Making the Market : The Characters of Izmailovo Market

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

In describing the social fabric of the market, this essay aims to demonstrate the seminal role of social relations. Sellers may be motivated by individual pursuits to make a living, but this should not locate individualism at the crux of the study: they frame their business processes within frameworks of moral concern. In applying themselves, sellers make the market.

keywords: relationships, affect, russia, market, work

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It is a warm afternoon, and I am standing outside Asan's stall helping him vend. The white sheets stretched above our heads offer an aperture for the sun to glimmer down and flood the marketplace with a golden colour. I notice a middle-aged woman meandering down the walkway and in a salesman manner: straighten up, smile and edge closer, to appear accommodating.

One of the brightly coloured tourist souvenirs caught her eye as she slowly lingers over. To reciprocate interest, I point to the postcards and keyrings to try and distinguish what the visitor may be after. Yet, mid sales pitch she enquires about my English accent. Keeping it short, I explain that I am conducting research and have been in Moscow for the past couple of months. She is inquisitive and asks further questions. Our conversation trails off as we talk about her visit and places I would recommend. Interestingly, the tone of the conversation is amicable as I forget my role as a vendor. After several minutes of talking, she turns back to the products and picks out some fridge magnets to

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Figure 1: A bird's eye view - the white building is Izmailovo Kremlin and below is the marketplace.

purchase. We smile and exchange goodbyes as the woman catches up with her husband and children.

My thoughts are interrupted as I hear Pavel, a cheery retiree who neighbours Asan's stall jokingly shouting out 'Did you see that, Asan? The researcher has truly become one of us.' Leaning over the wooden stand, Asan proclaims 'Sovershenno verno tovarishch!' ('Absolutely right comrade!) (1). Drawing on ethnographic research that was undertaken over two months in the Izmailovo market, I focus on the logic that governs vendors and shapes economic action. Origins of this market go back to the 1980s when the informal space comprised alleyways for artists to exhibit their work to the public. The legalisation of private cooperatives in the early 1990s facilitated the growth of small-scale trading. The collapse of the Soviet Union signalled a rapid adjustment in ideological reform. Russia was now open to the prevailing structures of capitalist forces. During the political transformation, there was a development of the tourism industry as post-communist states attracted an ever-increasing number of foreigners.

In 2003, the administration of Vernissage Izmailovo LLC formalised the space into Kremlin in Izmailovo and Izmailovo market. The Kremlin's exterior resembles a 16th-century architectural design, envisaging an 'old-style Russia'. A cultural complex where you can find a dozen small museums in the vicinity, the Museum of Russian Vodka or the Museum of Bread. Yet, if you make your way past these curated spectacles, you will find

(1) A popular synonym from the Soviet period (Wade, 2004).

(2) I recognise that 'institutions' have been critiqued for governing behaviours within human collectives. I employ it as Gambold who describes social institutions as a 'framework of expectations' (2010, p.274)

yourself at the metal gates of the market.

The space comprises over 90 wooden stalls. On any weekday, approximately two-thirds of the stalls are occupied by full-time vendors. One informant explained that there are roughly 450 individuals who work here, and the number rises to 650 on weekends. As the market provides work employment to traders and is fashioned to attract local and international visitors, I position it as a social institution (2) where communication is a fundamental feature.

My attention was directed to the meanings of work. Relevant here is the body of literature that discusses the ambivalence in the notion accorded to work (Harris, 2007). The concept of work can act as an idiom through which societies think about themselves.

In Western thought, the concept of work is related to the process of 'capital accumulation' (Narotzky, 2018). This is rooted in the Protestant ethic that Weber explicitly linked to the emergent capitalist ethos (1958). Such a theorisation gave way to an underlying notion that society is run by rational principles, where worldly success is an implication of divine favour and salvation. Weber saw work as a way for people to realise a supernatural mandate. However, is this applicable to societies that do not stem from Calvinist roots and still merit hard work?

Such a Weberian framework was utilised by Geertz in his examination of the culture-economy nexus and how social organisations affected economic growth. In Peddlers and Princes (1963) he identified the different types of entrepreneurship in a Javanese bazaar and those of the Balinese gentry. In the bazaar economy, Geertz found that reformist Muslims played a significant role in the economic transformation of the town based on their asceticism. The group of peddlers and shopkeepers were driven by a source of pride to work hard which was a 'stimulus to economic enterprise' (ibid., p.128). Nevertheless, Geertz's work reflected a modernisation theory. Bazaars marked an underdeveloped form of exchange, where scarcity of information and personalised transactions prevailed. Although he saw parallels with the Protestant ethic as conceived by Weber, he argued that the logic of trade in Bali entails a greater variety of meanings. What is effective in this work is that it underscores the reformist Muslim values that motivate work. Geertz sought to discover the meaning of their practices based on local knowledge.

Geertz's substantive legacy was the 'webs of significance' as this precept calls for renewed attention to the sense people make of their own life situation (1973, p.5). However, how does such a basis apply to the Russian context? It gives merit to the fact that understanding of work may stem from a system that both shapes and are shaped by individual actors. That 'culture' may define the context of work. For instance, the Communist Party championed hard discipline and labour-intensive goals under the banner 'workers of the world, unite!' (Krylova, 2017). Work was celebrated if it embodied ideas of egalitarianism. Nevertheless, if we are to follow Geertz's interpretation of culture, then Russia would still perhaps be under a red banner as semiotics are 'public' and hence, not only ideas but programmes and plans (LaCapra, 1988). As we know from history, such a deterministic approach is not sufficient.

Why are such reflections important for the contemporary context? Of particular interest is how postsocialist citizens' approaches to market economics are coloured by certain legacies of socialism.

Figure 2: The scene once you enter the market gates.

This is not to dispel that such views are changing but literature has noted the moral resistance to 'the market' (Mandel and Humphrey, 2002). In her monograph on privatisation and labour reform in Poland, Dunn stated that the effective adoption of market values 'requires changing the very foundation of what it means to be a person' (2004, p.6). Thus, implying that subject categories have been introduced by the transition to capitalism. People should either conform to prevailing logic or can resist seemingly individualistic notions but face exclusion (Makovicky, 2014). It underlines a fairly strict dichotomy towards market attitudes. However, such assumptions cannot be predicted. I will illuminate the ways individuals may oscillate between these notions and in some instances, cooperation can productively establish the basis for work. As I hope to show, the practices of selling are not merely beneficial as a product of work but are valuable in their very action.

Methodology

Throughout the course of my research, I spoke with thirty-five sellers five of whom I developed a more extensive relationship with. As I have a high proficiency in the Russian language, the interviews were undertaken in Russian with several individuals who chose to speak English. The communicative processes aided my data as they enabled people to articulate themselves in their 'native language'. My linguistic abilities were not quite of that standard but in some instances, this was constructive as it had implications for my collection and analysis. If I was unable to understand colloquialisms or casual terminology, I asked my informants to expand. Subsequently, I appreciated that I had become an instrument of data production. Researching 'multilingually' – both on the field and reading academic literature affects the knowledge amassed. The process of translation can impact how my participants are interpreted by readers.

Therefore, consideration has been placed on translating the extracts as candidly as possible, and when suitable, I have left the Russian term.

Understanding the Space

'I've been here for years, if not my whole life!' Moving the pipe from his mouth Ivan introduces himself to me, a Muscovite, selling Soviet memorabilia for the past thirty-six years. Trading here since its beginnings, Ivan counts himself as a handicraft master. As I ask him whether he enjoys working here or not, he seems affronted. In a hasty tone, he declares 'Of course, I love what I do.' What had I said that caused him to be so direct? While quickly trying to think of another question to ask, Ivan interrupts my thought process, leans back in his chair and calmly states 'However, it never used to be like this…' He succinctly explained:

'The "rynok" (market) has always been a remarkable area for us Russians….. there was even a market in Communist times, but it was done behind doors, illegally I guess especially with speculation. Trading in those days, was seen as bad and when I started in 1980s… I remember my uncle kept questioning why I was doing it… he could not understand how I made money off working people.'

For Ivan, there has been a clear shift in the way the market has been perceived. Post-Soviet literature has extensively referenced that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 'market' represented a challenged site (Mandel and Humphrey, 2002). The Soviet person was constructed around production and consumption within the state sphere; thus, to depart from such an alliance was contentious (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999). The public deemed private trading a conspicuous activity that heralded individualism and the disregard of the communal. This explains why sellers operated in the 'black market' as speculation was negatively perceived. Ivan added:

'I was not open about it, but I only started doing it because I collected badges and saw some money could be made (pauses and starts laughing) and now look… who would have thought that I would be here enjoying and showing off ah… my uncle would be "v shoke" (shocked).'

The figures of early post-Soviet individuals gave rise to contrasting images of commercial trade. On the one hand, new entrepreneurialism was realised in the 'new Russians' who derived their success from social capital accumulated in the Soviet period (Mandel and Humphrey, 2002). They exploited their networks by means of 'blat' (favours) to beat the system (Ledeneva, 2008). Their work stood for illegitimacy as they capitalised on illegal speculation. Speculation involved the purchasing of commodities or assets with the hope that in the future they will become more valuable. On the other hand, trade was associated with the necessity for a group of people including former workers, teachers, and clerks. Inhabiting this sphere of commerce was seen as a fall from grace (Patico, 2008). Here, it can be seen how there is a dichotomy between the racketeering 'new Russians' and the victimised individual who had to resort to such activities. However, in Ivan's statement, he does not fall into either category. He chose to be a seller – involved with speculation prior to the collapse of the USSR and did not use networks of 'blat' to move up in the business world.

Additionally, within Ivan's explanation, there is also a sense of pride in "enjoying" the position, which explains why he seemed taken aback by my earlier inquiry. By probing if he appreciated his job, I implied that as a researcher his actions conveyed this. I want to bring in Yurchak's findings in the late 1990s, as Ivan's pleasure evokes popular publications that championed a new business spirit (2003). In his ethnography, he showed that magazines were catering for a new generation of entrepreneurs: a neoliberal 'homo economicus' (ibid., p.73). Magazines such as Kar'era stated that individuals should meticulously organise aspects of their life. These ideals began to acquire a positive meaning due to the ascendancy of a neoliberal spirit. However, Yurchak emphasises the individual as the 'spirit of true careerism' (ibid., p.71). For Ivan, he does not only present himself, but he is showing off for the 'collective' by using the word 'we'. I believe that Ivan demonstrates the shifting moralities, where economic activities were gradually being welcomed by the Soviet public.

The structures of the market economy called for mobile individuals, leading to the emergence of a new subjectivity. This discourse reframed the workplace as an arena for the 'enactment of the self' by promising autonomy and empowerment (Makovicky, 2016, p.11). Another seller, Asan would fit into this category. Originally from Kyrgyzstan, he is thirty-eight years old and has been working here for the past eleven years. His products included tourist commodities: fridge magnets, matryoshka dolls and lighters. Echoing a similar sentiment to Ivan, Asan gestured towards his stock:

'Yes! As you can see. I am advertising Russia! If you look at what I sell, the products are recognisable... I trade these products as I know they are popular among visitors. Back in my home country we say that to gain a better understanding of a country, you should go to their bazaar (3). Then you get a real understanding of their "obshchestvo" (society).'

Furthermore, Ivan's and Asan's extracts underscore how the market has shifted from an ideologically marked space to a celebrated space. Formerly, commercial endeavours were politically condemned, yet here the organisers are capitalising on the market as a main attraction. This is one of the chief aims of the directors who describe it as an 'exhibition fair of products and objects' in collaboration with the Government of Moscow (Orlov, 2019). Presently, 'Izmailovsky Market' has 1,012 reviews on TripAdvisor and is ranked 107 out of 2,939 things to do in Moscow. Organisers are not only awaiting visitors to come through their appealing gates but actively promote the locality to a wider audience. Subsequently, it could be said that the market is geared towards a globalised and tourist audience.

Creating a Community

The saying 'не имей сто рублей, а имей сто друзей' translates to 'It is better to have 100 friends than 100 roubles' is an old proverb. Presently, 100 roubles will only equate to just £1.20, however, the bygone holds relevance. Many of the stands are run by family members so I witnessed how the united dynamic could

(3) The vast majority of people in Kyrgyzstan are Muslims - they refer to the market as the bazaar.

Figure 3: Katyusha and Maria sell food in the middle of the walkway.

operate. Yet, I was surprised by how accommodating each seller was to one another. Was each stall not effectively competing against one another? After several weeks, I came to comprehend that to be a 'khoroshiy prodavets' (good seller) one must take on a specific approach to work and see it as a practice.

In the Izmailovo market, work was a matter of exchange and was not confined to economic transactions. Bear et al assert in their seminal work 'Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism' that economic systems are diverse and intimate networks of human relations (2015). This led me to question what kind of relationships are produced within the context of the marketplace. The networks and ways of being created between fellow vendors were, I argue, ultimately structured by their notion and respect of 'hard labour'. Hence, why relationships formed between vendors were an important part of their lives as there was an affirmation of community – an intimate network as opposed to competition.

Work vs Labour?

In a setting of monetary incentives, it was fascinating that work could reinforce values centred on cooperation. Conceivably importing my ideals of commercial rationality that each stand was in direct competition with those surrounding them. My views countered Dimitri's belief:

'You have to find common ground (opshe iuzuk) with those around you. Otherwise, you'll never have a good business. Look we

are all doing the same thing, being "prodavtsy" (sellers) we are connected by this and should respect each other. Why should we not get on?'

Referring to the workers as 'we' and 'connected' implies that the community spirit is created from the process of selling. I want to expand on Carsten's notion of 'relatedness' and situate this logic within the market (2000). Her formative book elucidated that in society there are types of emotional and social feelings of connectedness, of which biological relationships are only a fraction. Suitably, it enlarged the analytical terrain of kinship as Carsten placed it in a wider frame of 'relatedness' and acknowledged that it could be constituted through practice. This is mirrored in Dimitri's view, although vending is performed by the individual it contributes to the collective sense of belonging. There is an acknowledgement that each person is here to work on their stalls, but they are bounded through their laborious actions.

I believe it is important to discern the difference between 'rabota' (work) and 'trud' (labour). Individuals sometimes used the terms interchangeably, but I soon grasped a salient difference in the actions they evoked. An ethos was instilled through the very act of labouring. If someone saw this market merely in terms of 'work' it was believed their principal ambitions were to generate profits. This is not to deny that the sellers' main reason here is for employment, but the correct type of work was when they were seen to labour intensively. Katya relayed a story about a previous seller who lacked respect for the 'kommuna' (communal):

'This man...hm… what was his name, Lesha… I think. He came here just to make money without thinking about anyone around him. Lesha even took someone else's stall! Which is the first mistake you can make. Hm... he did not bother to make conversation or help his neighbours…... sales motivated him. Although he made money, it was not the right type of work. He did not work here for long and was unsuccessful (starts laughing) … which is why I probably can't even remember his name!'

From Katya's viewpoint, there are tacit rules if one is to be prosperous. Sellers who tried to maximise sales did so at the expense of the community spirit. I want to underline her explanation of the 'right type of work' and compare this to Asan who was perceived as a very successful seller. Asan would often help those neighbouring him, but it was his active approach to work which was highly regarded. Throughout my time, I noted that he seldom sat down, lunch took less than twenty minutes, and he was constantly up on his feet ready to engage. When I spoke to my informants, rather than perceiving him as competition they praised him. In one instance, someone told me that he 'exemplifies what we're about'. Those seen to enthusiastically labour such as Asan garnered respect and promoted the collective essence. He approached market competition in a different way than theory dictated. Whereas Losha partook in work that was profit-motivated and nonconformist. Hence, his activities were negatively viewed and explained as unsuccessful. The market was not an economic realm but came to constitute a sociability. To reject the 'kommunal'nyy', such as labouring in a way that was favourable and failing to cultivate social relations, was morally dubious.

Figure 4: Ivan's posters that are exhibited. His stock also includes badges and medals.

Entrepreneurial Ethic

I assert that an admired form of selling is seen as a managed technique by interacting with visitors. In doing so, sellers attribute the theatricality of the market. Many informants declared themselves as 'entrepreneurs', 'boss' or 'businesspeople'. On numerous occasions, I was handed professional cards detailing their phone number, Instagram, and email address. Yet, I remained conscious of labelling them as entrepreneurs, aware of its connotations with capitalist logic within varying geographical locations. The classification of an 'enterprising selves' implies a trajectory of the worker where valorisation is established in the market sphere. It centralises on the fact that work is a significant site 'for the formation of persons' (Miller and Rose, 2008, p.174). Nevertheless, as a foreign researcher, what authority had I to question their beliefs?

I do not disregard that being an entrepreneur may incorporate the requirement for innovation. I noticed that sellers would always ponder about new potential opportunities or products that could be incorporated within their business. However, I want to highlight that Izmailovo sellers applied themselves to make their ventures. It was their actions which created economic possibilities. As Brenner and Theodore have noted, such processes are spatially uneven and there should be an analysis of 'existing neoliberalism' (2002). Hence, I postulate that they embodied an 'entrepreneurial ethic'. To those I spoke to, work empowerment was founded in their initiative and action as opposed to commerce results. Their business practices were not geared toward individualism but took account of the market as a whole.

Sensorial Experience

It represented a staging space for individuals – whether that be for work, consumption, or leisure. In La Pradelle's ethnography in Provence, France she portrayed the food market as an exceptional place (2006). She challenged the notion that relations have ceased to endure in modern economies by stating that a social bond is always established, even if trading takes place on an anonymous basis. Far from disappearing, they take on new forms. The meeting between seller and buyer is central and they engage in an 'equality of chances' in which they play at being temporarily equal (La Pradelle, 2006, p.4). In other words, markers of class or race are irrelevant, as everyone is governed by the pursuit of pleasure. The market is a game where everyone participates meaningfully, both shoppers and vendors 'seem as though they are not there to do business' (ibid., p.55). Instead, there was a 'capricious desire' to potentially purchase something which the sellers seek to capture (ibid., p.63). Such similarities were seen in Izmailovo – visitors meandering down the pathway, with products exhibited in abundance to attract lingering eyes. La Pradelle rightly sees being in the market as a public act but in the Izmailovo market, I believe this performative connection was founded on difference as opposed to 'equality'. What distinguished each seller, was how they applied themselves to sell - their charismas and knowledge gave extra leverage.

'Wow so much is being stated without a single word in sight!' I overheard one American woman say in a state of awe. She had just turned the corner and was met with a copious display of 'Pravda' magazine covers and posters of leading Soviet figures. Behind the stand, Ivan gave out a hearty laugh and said 'Back in the day, the state had said every word possible …. by the time they got to these posters they had nothing left to say … they had to use visuals!' Immediately, there was an outburst of chuckles. Taking pride in the interest they were generating, Ivan pointed to a grainy poster. Cautiously unpegging it from the white thread, he looked at it longingly as the woman urged him to tell her more.

Remarkably, stories evoked from these memorabilia contributed to a form of sociality and were an affective quality for sellers. Firstly, the products aroused curiosity in the American woman. Ivan was able to utilise his symbolic capital and his knowledge having grown up in the Soviet Union to transform it into financial capital. Later confirmed, I watched her stroll away with a rolled-up red and white realism print. Secondly, this form of 'trud' (labour) would have been respected among fellow traders as Ivan's embodied skill was evident in the personalised information he provided about his prints. He was not sitting by his stand awaiting her to purchase the item but provided greater meaning to the object. Ivan may have been 'self-making' as the entrepreneur and collaborating with the customer, but it was ultimately him, his story and his actions that formed the moment. In describing entrepreneurship processes as 'becoming' (Bröckling, 2016) we should not disregard what this individual also brings.

I want to propose that the 'entrepreneurial ethic' that sellers exhibited was future-orientated. From visitors I spoke to, they heard of the place either through 'word of mouth' or it had been recommended on internet search lists. Therefore, it can be stated that the continual flow of

people contributes to the relevance of the market. Without visitors, organisers would consider shutting the market down. Hence to function, it relies on the memories and reviews from people who have entered its gateways.

Subsequently, the correct manner of 'trud' that individuals aspired towards was one where they provided items and engaged visitors. Even if they did not buy anything, it was important that visitors were engrossed. As Miller asserted, the moment of sale is never an 'alienated moment' (2002, p.226). Conversely, it is a moment when the vendors' highly qualitative 'entanglements' and judgments come into play (ibid., p.227). It acknowledges that vendors can apply their styles and attitudes to go about their enterprise as long as they contribute to the collective effort of creating an evocative market experience. This ethical framework guides behaviours between sellers as well as with their customers, defining the embodied skill they exhibit for selling. By stating this, I don't disregard vendors who seek to make profits, but it simply means that how one does so matter.

Conclusion

The characters I have discussed illustrate the heterogenous category of the vendor. Although they have different objects, stories, and beliefs they are all unanimously joined by their labour 'trud'.

The major aim has been to describe the social fabric of the market. Pushing back against the notion that economic expansion indexes a debasement of the community (Gudeman, 2001), my objective has been to demonstrate the seminal role of social relations. I have avoided delineating spheres of market and morality as this dichotomisation implies that they conflict with one another. Sellers may be motivated by individual pursuits to make a living, but this should not locate individualism at the crux of the study. I have hoped to show how they frame their business processes within frameworks of moral concern. They were not only 'becoming' (Bröckling, 2016) market actors, but they had an active role in 'creating' this position. In applying themselves, sellers made the market.

On my last day, I stood on the pathway to take in the last blissful moments of the exuberating energy around me. Coming out of her 'zhilishche' Katya smiled, I could see she was holding something carefully wrapped in her hands. Without saying a word, she passed me the item, gesturing with her head to open it. It was an object that I had become quite accustomed to – yet here it seemed distinctly unique. A matryoshka doll. I closely examined the beautiful and alluring design. Katya calmly expressed 'I want you to take this….so when you look at it… you will remember your time here.' It was not only a symbol for my trip to Russia, or a reminder of my fieldwork but for me, the matryoshka doll and its many nesting sections represented the many layers of the Izmailovo market.

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