private houses became the first shops. The flats on the first floor were considered the most convenient for trade. Especially, private houses were the most comfortable places to become real shops.
Issues raised in the writings about the city, to see the light in the last century, undoubtedly belonged to the category of questions which will never be found. Accordingly, the continuing development of modern urbanism has brought with it an impressive opportunity to oust (or delay), all such questions - and, moreover, deny that such displacement has occurred (or that such a delay occurred). Sociocultural approach may be specified in the form of several principles helps us clearly interested in the problem. This is the principle of human activities, carry out social action and interaction (Bauman, Z. pg. 1570).

As it was mentioned above, the another important factor of the commercialization of the society was the absence of a job market. The labor migrants who migrated mainly to Russia, were also engaged in commerce. As one of my informants noted, “it is not necessary to have a trading profession, you should buy something cheap and sell it more expensive”.

In the Soviet period the abovementioned expression was actually understood as speculation, so this phenomenon continued to be widespread during the post-Soviet period. People, who lived in the Soviet period, often used to mention about underground trade. This was the case when the Soviet country was not able to control the hidden commerce- food, clothes and other kind of goods trade considered to be illegal at that time.

It is interesting that the first steps to commercialization of the society were already noticed in the last years of the Soviet Union. Thus, many couples used to go to Poland, to the former Checkoslovakia, to Balkans not as tourists but as traders. They took with them some factory goods to sell there. They faced many obstacles in these countries during importing and exporting some goods. After selling the imported goods they bought utensils, chandeliers known as brand products mainly from Balkan countries and were sold at twice, even triple expensive in the Soviet Armenia.

Zsiegmund Bauman has a very interesting statement on postmodern: he states, that a man can construct many things in his mind for hundreds of times which he makes true when getting an opportunity. So, taking this viewpoint into consideration, it can be stated that still in the Soviet period the society was in some way commercialized, moreover many people were financially well provided due to speculative or underground trade. In the post-Soviet years this activity was given meaning or was legalized and became obvious reality. (Bauman, Zsiegmund, p. 177-178):

It is also important to mention about the other ways of trade before a shop trade. Thus, in the 1990s going to the Sadakhlo market became a widespread trade activity. This can be considered as a cultural phenomenon in the sense that this market was located on the Armenia-Georgia-Azerbaijan borderline, whilst at the same time the Republic of Armenia, as an ally of the Karabakh Republic,
was in war against the Republic of Azerbaijan. Despite this fact, the Sadakhlo market became the most widespread market for Armenian traders. As it was noted above, the goods from Sadakhlo were brought to Armenia and were sold first of all in apartments or houses. The information that some goods were brought from Sadakhlo was spread by the trader’s relatives or neighbours, so the goods were advertised only in this way. These goods were usually kept in luggages in houses. The luggages were unpacked every time for a new potential buyer to observe the goods. It is worth mentioning that at this period a barter was also taking place. In this process the ones who brought goods, mainly clothes from Sadakhlo, appeared to be the main price setters. In fact, shops were not widespread yet. A train carriages, being imported to Armenia after the Spitak earthquake\(^3\) as temporary dwelling for the disaster victims, were used as shops. Apart from these mobile shops, there were only a few stone buildings utilized as trade places. The goods brought from Sadakhlo were mainly sold in the open-air markets – bazaars or in the new founded other open-air markets. According to cultural anthropologist Aghasi Tadevosyan, the first clothing market was opened in the Car Market. As it was required much time to sell cars, traders brought with them and sold other goods, such as clothes, utensils, which were put just on the cars. A table-trade was another kind of street trade in post-Soviet years when people arranged different things on small tables placed in their streets. The good prices were written on papers put under them.

New bazaars set the beginning of another kind of open-air trade. Thus, in Yerevan such bazaars came into existence, whose areas were formerly used for other purposes. For example, the Rassia department store had been a cinema, in the place of the Malatia market kolkhoz cotes had been located, the Firdus market area had formerly been just a street, which turned to a market receiving the same name, and finally the whole surroundings of the Hrazdan stadium became a real mart.

**CONCLUSION**

Speaking about the bazaar economy, it should be noted that this issue was first raised by Clifford Geertz. Referring the Eastern markets he qualifies them markets, which have the bazaar economy. Here Gerc apart the fact that this type of markets are generally more standing socio-economic or cultural field, than economical one. This is most visible during environment of a commercial process, when social relationships play important role in commercial processes.

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\(^3\) For more information about this see in [http://www.nssp-gov.am/spitak_eng.htm](http://www.nssp-gov.am/spitak_eng.htm) 12/02/2014:
For calling Armenian economy the bazaar economy there is need to do a historical overview that would allow a more detailed understanding. Basis of the historical and political reality Armenia was either under Turkish or Persian domination during ages. So, it is clear, that as features a variety of cultural as well as economic, social reality was close to being exactly the Persian and Turkish. Oriental type of economy or bazaar economy means that in this case the economic processes are guided mainly by individuals, communities, agreements and traditions.

These factors started to obtain in Armenian society after 70 years governmental state-planned economy. Z. Bauman noticed in his researchs that an individual's new, innovative presentation not happening all at once, but it “cooked” in a person until the time to express it. So, the last years of the Soviet Union and the first post-Soviet years were the best moments to express them. We can also argue that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was the time of change not only in trade, but also in all other aspects, in one word it was the transformations maturation time.

First, we should note, that it is important to segregate the trade in the society. This is the most important thing in these reaserches. Following the social-economical bad conditions, which is typical for the society during the war, occur lots of changes, including economical functions, which are getting more and more primitive. This is connected with economical socities. As the first plase of the trade society we can mention barter, which was “the main source to live”. It’s important to seclude, that if other Soviet countries trade processes lasting particular period and the society came back again to its functions in presoviet Armenia these functions needed long period. It’s also true, that the society is still in trade processes. The question is that how much has it been developed or retreated or has it become more qualified or more passive.

As abovementioned, the commercialization of society in post-Soviet Armenia is long-term and underground emporiums, wagon-shops, table-emporiums, suitcase trade are up-to-date and it is true, that street trade is the main part of post-Soviet Armenia. Even if we will mantion the existence of large stone stores then it could be argued that the change of the interior has not changed the rules of the street trade, maybe “Katsya tsyotsya” (aunt Katia) became a “badge bearing” Yekatirina, but in the cultural aspect it is largely preserved “Katsya tsyotsya’s”, “Gegham’s stores” model, which even extends to some of the supermarkets, which are well known for all of us. Street trade is not due to appearance, beauty or variety of the stores, it depends of the culture, which is characteristic of the persons, who owned these nice shops.
Bazaars can be called not only all the markets that have this “title” but also those emporiums, which are in the same cultural category. These bazaars can be branded stores, supermarkets and outdoor markets, etc.

In bazaars the sensor of the price formation it can not be said competition on pricing or economic interests. So if I want to sell socks for 150 drams, I will arrange with the seller standing next to me, who like me is the supplier of the product and we will make it to 150 drams, without taking into account, that it may be to sell 100 or 135 will be profitable or there will be a competitive field, which is also pursuing the development trend. The most important are the ideas of the community: not to be offended from each other, continue standing in the same place, I am tired instead of me he/she will stand (yola tanel-get alonge) one day, etc. So the pricing of the bazaar is connected with communal and traditional norms.

Street trade must have been typical of the transitional period, which should have been developed and changed by the time. Maybe the new emergence could also be taken as a street trade, but it should have passed the way of evolution. Actually supermarketization in our country can not be expected, as the supermarket worker does not change, does not pass the training courses about communication with the customers, etc. Theoretically, he is from the same bazaar community, only now his bazaar name is supermarket. Naturally, some developments are taking place, which are related with external factors due to cultural, social innovations, but supermarketization is not taking place completely. These supermarkets have only good interior and nice look, but inside they are still Havlabar’s, Ghantar’s traditional bazaars from 19th century with community-minded, stereotypes and fears.

LITERATURE