

The Changing Perception of Trade as “real” Work: The Unmaking of Soviet Workers at the Vernissage in Armenia

Gulniza Taalaibekova
Frobenius Institute
Goethe University Frankfurt am Main
Taalaibekova@em.uni-frankfurt.de

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Introduction

This paper gives an account of the unmaking of Soviet workers at the Vernissage in Armenia. I argue that the unmaking of Soviet workers, first, is the irrelevance of Soviet workers as workers once they lost their jobs after the collapse of the Soviet Union and came to the Vernissage to trade. During the Soviet period, private trade was forbidden, and the Soviet government persecuted people who dared to engage in it. Consequently, many people grew up thinking of trade as a criminal activity that was non-productive and parasitic, as opposed to productive work that facilitated the modernization of the USSR. After the dissolution of the USSR, when trade was liberalized and many former Soviet workers were pushed into trade as they lost their jobs, it still retained its quality of not being “real” work, to borrow Roberman’s (2013) wording. Even 25 years after the dissolution of the USSR, former Soviet workers at the Vernissage still want to be identified with their former Soviet occupations and not with trade. However, now engaged in trade, former Soviet workers came up with a “new” way of establishing identity and hierarchy—through production. I describe this “new” way as “the identification game”; employing it, I demonstrate how former Soviet workers at the Vernissage identify and represent themselves as masters, whose work is productive and intellectual. In doing so, they single out resellers, people who resell the work of other masters, by implying that their work is parasitic and selfish. However, this “identification game” is reified only by the older generation of traders, former Soviet workers. The younger generation of traders at the Vernissage, which does not have any experience of being Soviet workers, is disengaged from it, thus undermining the Soviet view of trade as not “real” work and making it irrelevant in the postsocialist era. Thus, I contend that the unmaking of Soviet workers consists in, first, their irrelevance as workers in a postsocialist period, and second, the irrelevance of their ideas about trade as not “real” work. Furthermore, to support my depiction of a master who engages in “the identification game” and a younger-generation trader who is disengaged from it, I give two ethnographic portraits of traders at the Vernissage. I assert that the disengagement of a younger generation of traders at the Vernissage signals a change in the perception of trade as “real” work and runs parallel to the unmaking of Soviet workers.

The Vernissage introduced

In the Caucasus, Yerevan boasts of two Vernissages. The older of these two markets is located in the Saryan public garden and is called the Saryan Vernissage. According to Melkumyan (2014), it was first established in 1986 as a space to exhibit works of art and was considered a cultural space rather than a space for commerce and profit. However, Melkumyan claims, after

the collapse of the Soviet Union the Saryan Vernissage slowly turned into a space for commerce as street trading became popular and more people came to sell their household items and handmade crafts. This transformation alarmed the municipal government, as “it was not a proper image for the cultural center of the city, where the Saryan public garden was located” (Melkumyan 2014, 17). Subsequently, in 1993, the municipal government decided to move the flea market that had grown up around the Saryan Vernissage to a location near Republic Square. As a result, the second Vernissage, a souvenir market, emerged—commonly referred to as the Vernissage.¹

The government’s rationale for relocating the flea market away from the Saryan Vernissage resonates with the opinions of ordinary people, who believe that the Saryan Vernissage is a non-commercial space. “One may come across the same opinion even now when the Vernissage is perceived as a mere artistic place: ‘Though in [the] Vernissage people sell, it is not a market,’ said one of the visitors” (Melkumyan 2014, 16). Similarly, during my own fieldwork, the representatives of the Vernissage administration also highlighted the cultural and artistic aspects of the Vernissage and distinguished it from other markets in the city by suppressing its economic aspect:

Armen: No, there those are bazaars. There is a big difference. [At other bazaars] they engage in trade (*torgovlya*), business.

Pavel: Here it is different. They have no connection whatsoever.

[...]

Armen: Everything that is sold at the Vernissage is an exhibition. [...] It is not a bazaar.

The idea that making and selling art and handicrafts is not an economic activity but rather a cultural one points to a hierarchical dichotomy between a “*master*” (producing goods) and a “reseller” or *perekuptchik* (making a profit), between production and mediating consumption of goods (trade) at the market. This hierarchy between economic and cultural activity—the fact that *mastera* keep claiming that they “engage in a cultural activity and [...] are not vendors” (Melkumyan 2014, 16), or the fact that some resellers try to illegally procure certificates attesting that they are *mastera*—is what attracted me to conduct this study at the Vernissage. Clearly, being a *master* or an artist is preferred to being a mere reseller.

In tackling this apparent hierarchy between two groups of actors, *mastera* and resellers, Sveta Roberman’s (2013) work was very helpful. In “All That is Just Ersatz: The Meaning of Work in the Life of Immigrant Newcomers,” Roberman writes about the meaning of work to middle-aged immigrants who migrated to Germany from Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These immigrants, unable to compete in the labor market in Germany, considered the jobs they had, which were not full-time, full-paid, or formal jobs, an *Ersatz*, a substitute for a “real” job. The reason why they thought of their jobs as an *Ersatz* Roberman sees as coming

¹ To be clear, the Vernissage is located near Republic Square and is a souvenir market. The Saryan Vernissage is located in the Saryan public park, where painters sell their works. Martiros Saryan was a famous Armenian artist after whom the park was named.

from Soviet ideology. Roberman claims that “the centrality of the value of work was hardly a new concept for my interviewees. [...] Soviet ideology endowed the institution of work with a magnificent and central position in people’s lives. Work was that evolutionary and emancipating force that created the human and social self” (Roberman 2013, 6). It was very important to these immigrants to have full-time, full-paid, and formal jobs in order to be socially recognized and realized. However, being unable to find such jobs and pointing out that their state-provided one-euro-an-hour jobs were a substitute, they directed the researcher’s attention to their feelings of being unable to create social selves in their new home country, Germany.

In a similar but slightly different manner—if Russian immigrants in Germany by regarding their jobs as an *Ersatz* point to their inability to gain prestige and create social selves—traders at the Vernissage by introducing themselves as artists and *mastera* as opposed to resellers point to their desire to gain more prestige and create social selves. In an attempt to tackle the dichotomy between cultural and economic activities and the hierarchy between *mastera* and resellers, I posed the following questions: 1) why is there a hierarchy between *mastera* and resellers? and 2) is trade perceived as “real” work among traders at the Vernissage? After conducting my fieldwork and analyzing the data, I concluded that the answers to these questions are part of a process that has played out since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991: the unmaking of Soviet workers. This process is ongoing in all of the post-Soviet countries; my present work is an ethnographic account of this process in Armenia.

Theoretical Framework: The Making and the Unmaking of Soviet Workers and the changing Perception of Trade

The unmaking of Soviet workers should be understood in conjunction with the making of Soviet workers, which started when the Soviet Union emerged. The establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917 had a tremendous impact on the lives of people who lived under the rule of the Communist government. Russia, being a poorer country compared to European countries, decided to “catch and overtake” capitalism, transforming a country that had been backward for centuries into an industrial country with a planned, thus “superior,” economy at a “Bolshevik tempo” (Kotkin 1995, 69). This industrialization created thousands of jobs and required a commensurate number of workers, as indicated in “Peopling a Shock Construction Site,” the second chapter of *Magnetic Mountain* (Kotkin 1995). The making of Soviet workers was not a short-term process that ended with workers getting jobs at state-owned enterprises, but rather it was a long-term process that constructed Soviet workers anew. This ideological construction of new Soviet workers is evidenced in the state’s seizure of control over workers’ lives and bodies and in its attempts to impart new values through discouraging alcohol consumption, popularizing “cultured” activities and reading habits, and encouraging workers to improve their work skills through training and to remain a conscious proletariat by attending political discussion meetings—in short, a new Soviet culture (Kotkin 1995, 180-197).

The collapse of the Soviet Union, after 74 years, created chaos and had a major impact on Soviet workers' lives as state enterprises were privatized or closed down because they were unable to make a profit (Humphrey 2002, 80-85), thus creating high unemployment in the newly independent post-Soviet countries. The period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its influence on Soviet workers' lives and work have been identified and described by scholars as the unmaking of Soviet workers, Soviet work, and Soviet life (Humphrey 2002; Kideckel 2002, 2008). One of the characteristics of this period was a mass exodus of Soviet workers into trade due to high rates of unemployment. For example, Humphrey (2002, 73) quoting Nikitina (1996) claims that "in 1992, about half of the population of Irkutsk took part, and in 1996 [...] around 30 million people (41 percent of Russia's working population) were engaged in the international shuttle trade in petty commodities and services tied to that trade."

One might ask why the fact that people enter trade should be considered their unmaking as Soviet workers, since trade replaces the previous jobs they lost. Knowing the difference between productive work and non-productive work is key to understanding why the entrance of former Soviet workers into trade constitutes their unmaking. During socialism, the government as part of its ideology promoted productive work,² while declaring trade an unproductive and "parasitic" activity (Niyozov and Shamatov 2006, 236; Humphrey 2002, 82). Back then, productive labor was not just work done in exchange for a wage: it was implicated economically, politically, and socially. It gave social identity to a worker, who had to prove his political loyalty to the state by engaging in productive work; the state in return gave a worker the financial means to live and be part of society.

Opposed to productive work was private trade that was labeled illegal speculative and profit-making activity—unproductive work. Kotkin states (1995, 250), "Resale of goods with the intention of making a profit was known as 'speculation' and prohibited by law. [...] in a 1932 addition to the RSFSR Criminal Code [...] speculation was defined as 'the purchase and resale by private persons, for profit, of agricultural products and other objects of mass consumption' [...]." Back then, only the state had the right to trade, and speculation (private trade) was declared parasitic and was criminalized early in the history of building communism, at times being punished severely and at times being tolerated or permitted as a concession by the government (Romanov and Suvorova 2003; Medvedev 2015). Thus, anyone who engaged in private trade was labeled a *spekulyant* and criminalized. Romanov and Suvorova (2003, 162) report how while giving interviews, people who engaged in private trade during Soviet times still felt uneasy and justified themselves for their past activities long after the Soviet Union was gone and private trade was no longer forbidden.

² Productive work is any work that a person could do to produce something. For instance, miners produced coal—this kind of work was considered to be productive. In the case of the Vernissage, productive work is the work of *mastera*, who produce the souvenirs they sell, and unproductive work is the work of *perekuptchiki*, who buy and resell souvenirs for profit.

In other words, productive work was a norm that everyone had to accept. If not, they were ostracized or criminalized. As Kotkin (1995, 202) remarks:

In the Soviet context work was not simply a material necessity but also a civic obligation. Everyone had the right to work; no one had the right not to work.³ Failure to work, or to work in a “socially useful” manner, was a punishable offense, and the chief punishment was forced labor (*prinuditelnaja rabota*). [...] Work served as both the instrument and measure of normality.

In postsocialism, on the other hand, work is neither a right nor an obligation. As state enterprises shut down and the state withdrew from its citizens’ lives, people lost their jobs against their will (Kideckel 2008). In losing jobs that were “economically, politically, and socially implicated,” they lost not only their means of economic provision but also their social networks and social capital (Abashin 2015; Kideckel 2008). Whereas before work was provided by the government, in the postsocialist era people had to seek it themselves. Those who could not find productive work were forced to engage in trade, a “parasitic” activity that the Soviet state attacked throughout its whole existence.

In 1993, when the municipal government of Yerevan moved the growing number of traders from the Saryan Vernissage to the Vernissage near Republic Square, this growing number of traders consisted of former Soviet workers, who then without work were reluctant to enter trade. Amid dire unemployment in the country, engaging in trade seemed a logical action, for it did not require any formal qualifications and was accessible to virtually everyone. As evidenced in Tadevosyan’s (2014) article, street trading proliferated after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

To former Soviet workers, who grew up in a country where the state attacked trade as a parasitic, unproductive, and illegal activity, it was hard to take up such an activity, proclaim it their work, and identify with it. More than 25 years after the dissolution of the USSR, the lasting effect of Soviet rhetoric on trade has not been eradicated completely and lurks in the language and self-representations of traders at the Vernissage. The narratives of my informants in the field show evidence that trade for them was, indeed, a last resort in the post-Soviet period in which “[...] Armenia was caught in war, ensuing economic crisis, high unemployment rates, whereby poverty, especially in urban areas” (Melkumyan 2017, 15). Consequently, in the following years, when the Vernissage started attracting people, former workers were already unemployed and deep in poverty. The following is an excerpt from an interview with *tikin*⁴ Aida and her son Artyom, who sell small cross-stones (*khachkary*) made of tufa. When I asked them how they came up with the idea of making *khachkary*, they answered:

³ “These strictures were set down in the 1936 constitution. Under article 12, work became compulsory. Under article 118, it was listed as a right” (Kotkin 1995, 490).

⁴ *Tikin* is a term used for older women. Within a family, it is used to refer to a paternal aunt (father’s sister), but people use it to refer to older women generally.

Tikin Aida: Why did we come up with this idea? Because we had a bad life. We did not have jobs.

Artyom: If people were offered jobs with a stable salary, they would work.

Tikin Aida: There is no stability. [...] If we had jobs, we probably would not do this [making *khachkary*]. Since we did not have jobs, we had to think. We had to live somehow, because otherwise, no one cares about us.

Artyom: Yes, no one cares if we live or not.

This last sentence of no one caring whether traders at the Vernissage live or not is reminiscent of a passage from *Getting by in Postsocialist Romania* in which David Kideckel quotes a Lupeni miner saying, “They [the government] hope we will all disappear. Whether we do it by taking the buy-outs or dying in the mine makes no difference to them, just as long as we disappear” (Kideckel 2008, 98). In Lupeni, Romania, former miners, who were celebrated for their productive work during the Communist government’s rule, are also slowly losing their jobs as the postsocialist state is closing down mines and offering miners buyouts with no prospect of giving them other jobs or caring for them. During Soviet times, the government was perceived as a patriarch that pledged—although it might not have lived up to its promises—to provide for the basic needs of its citizens. However, nowadays in Armenia, as in Romania, people feel disregarded as the state has withdrawn from workers’ lives and abandoned its role of protecting workers, thus pushing them into trade.

In considering the unmaking of Soviet workers and the emergence of traders as a social and cultural category in Armenia, the Vernissage proves an excellent choice as a focus for this study, since the market has absorbed many former Soviet workers. In becoming a place of refuge for former workers and in combining both productive and non-productive activities in which *mastera* and resellers are engaged, the market proves to be useful for studying the dynamics of the interaction between productive and non-productive work and capturing changes in the perception of trade as “real” work. However, this paper does not give a fixed definition of what work is but rather emphasizes that its meaning is versatile and can change with the context—state legislation, the collapse of the government, an ideology, or a personal perception.

Research Method

This work is based on research at the Vernissage from the last week of September 2016 until the end of January 2017. In this research, I employed two methods of investigation: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation: from October until mid-December, I spent the weekends at the Vernissage learning how to knit socks from two women at the market and was able to spend a considerable amount of time there in the company of traders, which enabled me to establish rapport with them. In-depth interviews: overall, I conducted 27 interviews with different stakeholders at the Vernissage. I tried to cover as many stakeholders as possible: traders, officials from the municipality, representatives of the Vernissage administration, architects from the “Yerevan Project” who designed the

reconstruction and modernization project for the Vernissage, and customers. Due to privacy concerns, I have changed the names of some of my informants. Besides employing participant observation and in-depth interviews, I also gathered photographic data on the Vernissage reconstruction process, different items for sale, and the market in general.

“The Identification Game”: The Categories of *Master* and Reseller at the Vernissage

Although after the independence of Armenia, private trade was not considered a criminal activity anymore, its connotations were difficult to forget. In the minds of former Soviet workers, private trade’s connotations as a parasitic, unproductive, and selfish activity that did not contribute to achieving their country’s modernization were still very much alive. As Alla’s case study below illustrates, we can say that former Soviet workers were therefore *reluctant* (author’s emphasis) to enter trade. However, engagement in trade for more than two decades was not only a process of struggling: it was also a process of attaching meaning to their new occupation and of establishing identities and hierarchies anew. At the Vernissage, one such “new” way of establishing identity and asserting authority (hierarchy) among former Soviet workers was through “the identification game.” “The identification game” is a term coined by Stephan Kotkin (1995, 215). Although he presents “the identification game” as a mechanism that Soviet workers used to present themselves and their past lives in terms of categories conforming to state ideology without necessarily believing in them, I slightly modify this term in my employment of it. By “the identification game” I mean a mechanism that former Soviet workers at the Vernissage use to identify themselves as *mastera* whose work is productive and/or intellectual, as opposed to resellers whose work is parasitic and selfish.

To understand “the identification game” at the Vernissage, it is necessary to know about the difference and the relationship between a *master* and a reseller. At the Vernissage, a person who produces his own work for sale is known as a *master* and is on the upper rungs of the hierarchy ladder, as opposed to a reseller, a *perekuptchik*. A reseller does not produce anything and makes a profit by reselling the work of *mastera*. For people at the Vernissage, the notion of being a *master* inherently means “to produce”; it was enough to produce one’s souvenirs for sale to be called a *master*. Most of the *mastera* I encountered—unlike the “false *mastera*” in Melkumyan’s (2014) article, who procure certificates illegally to pass as *mastera*—did not have any certifications from a government institution stating that they, in fact, were *mastera*.⁵ Most of my interviewees did not know the process for obtaining a certificate and were bewildered at my question about how to obtain one. One of the main reasons why my informants did not get a certificate was that it was unnecessary. “What for?” was the answer I usually received when I asked whether they had a certificate.

⁵ Only *tikin* Anakhit had a certificate that stated that she was a *master*.

During the course of my research, mainly older people from both the Saryan Vernissage and the Vernissage talked about *perekuptchiki*, resellers. Although none of them pointed out a *perekuptchik*, they all claimed that they were there and their presence negatively influenced the Vernissage's reputation. An excerpt from an interview with Alla makes the point quite clear.

Alla: Honestly, I do not know when people started reselling, but there are so many of them now. This is negatively reflected on...

Gulniza: How is it exactly reflected? What are the consequences?

Alla: Tourists know that it is a fair market of handmade works. A tourist—let us imagine—buys goods that are not handmade and are being resold after being imported from neighboring countries. He buys an item assuming it is handmade. If he asks for a price, it obviously suits him, because a handmade work costs much more than a non-handmade work. A tourist sees that an item is cheap and buys it. Later on, he approaches handmade goods. He finds out the price and is shocked by the price. On the one hand, it is unethical to tell him, "My goods are handmade; the goods that you have just seen are not handmade." On the other hand, you know that it is a lie: that some people are lying.

Perekuptchiki are regarded as a distinct category of traders and sometimes evoke in those who talk about them mostly negative feelings toward them. For instance, one afternoon when a woman came up to *tikin* Anakhit and asked her whether she wanted to sell her socks for resale, she (*tikin* Anakhit) turned down her offer right away. After she had left, *tikin* Anakhit exclaimed, "They are smothering us! They are working even during the weekdays." Sometimes, there are cases of *mastera* reselling the work of other *mastera*, but even then, they clearly distinguish themselves from resellers. Alla, who besides her own dolls sold dolls by other doll makers at the market, in trying to explain the difference between herself and a *perekuptchik*, said:

Those people, who are engaged in reselling, are a different category of people because they do not care whether works get damaged. All they care about is profit. When profit is not the priority... In my case, it is not only profit that affects my relationships with others, there are many other factors that might be inexplicable, but it is so. I advertise works of *devochek* [referring to other doll makers] with great pleasure.

From the quotations above, we can see that the relationship between *mastera* and *perekuptchiki* is hierarchical in nature. This hierarchy is based on the assumption of the higher status of productive work, which originates in Soviet ideology, and is enforced mostly by those who claim that their work is productive. It is only those who call themselves *mastera* who condescendingly talk about resellers and not vice versa. I have not met a reseller who would mention *mastera* and complain about *mastera*'s productive work or *mastera* as such. We find out about resellers only through *mastera* who complain about them. Moreover, the categories of *master* and reseller are permeable, meaning that a person can always switch back and forth between being a *master* or a reseller. Alla, for instance, is a good example of how a reseller can become a *master*, for she first started selling goods that her uncle and aunt produced and later started making dolls. Thus, we can infer that this practice of identifying oneself as a *master* or a reseller does not make reference to a fixed category, nor it is a category that the current government or the Vernissage administration imposes on them.

Therefore, it is difficult to determine the exact number of *perekuptchiki*. Depending on whom one talks to, this number can change greatly, for no one keeps a record of who is a *master* and who is a *perekuptchik*. Pavel Guroglyan, the director of the Vernissage, and Armen estimated that 50% of traders at the Vernissage were *perekuptchiki*. The administration is uninterested in counting the number of and differentiating between *mastera* and resellers; it is happy as long as people occupying stalls at the market keep paying their fees.

If we pay close attention to who exactly engages in identifying who is a *master* and who is a reseller, we quickly come to the realization that it is mostly older traders at the Vernissage—former Soviet workers. I call this practice of identifying who is a *master* and who is a *perekuptchik* “the identification game.” The fact that it is mostly former Soviet workers who engage in “the identification game” is hardly surprising, for they were fed Soviet propaganda on production and private trade at least while growing up, if not their whole lives. It is not difficult to see the parallel between Soviet rhetoric on production and private trade and “the identification game” played by former Soviet workers at the Vernissage: *mastera* engage in production and are therefore worthy of praise and distinction, and resellers engage in profit-making and live off the *mastera*’s production—a parasitic activity. The “identification game” has its roots in an assumption that private trade is not “real” work, as will be discussed in the next section. Observing who does not engage in “the identification game” points to a gradual change in the perception of trade as “real” work, one which runs parallel to the unmaking of Soviet workers.

The changing Perception of Trade as “real” Work—an analytical Tool in Understanding the Unmaking of Soviet Workers in Armenia

Private trade—as opposed to, for instance, a profession such as teacher, doctor, or accountant—was not institutionalized during Soviet times and was not regarded as “real” work. As Roberman (2013) has stated, in the Soviet Union, “real” work was considered to be a full paid, full-time, formal, and I add, productive occupation. In Armenia as well, despite the fact that many former Soviet workers took up trading as a substitute for their lost jobs, it is still not regarded as “real” work by many. For instance, trading at the Vernissage is not formal, as it is not registered with the state; it is not full paid, as the revenues are seasonal since they depend on the flow of tourists; it is not full-time, as many come to trade only on weekends; and above all, it was considered unproductive for far too long. However, the fact that traders come to the Vernissage only on weekends might give a false impression that they work only two days a week. At the beginning of my research, having found out that most of the traders came to the Vernissage only on weekends, I expected that they would have another job on weekdays. I thought it would be easier for me to ask them to compare trade to their second jobs. As I got to

know people better, to my surprise, I found out that none of them except for Armen⁶ had a second job. On weekdays, instead of having a second job, some (*mastera*) were busy producing their work for the weekend, and some (resellers) came to trade on weekdays. Despite the fact that *mastera* at the Vernissage work more hours than those 16 hours on weekends, their time spent producing their work on weekdays is hardly ever acknowledged. The same applies to those who come to trade on weekdays.

To the question of whether or not trade can be compared to the work of a doctor or a teacher, Pavel, the director of the Vernissage administration, said, “No. Here people work only on Saturdays and Sundays, whereas teachers work from Mondays to Fridays.” However, it is not only the amount of time that obstructs the identification of trade as “real” work, but also its non-prestigious status, which makes some people think that a person who engages in trade did not choose to do so. For instance, *paron* Avakyan,⁸ reflecting on the difference between trade and teachers’ work, said, “Trade is not prestigious. Among traders, there are many former good specialists, but now they do not have jobs. What should they do? They have to live! However, traders’ work and teachers’ work cannot be compared. [...] In Moscow, people are also trading: architects are trading, doctors are trading.” Mostly, people believe that engaging in trade stems from the inability to find a job; in their opinion, someone rarely chooses to engage in trade voluntarily. Rather, it is a means of everyday survival. Alla, for example, also decided to trade at the Vernissage only after not being able to find a job for half a year. It is a common narrative that most of the researchers working in the post-Soviet space hear: engaging in trade as a last resort because there are no other alternatives to make ends meet (Nasritdinov 2006; Cieslewska 2014; and Melkumyan 2017). This contributes to the negative perception of trade not as a voluntary activity or “real” work but as something one has to resort to in order to make a daily living.

Moreover, people’s refusal to consider trade as “real” work is not only rooted in their statements and perceptions, but is embedded in government policy. While teachers, doctors, and architects pay taxes and have payments to the social fund and the pension fund automatically deducted before receiving their salary in order to secure government support later in their lives, traders at the Vernissage do not make any of these payments. As previously mentioned, the only fee they pay is to the Vernissage administration for a one-meter-long space at the market to display their goods. The direct consequence of not paying taxes or any other payments to government institutions is that trade is not considered institutionally to count as years of work experience (*stazh raboty*). According to *paron* Unanyan,⁹ in order to get their work recognized

⁶ Armen works for the Vernissage administration as a *kassir* collecting fees from traders, rents a stall at the Vernissage selling jewelry and other souvenir items, and has a greenhouse, where his sons help him grow vegetables.

⁷ *Paron* is a term used for older men.

⁸ *Paron* Avakyan is an architect who works for the “Yerevan Project” that had developed the model for the Vernissage reconstruction and modernization project.

⁹ *Paron* Unanyan is the deputy head of the administration of trade control and services of the Yerevan municipality.

as *stazh raboty* traders have to make all the legal payments to the government as individual entrepreneurs. If they do not do so, their work will be institutionally unrecognized and, consequently, they will not receive an adequate pension when they retire. Such a situation makes one think that maybe traders are nonexistent to the government as traders; in order for their work to be recognized, they have to register as private entrepreneurs and not as traders as such. However, none of the traders at the market do so, as the state tax service does not bother them. Traders' decisions not to pay taxes and not to get their work institutionally recognized further reinforce the status of trade as not "real" work.

Furthermore, an attitude that trade is not "real" work is also expressed in the language of most of the older generation of traders at the Vernissage. For instance, when they talked about trade as an occupation, they often used a Russian word, "*stojat*," which translates as "to stand," as opposed to "to work." Most of my informants when talking about how long they have been trading would say, "I have been standing here for 20 years." What is striking is that while traders use the verb "to stand" to refer to trade, when talking about their goods, they use the noun "work(s)" (*moi raboty, moja rabota*). In other words, for them "to trade" might inherently mean to stand, and "work" as such requires production of some sort.¹⁰ I interpret their use of the verb "to stand" as an attempt to dissociate themselves from trade as an occupation, and their use of "works" to refer to the goods they produce as an attempt to identify themselves with production, and by doing so confer on themselves the status of being a *master*, a producer. Besides this specificity of language, it was common to hear from the older people at the Vernissage that they were electrical engineers, chemists, mathematicians, miners, programmers, artists, historians, teachers, etc. Almost all former Soviet workers seem to identify themselves with their former professions.

What about the younger generation of traders at the Vernissage? The traders who were born slightly before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union? The ones who did not have any experience of being Soviet workers? What does Hayk, who is in his early 20s, for instance, think about trade? How does he relate to trade? The shortest answer to these questions is that trade for Hayk is "real" work. Not only does he consider trade "real" work, but he also thinks that trade is the best business in the country and that anyone who has achieved something in life has in fact engaged in trade. Moreover, as the reader will see in detail in the case study about Hayk, he does not engage in "the identification game" of pointing out who is a *master* and who is a reseller. For him, it does not matter whether someone is reselling or producing goods; he believes that both resellers and producers are working and spending time at the market to sell their goods. Thus, what Hayk's attitude towards trade demonstrates is a discontinuity in

¹⁰ When I have talked to my supervisor Susanne Fehlings, who wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on Armenia, and Flora Roberts, who wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on Tajikistan, both of them have mentioned that they encountered situations in which people who engaged in trade would refer to themselves as unemployed and would identify themselves with their former work.

perceiving trade as not “real” work. We see a changing perception of trade among the younger generation of traders, who did not have the experience of being Soviet workers.

This changing perception of trade as “real” work can be viewed as an analytical tool that sheds light on the unmaking of Soviet workers. But what is the unmaking of Soviet workers? How should we understand this process? The unmaking of Soviet workers, first and importantly, is the irrelevance of former Soviet workers as workers since they lost their former jobs and entered trade—which shook the foundation upon which they had built their identities as Soviet workers. Furthermore, despite being engaged in trade older people still do not perceive trade as “real” work and do not take on the identification of being a trader. They all identify themselves with their former occupations and/or with production—being a *master*. Also, both non-traders and the older generation of traders, who lived in the Soviet Union, see “trade” as a means of survival. The only people who think that trade is “real” work are the younger generation of traders, like Hayk, who was born after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This diverging view on trade between the older Soviet workers, who do not perceive it as “real” work, and the younger generation of traders, who think of it as work, demonstrates the ideological discontinuity of the discourse that shuns trade as “real” work and illuminates the change in perception of trade. This ideological discontinuity is the essence of the unmaking of Soviet workers, for it makes the Soviet discourse on productive and non-productive work irrelevant. Trade becomes as much “real” work as other types of work.

As such, trade as work is informed with a new meaning; it has become “real” work for the younger generation of traders, and its nonproductive and profit-making nature is not a problem any longer: they identify themselves with trade, and they want to pursue trade as their main occupation in the future. Thus, the perception of trade is changing along generational lines. This in its turn results in the ideological discontinuity of the logic of Soviet workers in understanding work and contributes to their unmaking: the younger traders disengage from the Soviet discourse on productive and non-productive work by not playing “the identification game” that former-Soviet-worker traders play and make this discourse irrelevant. Thus, the unmaking of Soviet workers lies not only in their irrelevance as workers since they do not have jobs anymore, but also in the irrelevance of their discourse on what “real” work is.

Furthermore, the unmaking of Soviet workers should be understood as embedded in the disruption that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet system. This disruption divided the older generation of traders from the younger generation at the Vernissage along the fault lines of two different economic systems: communist and capitalist. The older generation of traders attaches itself to Soviet ideology, while the younger generation attaches itself to a new economic system: capitalism.

Case Studies: How Traders came to the Vernissage

Below I would like to provide the reader with case studies of two traders at the Vernissage to support my depiction of a *master* and of a younger generation of traders who do not engage in “the identification game.” I chose Alla, who is 50 years old, and Hayk, who is in his early 20s. The reason behind my choice is that one of them has the background of being a Soviet worker and the second one does not: Alla worked for a few years as a programmer for the Ministry of Statistics before the dissolution of the USSR, and Hayk was born around the collapse of the Soviet Union and did not have the experience of being a Soviet worker. Second, Alla experienced entering trade as a distressing change and highlighted her role as a *master* by emphasizing that her activities at the market were both productive and intellectual, whereas Hayk did not. Moreover, as discussed earlier, Alla’s opinion on trade differed significantly from Hayk’s—a very crucial point for my thesis. Last, I chose them also because I know them well and they allowed me to use their stories. I hope these case studies will give faces to former Soviet workers engaged in trade and to those who are undermining that group’s ideas about trade and “real” work in the postsocialist era.

Alla

I liken meeting Alla to finding a needle in a haystack because she has kept a record of all the 330¹¹ dolls she has made during almost seven years of trading at the Vernissage: names of the dolls, dates of their birth, dates of their sale, and countries of destination. It is very rare that people keep such a record of the movement of their goods. The reason why she kept such a record is that she worked as a programmer before; now she uses her programming skills to organize her work at the Vernissage. Alla studied programming at the Minsk Radio-Technical Institute. In her final year of school, in 1988, she got married. Shortly after her marriage, she moved to a village, where she stayed with her husband’s family for five years and worked for the *rayon* administration teaching people there how to use the first computers that arrived in the village. During these five years, her husband participated in the Karabakh war and on his return was not able to get back his previous job as the head of social services in Arktikskiy *rayon*.¹² Unable to pay a large sum of money as a bribe, he left for Russia as a regular construction worker.

Not long after, Alla also moved to Russia with her two children to be close to her husband. She lived in Russia for around ten years, and during this time, she held different jobs: she worked with computers at a clinic, worked as a secretary in a school, taught computer science, and earned money videotaping Armenian weddings and editing the videotapes. After she returned to Yerevan, she was not able to find a job, despite the fact that she could do a lot.

¹¹ In January 2017, she had 20 dolls left for sale. The rest she sold to people from around the world, and some of them she gave to people as presents.

¹² This *rayon* was eliminated in 1995. Now it is part of the Shirak oblast.

In her early 40s back then, she was too old and not old enough at the same time. Eventually, in September 2010, she decided to sell her aunt and uncle's handwoven carpets at the Vernissage.

Her decision to engage in trade was not an easy one, for her husband and her father could not grasp that a woman with a higher education would go into trade. Telling me how her husband was perplexed at her inability to find a job, she quoted him, "With a higher diploma and education, not being able to find a job!" Besides her husband, her father too had a hard time reconciling with the fact that she started trading at the Vernissage. He complained to Alla's mother saying, "What is our daughter doing with a higher education? She is playing around with dolls."

When Alla came to the Vernissage, she did not know how to make dolls. Besides selling her relatives' work, she made napkin rings for sale. It was these napkins that attracted the attention of a young man who sold handmade chess boards. This young *master* challenged her to "make something that did not exist at the Vernissage, to present my [Alla's] 'face', my [her] work." Within a week, she presented her first doll to him. It was made of materials available at home; it was never exhibited for sale. Inspiration from her first doll gave birth to 330 other dolls over her subsequent years of trading at the Vernissage.

When she made her first doll, she looked up information on the internet about how to make one, but as she emphasized, it was important for her to develop her own style and not to copy others. Alla says that she tries to use new doll-making techniques and asserts that her dolls do not look alike: "When I start, I do not know what a doll will look like in the end. The character of a doll depends on what kind of mood I am in, on what I want to have." Moreover, she bakes the dolls' eyes out of plastic in an oven herself, which also helps to ensure that "they [the dolls] all have different expressions and looks." She emphasizes that her work at the Vernissage is creative: all of her works are original and unique.

Alla prides herself on the fact that she has developed her own style in making dolls, that she has participated in exhibitions with other *mastera*, and that she has been able to establish "Alla's shop," where she sells the work of other *mastera* along with her own work. However, it was not like that at the beginning. Her experience of starting to trade was emotionally distressing. Thinking back to the time when she sold her first doll, she said:

I did programming: all that I needed was a computer and I. I had a task and had to simply complete it. I did not have to persuade anyone, saying that it is a good piece of work of mine and etc. I was not familiar with such subtleties of this work. When I sold my first work, my hands were shaking. I felt as if I sold something that was stolen. It was because I did not use to sell something and get money for selling.

Although before becoming a doll maker and trading at the Vernissage Alla had different jobs, when I asked her to compare her current work to her previous work, she referred only to programming:

In my previous jobs, I had a steady salary. I could always rely on it. For instance, during the Soviet period when I was a student in my fourth year, I received 170 rubles. It was my salary;¹³ it was not a little amount, especially considering that I was still a student. I ate at the Ministry cafeteria, which was not unimportant, and plus I received bonuses. I was earning well. I thought back then, “If I was earning this much now...” After I had finished school, I would have had great prospects if only the Soviet Union had not collapsed. I had great prospects, but *perestroika* broke many people’s fates.

The fact that she identified herself with programming and not with her other jobs is telling in that like other traders, Alla identified with her Soviet-era profession. As with *tikin* Anakhit and Hripsime—two masters with whom I spent a lot of time at the market—I found out that Alla was a programmer within 10 minutes of our first meeting: she told me that she was a programmer on our way to her apartment from the bus station, where she met me for the first time.

Hayk and the Hrachya Ohanyan Company

I met Hayk through Artur Ohanyan, one of the owners of the Hrachya Ohanyan Company that makes and sells chess and backgammon boards at the Vernissage. Hrachya Ohanyan is Artur’s father and started making chess and backgammon boards already back in 1986¹⁴ when the Vernissage was still located in the Saryan public park. Throughout the subsequent years, Hrachya Ohanyan worked with his two sons at the Vernissage, where they rented a two-meter-long stall. Five years ago, they established the Hrachya Ohanyan Company. They now have four stalls at the Vernissage and a “Professional Carving Gallery” in Tashir Street in one of the fancy districts of Yerevan—North Avenue. The company employs around 30 people who make the game boards and around 10 people who sell them at the Vernissage. Hayk is one of the sellers and has been working for the Hrachya Ohanyan Company for three years.

Hayk is in his early twenties. Right after he finished high school, he left for Khabarovsk in Russia to try his luck there. Spending some time there and not finding anything suitable, he returned to Armenia and on the advice of a friend started working for the Hrachya Ohanyan Company. He is one of 10 sellers who work at the four Hrachya Ohanyan stalls at the Vernissage. Like other sellers, he works every day from 9 AM until 5 PM in winter, and from 8:30 AM until 7 PM in summer. His work is to sell the game boards to customers. The prices of the boards start at 45 euros and go up to 1,400 euros, with the average price falling between 150 and 200 euros for a game board. For someone who does not know much about chess and backgammon boards, such prices are, indeed, very high. It is Hayk’s job to explain why a game board costs a certain price and why a customer should appreciate it and buy it. Although Hayk does not make the game boards, he is quite knowledgeable about the details of their production.

¹³ As a student, Alla worked as a programmer at the Ministry of Statistics. She specifically worked with the data gathered for the population census.

¹⁴ Artur Ohanyan, who is older than Amo Ohanyan, said that he was 10 years old when their father Hrachya Ohanyan started selling his work at the Saryan Vernissage.

The company makes sure that its sellers know their products and can explain the nuances of the work to a potential buyer.

As I have discussed earlier, for the older generation of traders at the Vernissage, being a *master* is very crucial and important. Hayk, on the other hand, is different in the sense that he is neither a *master* nor a reseller. He is a seller who was specifically hired by the Ohanyan Company to sell its products. What really distinguishes him, for instance, from Alla is his drastically different view on trade and the fact that he does not try to distance himself from it. For him, trade is “the best business” in Armenia, one which he potentially wants to take up:

I think that the best business in our country is trade because people who have achieved something in their lives used to engage first in trade. First, they had a small shop and then they expanded it. Afterwards, they built a new shop in a different town. [...]

He does not plan to work for the Hrachya Ohanyan Company for a very long time and considers his current occupation a temporary one. What he wants to do eventually is to expand the butcher shop that his father owns and open another butcher shop in a different part of the city—in other words, engage in business.

Moreover, like everyone else at the Vernissage, he does not pay anything to the government, and his work at the Vernissage is not recognized as years of work experience (*stazh raboty*). The fact that the government does not recognize his work at the Vernissage as such does not concern him, for he does not want to accumulate years of work experience in order to receive a pension from the government. He believes that it is better to use the money he would otherwise pay to the government to start a business and not rely on the government to provide for him later when he retires.

I would like to have my own business and do not want to be dependent on the government. I will not receive a pension; I do not need anything from the government. [...]. For instance, if I have to make payments to the pension fund or the social fund, every month I have to give away 20 or 30 thousand drams. Taken all together, in a year I will be paying a large amount of money. If you look at the total sum of the money in 20 or 30 years, it will be a huge amount of money.

The child of post-Soviet times, who grew up in a period when the government withdrew from people’s lives, he does not want to rely on the government. Furthermore, he was not fed Soviet propaganda on trade and, therefore, does not think similarly to Alla about the resellers who, according to some traders at the Vernissage, are popping up all over. When I asked what he thought about resellers at the market, he answered:

There are *mastera* who resell the work of other *mastera* along with their own work and there are resellers who resell the work of other *mastera*. **I do not think it is bad, because** it is good both for a *master* and for a seller (*prodavets*). A *master* is happy that someone else is selling his work and he can work more. I do not think it is bad, because everyone is working. It is not that if a person is not a *master*, he should not stand here. A person who is here will lose his time. It is useful for everyone.

“Royal” Work:¹⁵ On the Importance of being a *Master*

As the reader can see from the case studies, entering trade for Alla was a painful experience: when she sold her first doll in 2010, she felt she was selling stolen goods. Her case is not one of a kind; many other traders had similar experiences. Why was entering trade so painful and psychologically distressing? Why did Hayk not have a similar experience with trade? The answer to this question lies in her background of being a Soviet worker. Thus, in order to understand why engaging in trade was painful we have to understand what it meant to be a Soviet worker.

With the creation of state industries that hired industrial workers who worked with their bodies, there emerged administrative, creative, political, and military intelligentsia (Derluguian 2015, 8; Antonyan 2012, 81) who did intellectual and administrative labor. With all the jobs provided by the state, there was a clear gradation of hierarchy and prestige: traders were at the very bottom of this hierarchical ladder. As such, the reason why entering trade for many of my informants was painful and psychologically distressing was due to the drastic change and the steep fall in prestige and hierarchy: from an educated and intellectual laborer to a trader. This is starkly demonstrated in Alla’s husband’s bewildered exclamation when she decided to take up trade at the Vernissage: “With a higher diploma and education, not being able to find a job!” Niyozov and Shamatov’s (2006) article about teachers in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also demonstrates that engaging in trade was a distressing experience for many teachers who decided to engage in trading but quit it not long after.

Alla had a higher education and labored intellectually, and therefore identified and represented herself as part of the intelligentsia. Similarly, before coming to the Vernissage many traders of the older generation completed a university degree and held “proper” jobs like Alla—“real” work that was full-time, full paid, formal, and productive. Although after the collapse of the USSR, they lost their “proper” jobs, and the ensuing long-term economic crisis undermined their status, they still thought of themselves as part of the intelligentsia. Thus, it can be inferred that a person can be part of the intelligentsia because she either had a higher education or labored intellectually or both (Antonyan 2012, 77, 80).

Thus, when traders at the Vernissage identified with their former profession, in my view, they first tried to highlight that their former work was intellectual. This is also evident in their claims of not just being a *master* in the sense of a producer of their own goods, someone who produces a particular kind of work repeatedly, but also being a *master* in the sense of someone who puts creativity into their work and makes something original and unique. Like many other *mastera*, Alla emphasized that she did not copy other people but developed her own style:

¹⁵ *Tikin* Gulchora, one of my interviewees, referred to her needlework as royal. To prove her point, she claimed that she read that royal workers in England started making needlework in the 15th century. Two centuries later, in the 17th century, needlework came to Russia, and in the 18th century to Armenia.

“Becoming a self-respecting *master* requires not only production but also creativity in producing one’s own works.” This concern that a *master*’s work be not only productive but also creative exposes two layers of being a *master*: producing and/or laboring intellectually.

This might be a possible explanation of why, for instance, Alla keeps a record of her sold dolls around the world. In trying to understand her reasons, it is necessary to ask the question of to whom this record is important. It is probably not to her customers, since many of them most likely do not accord much significance to the fact that Alla made the doll they bought. It is not to the government, because she is not planning to get a certificate certifying that she is a *master*. As such, the record is important to her to show that she has made these dolls and that they are unique and original. In a way, this record becomes evidence upon which she can base her claims to be a *master* who not only produces but also employs her intellect to produce.¹⁶

The Irrelevance of “the Identification Game” as a concluding Remark

Meeting Hayk was crucial for my work because while at the Vernissage I was so caught up in finding out more about *mastera* and resellers that when I talked to Hayk, I was surprised that he did not have a strong negative opinion about resellers and that he did not confirm my expectation that he would take the side of the *mastera*. Moreover, his views on trade and the government’s role in his life were different. It was only after talking to Hayk that I realized that other younger men I talked to at the Vernissage also never talked about being *mastera* or did not complain about resellers and did not shun trade as not “real” work, although they did highlight that their works were handmade.

His different opinions on trade, resellers, and the government’s role in his life made me think about why he thought that way. Only after comparing him to Alla and other traders did I realize that Hayk was different from them in that he did not have a higher education, he grew up when trade in the country was liberalized (many people made fortunes through trade), and he was not familiar with Soviet rhetoric on productive work, trade, and being a *master*. The concept of being a *master* is itself a Soviet understanding, for it was during the Soviet era when people were given such certificates. As such, Hayk’s refusal to engage in “the identification game” of identifying who is a *master* and who is a reseller, in which I was caught up by the time I met him, and his willingness to identify with trade pointed to the irrelevance of the “identification game” to him and illuminated the discontinuity of former Soviet workers’ perception of trade as not “real” work.

¹⁶ I would like to thank Dr. Yulia Antonyan for asking the question of for whom Alla’s record is important and pointing out different meanings of being a *master*.

Thus, the unmaking of Soviet workers, the argument that I have discussed so far, bases one of its premises on the irrelevance of “the identification game” to and the acceptance of trade as “real” work by the younger generation of traders like Hayk.

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