

PERNILLE HOHNEN 'A MARKET OUT OF PLACE? REMAKING ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES IN POST-COMMUNIST LITHUANIA: ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES AT GARIŪNAI MARKET'

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Among salient features of the ongoing systemic change in contemporary Eastern Europe is the expansion and institutionalization of informal trade and petty mercantile activity. Recently, such economic practices and their socio-cultural parameters have become the object of sustained scrutiny by anthropologists working in post-socialist settings.¹ Pernille Hohnen's monograph on market trading in today's Lithuania² – the first of its kind – is a significant contribution to this growing body of ethnographic research and writing.

Focusing on Gariūnai, a marginalized open-air 'bazaar' on the outskirts of the capital Vilnius, Hohnen explores the ways in which various market activities become implicated in reconfigurations of gender identities and ethnic subjectivities, as well how those activities articulate with altering notions of work and morality. The author's argument coheres around boundary remaking, broadly conceived, which she sees as a key strategy used by Lithuanians to negotiate the disorienting social environment engendered by the nation's current 'transition' from authoritarian socialism to liberal capitalism. She suggests that the process of 'transitioning' can be productively examined and critiqued through 'new' institutions such as Gariūnai, a market place that speaks, more abstractly, to the "spatial, social, and symbolic reterritorialization" (Hohnen 2003: 3) of Lithuania after Communist rule.

Hohnen proposes that emerging in the nation's post-Soviet economy are 'new' ways of conceptualizing commodities, money, and exchange, which she presents as evidence of 'the development of a new economic field' (Hohnen 2003: 31). While there is certainly much that is new in this field, I find its novelty exaggerated. Many economic practices, knowledges, and identities that appear unprecedented, upon closer examination, turn out to be 'socialist' or 'old'. In the wake of state socialism, the categories of 'old' and 'new', of change and non-change, as it were, often coexist in mutually constitutive dialectic and deserve our equal consideration. This monograph could be more attentive to ways in which Lithuania's Soviet past and its post-Soviet present interplay and inform each other at the Gariūnai market and in the society at large that surrounds it.

Hohnen's study offers a rich account of Gariūnai traders, but says surprisingly little about the market's purchasers. Selling implies buying and vice versa; one transaction is inconceivable without the other. The author does mention in passing "Lithuanian, Latvian, and Byelorussian middle-

¹ Humphrey, Caroline 2002. *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Kaneff, Deema 2002. *The Shame and Pride of Market Activity: Morality, Identity and Trading in Postsocialist Rural Bulgaria*. In *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*. Mandel, R. and Humphrey, C., eds., pp. 33-52. Oxford: Berg.

² Hohnen, Pernille, 2003. *A Market Out of Place? Remaking Economic, Social, and Symbolic Boundaries in Post-Communist Lithuania*. Oxford University Press, x + 164 pp. index. ISBN 0-19-926762-6.

aged women... walking around the market with alert eyes and big carrier bags” (Hohnen 2003: 17). Are the gender, nationality, and generation of these shoppers relevant? In another comment she points out that most sellers assumed a rather passive stance vis-à-vis their customers: “Goods were principally believed to be selling themselves” (Hohnen 2003: 56). An intriguing observation. But what does this merchant ‘passivity’ bespeak? The author notes that buying at Gariūnai was less stigmatized than selling. This insight could potentially provide some clues as to sellers’ disengagement from shoppers. I was also left wondering how this seller-buyer distancing – a fact so reminiscent of Soviet retail – would fit into the monograph’s underlying argument of ever shifting boundaries. Some of them come across as being rather static.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Hohnen examines the multiple ways in which market traders generate, exchange, communicate, conceal, and reconfigure their commercial expertise. The fine-grained description and smart analysis of merchants’ agency as it pertains to ‘reading’, knowing, and acting in the market is one of the greatest strengths of this book. The author demonstrates that trader knowledge at Gariūnai is not just a product of practice but, in effect, *is* practice.

Again, left out from this stimulating discussion are the buyers. We do find out, for instance, that Gariūnai shoppers “were by no means ignorant of prices and quality” (Hohnen 2003: 64), but we are told virtually nothing about how they ‘read’ and came to know the market. One presumes that their knowledge, like that of traders, was continuously reshaped in response to the changing realities of Gariūnai. How was customer expertise made and remade, and how did it contribute to the market’s dynamics? It is unfortunate that an ethnography concerned with the market place neglects to address such questions in a more rigorous way and largely overlooks some of its principal actors.

The discussion of Lithuanian nationalism could be more nuanced. The author maintains that the market’s ‘global’ commercial links to the Asian East (most consumer goods sold at Gariūnai are imported from that part of the world) clashes with “the idea of Lithuanian cultural homogeneity inherent in the developing national discourses” (Hohnen 2003: 93). How really resonant are these discourses? Ever since this Baltic republic broke away from the USSR in 1991, nationalist sentiment has been progressively on the wane, rather than somehow ‘developing’. It has not ceased to exist, of course, as is attested by sporadic calls for national togetherness by right-of-centre politicians and intellectuals.

What has come unmistakably to dominate the public sphere is the relentless futuristic rhetoric valorizing the ‘modernity’ and ‘civilization’ of what is perceived to be Europe and the West. Although the number of so-called euro-sceptics has recently increased in Lithuania, for most citizens ideals and imaginaries associated with ‘the modern West’ continue to hold the promise of material prosperity, socio-moral order, and overall existential normalcy. Perceived by many as an epitome of *bardakas* – that is, a morally dubious, legally ambiguous, disorderly, and uncivilized place – Gariūnai in this context stands in the way of Lithuania’s current project to reinvent itself as a progressive nation-state geopolitically allied with *Europe*.

The monograph could be strengthened not only by a more thoughtful discussion of Gariūnai in relation to this ‘civilizing’ project but also by considering this ‘messy’ market place vis-à-vis other sites of *bardakas* in today’s Lithuania. During my fieldwork in Vilnius in 1998-1999 and more recently in 2004, I heard the word *bardakas* invoked in reference to the nation’s universities, hospitals, law courts, *Seimas* or Parliament and, so forth. My interlocutors saw these institutions as sites of profound ‘disorder’ and ethical breakdown. Situating the Gariūnai market in such discourses

would provide the reader with a broader view of contemporary Lithuanian society and its ongoing ‘disorderly’ transformation.

In Chapter 6 which deals with ethnicity, I was taken aback by the author’s claim that Russians who immigrated to Soviet Lithuania shortly after World War II had “a higher education level than... the [local] Lithuanians” (Hohnen 2003: 93). How really resonant are these discourses? Ever since this Baltic republic broke away from 1981? A perusal of Lithuania’s demographic surveys reveals that the majority of those ‘immigrants’ were soldiers of the Red Army, low-level bureaucrats, and industrial sector workers with limited formal training. In comparison to Lithuanian intelligentsia in urban centres, especially Kaunas and Vilnius, the educational levels of the post-War arrivals from Russia were inferior. This asymmetry persisted throughout the socialist years. In addition to this factual error, there are numerous mistakes in the spelling of Lithuanian words – another editorial lapse.

Overall, *A Market out of Place?* is a sophisticated and ambitious account of market trading in a post-socialist setting. This pioneering monograph is a welcome contribution to the study of the Baltic States, a region of the ex-Soviet bloc that as yet has not received much attention from ethnographers.³ As well, this study offers a sobering counterpoint to abstract economic theorizing which all too often overlooks post-socialism’s ‘actually existing’ markets and their actors. Hohnen’s monograph will undoubtedly be a valuable resource for students and scholars interested in ‘transitioning’ Lithuania, Eastern Europe, as well as in economic anthropology more generally.

³ But see: Skultans, Vieda 1998. *Testimony of Lives: Narratives and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia*. London: Routledge. Rausing, Sigrid 2004. *History, Memory, and Identity in Post-Soviet Estonia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.