

Multi-ethnic Marketplaces in Post Socialist Urban Landscapes

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Introduction

As many scholars have highlighted (Hann and Hann¹ on border markets in Turkey; Sik and Wallace²; Hohnen³ on markets in Vilnius /Lithuania; Nyiri⁴ on Chinese bazaars in Budapest; Marcinczak and van der Velde⁵ on bazaars in Poland; Nagy⁶ on the Red Dragon Market in Bucharest; among others) open air markets (OAM) already existed in the communist economy and were important places for the distribution of goods⁷. They were also considered places where profit-making occurred through both legal and illegal activities, including pick-pocketing, speculation, and the resale of stolen or smuggled goods⁸. More than two decades after the breakdown of communism, police raids and control by customs officers are part of the everyday experiences of traders and clients in bazaars in Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague.

While OAMs were to be found in many socialist countries, such bazaars did not exist in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)⁹. Nevertheless, people in East Germany found different ways of practicing exchange in order to deal with the economy of scarcity. In many places in Central and Eastern Europe, thousands of people met in

¹ Hann C., Hann I. Samovars and Sex on Turkey's Russian Markets // *Anthropology Today*. 1992. Vol. 8(4). P. 3–6.

² Sik E., Wallace C. The Development of Open-air Markets in East-Central Europe // *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 1999. Vol. 23(4). December. P. 697–714.

³ Hohnen P. A. Market Out of Place?: Remaking Economic, Social, and Symbolic Boundaries in Post-Communist Lithuania. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁴ Nyiri P. Chinese in Russia and Eastern Europe: A Middleman Minority in a Transnational Era. London : Routledge, 2007.

⁵ Marcinczak S., Velde M. van der. Drifting in a Global Space of Textile Flows: Apparel Bazaars in Poland's Łódź Region // *European Planning Studies*. 2008. Vol. 16(7). P. 911–923.

⁶ Nagy D. Fiery Dragons: Chinese Communities in Central and Eastern Europe. With Special Focus on Hungary and Romania // *Religions & Christianity in Today's China*. 2011. Vol. I(1). P. 71–86.

⁷ *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism* / eds. Mandel R., Humphrey C.. Oxford : Berg., 2002.

⁸ Sik E., Wallace C. Op. cit.

⁹ Hüwelmeier, G. Spirits in the Market Place –Transnational Networks of Vietnamese Migrants in Berlin // *Transnational Ties: Cities, Identities, and Migrations*. Edited by Michael Peter Smith and John Eade. CUCR book series, Vol. 9. Brunswick ; London : Transaction Publishers, 2008. P. 131–144.

OAMs on a daily basis already at the very beginning of the 1990s, such as in the bazaar in the Warsaw Stadium¹ or in the Chinese market in Budapest. In Berlin, wholesale markets were only established in 2004 and 2005, while smaller markets run by Vietnamese migrants existed as early as the 1990s².

In the following, I conceptualize marketplaces as sites of exchange in which the social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of everyday life and the transnational ties of people have an impact on the encounters between various groups, such as migrants, locals, clients, traders, and political authorities. In the first part I will focus on the spatial continuities between the socialist past and the post-socialist present by analyzing the sites of the new bazaars. Interestingly, the new global trade centers started in “empty” places, some of them on the grounds of former socialist production sites. The second part deals with socialist migrations prior to 1989 and the social and economic uncertainties that Vietnamese former contract workers faced after the breakdown of Communism. It explores *socialist pathways of migration*, arguing that social and economic networks that were created in the socialist period are still in effect today. I conclude by highlighting multi-ethnic post-socialist bazaars as nodes of cross-border activities and as localities of cultural diversity.

The transformation of urban space – “Asian” marketplaces in European capitals

Fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 2005, the *Dong Xuan Center* (which translates to “spring meadow”), a large wholesale market in Berlin, opened its doors in the suburbs of the eastern part of the city. The legal owner of the territory is a former contract worker from Vietnam, who built large halls with about 250 stalls and rents the stalls to wholesalers from various countries. Most of his employees, such as security guards, are German, and some are Vietnamese. Located on the grounds of a former state-owned enterprise, the bazaar is surrounded by pre-fabricated apartment buildings, so-called *Plattenbauten*, built in the 1960s and ‘70s. Thousands of migrants, a large number of whom arrived from the former Soviet Union and from

¹ Hüwelmeier G. Mobile Entrepreneurs. Transnational Vietnamese in the Czech Republic // Rethinking Ethnography in Central Europe / eds. Cervinkova H., Buchowski M., Uherek Z. Palgrave : Macmillan, 2015. P. 59–73.

² This essay is based on the anthropological research project “The Global Bazaar,” funded by the German Research Foundation (HU 1019/3-1) between 2011 and 2015. Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in Berlin, Warsaw, Prague and Hanoi in 2012 and 2013.

Vietnam, live in these places, together with Germans. These buildings are typical for the architecture of the late socialist GDR, a traveling architecture that can still be seen in former “socialist brotherlands” such as Vietnam¹, and other places such as Tanzania, where it was part of what was called “African socialism”. The area of the Dong Xuan Center, situated a few kilometers from today’s city center, was already being used as an industrial site in the 19th century. Transformed into a global trade center in 2005, the wholesale market was mainly run by Vietnamese in the very beginning. Some years later, however, people from China, India, Pakistan, Poland, Turkey, Germany, Mexico, and other countries can also be found among the wholesalers and retailers.

Bazaars of this kind exist in many Central and Eastern European countries.² In Warsaw, for instance, the *Jarmak Europa*, called *Stadium* in the vernacular, Europe’s biggest bazaar, was the melting pot of the city after the fall of Communism³. Similar to other multi-ethnic bazaars, Vietnamese, Poles, and Russians sold goods in this market after the breakdown of the socialist economy, yet Africans, Chinese, Indians, and Central Asians were also represented among the traders. This trading location has since been transferred to the suburbs of the city as the *Stadium* market was closed down in 2008 in order for the stadium to be rebuilt for the European Soccer Championship in 2012, which took place in Poland and Ukraine. As a result, Chinese, Vietnamese and Turkish investors purchased huge areas of land in a small village about 20 km south of Warsaw, literally on the meadows, and built new global trade centers, with several hundred people trading in each one.

In Prague, Vietnamese migrants founded a global trade center in 1999⁴. The Sapa⁵ bazaar on the outskirts of the city takes up 350,000 square meters⁶. It is the largest and most famous migrant-run market in the Czech Republic. The majority of traders have a Vietnamese background, while about 20 % of the traders are Chinese, Turkish, In-

¹ Schwenkel C. Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam // Positions: East Asia cultures critique. 2012. Vol. 20(2). P. 437–470.

² See, for example: Nyiri P. Op. cit.; Hann C., Hann I. Op. cit.; Sik E., Wallace C. Op. cit.

³ Hüwelmeier G. From ‘Jarmak Europa’ to ‘Commodity City.’ New Marketplaces, Post-Socialist Migrations, and Cultural Diversity in Central and Eastern Europe // Central and Eastern European Migration Review. 2015. Vol. 4, N 1. P. 27–39.

⁴ Hüwelmeier G. Mobile Entrepreneurs. Transnational Vietnamese in the Czech Republic ...

⁵ This name refers to a small mountain town in northern Vietnam, Sapa, where a number of different ethnic groups live, trade, and encounter thousands of European tourists every year. According to the manager of the bazaar in Prague, the group of investors made a decision for the name Sapa, because this name is very easy to pronounce for Russians, Czechs, Ukrainians, Turks and other people, who are not used to speak Vietnamese.

⁶ Compared to this bazaar, the Dong Xuan Center in Berlin has “only” 180 000 square meters.

dian, and Pakistani. Located in the Libus district of Prague 4, about 15 km from the city center, the bazaar was built on the grounds of a former poultry processing enterprise and a meat company. According to the Czech gatekeeper of the Sapa bazaar, with whom I talked, the locality, which opened in 1977, was one of the most modern slaughterhouses in Europe in the socialist period. The business closed after 1990 and the grounds were purchased by Vietnamese investors in 1999. Another market had previously existed in the same district, near a residential home for “foreign workers”, but it was closed down by local authorities in 1996¹.

Compared to the “wild” markets that had sprung up at the beginning of the 1990s, the “new” bazaars in each of these cities are organized by a market management team on property that was purchased by foreign investors². The market management represents the bazaar to the outside, negotiates with state authorities such as the mayor of the district, the police or the firemen. Inside the market, the management collects the rent from the traders, guarantees security by hiring personnel and, for example, expelling those people from the site who sell products without having a market license.

All three of these places, Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague, are transnationally connected. First, managers from all three countries, including managers and businessmen working in Slovakia, Hungary, and other countries, meet on a regular basis in one of the cities and simultaneously maintain economic and political ties to their home country. Second, some support “cultural events” (such as beauty contests) within the grounds of the markets, in which people from various countries are invited to participate. Next, traders travel to bazaars in neighboring countries to purchase or sell goods across borders. Further, clients move between bazaars, as these are places where they meet relatives and friends. Finally, Buddhist monks from Vietnam create religious ties between Berlin, Prague, Warsaw and Hanoi, visiting each place and performing religious rituals in the respective *bazaar pagodas*³. As these examples indicate, a whole range of transbor-

¹ Martinkova S. The Vietnamese Ethnic Group, Its Sociability and Social Networks in the Prague Milieu // Migration, Diversity and Their Management. Edited by Zdenek Uhrek et al. Prague Occasional Papers in Ethnology, N 8, Institute of Ethnology. Prague : Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2011. P. 133–201.

² Who exactly the investors are, whether they live in China, Vietnam or elsewhere, was not easy to find out. In this contribution, I refer to the “management level” when talking about my contacts among market representatives.

³ Hübner G. Bazaar pagodas – Transnational religion, post-socialist marketplaces and Vietnamese migrant women in Berlin // Gender, Religion and Migration, special issue / eds.L. Ryan, E. Vacchelli. Religion and Gender. 2013. Vol. 3(1). P. 75–88.

der mobilities between these new post-socialist bazaars simultaneously connect people and places. However, a number of people were mobile in the socialist period and much of the economic and social activities that took place after the breakdown of Communism had its origins in the pre-transition times.

Socialist Migrations

New forms of mobility in socialist countries existed prior to 1989 due to agreements between “socialist brotherlands”¹. With regard to the agreements between the GDR and Socialist Vietnam, for example, from the 1950s up to the end of the American War in Vietnam in 1975, children, young people, and students were “delegated” by the socialist government of Vietnam to live, work and study in socialist East Germany. The group of students, about 200 or 300 every year, was sent to East German universities to study economics, mathematics and other subjects in order to help build up the home country after the war. In a way, these students, most of them children of cadre families, were expected to become leading figures in the reconstruction of Vietnam after the War. Once back in Vietnam, however, only a small number of them worked in positions that corresponded with their university training. A considerable number of these students returned to East Germany in order to become interpreters for the thousands of Vietnamese contract workers, who arrived in the GDR, in the Czech Republic and other CEE countries in the 1980s.

Traveling People

During the socialist period, a number of Vietnamese migrated to various countries in Africa and Asia to provide expertise in fields such as science and industry, and were therefore part of the global or “international socialist ecumene”². This term refers to imaginations of a

¹ Hüwelmeier G. Moving East. Transnational Ties of Vietnamese Pentecostals // In *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities* / eds. Gertrud Hüwelmeier, Kristine Krause. Oxford ; N. Y. : Routledge, 2010. P. 133–144; Hüwelmeier G. Socialist Cosmopolitanism meets Global Pentecostalism. *Charismatic Christianity Among Vietnamese Migrants in Germany* // *Cosmopolitan Sociability. Locating Transnational Religious and Diasporic Networks* / eds. Tsypka Darieva, Nina Glick Schiller, Sandra Gruner-Domic // *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 2011. Vol. 34(3). P. 436–453; Hüwelmeier G. Post-socialist bazaars. *Diversity, Solidarity and Conflict in the Marketplace* // *Laboratorium*. 2013. Vol. 5(1). P. 42–66.

² Bayly S. Vietnamese Narratives of Tradition, Exchange and Friendship in the Worlds of the Global Socialist Ecumene // *Enduring Socialism. Explorations of Revolution & Transformation, Restoration & Continuation*, edited by Harry G. West and Parvathi Raman. N. Y. ; Oxford : Berghahn Books, 2009. P. 125.

“worldwide fraternal community forged by both states and individuals on the basis of enduring revolutionary solidarities and socialist ‘friendships’”¹. To this day an “enduring socialism”² exists in a number of these countries due to former ties among socialist states. Such ties were also forged and maintained between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the GDR, but in an asymmetrical way. While East German experts, such as architects, traveled from the GDR to Vietnam, bringing specific knowledge and skills to the socialist brotherland³, East Germany did not often invite experienced Vietnamese doctors, engineers or scientists to travel to and work in the GDR. Contrary to socialist countries such as Algeria, Mozambique or Angola, which required specialists and expertise to build up their economies, the GDR was in need of foreign manual labor to work in industrial production.

In April 1980, the GDR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed a bilateral “Agreement on the Temporary Employment and Qualification of Vietnamese Workers in Companies of the German Democratic Republic”⁴, and as a result, tens of thousands of Vietnamese migrants, most of them from North Vietnam, came to live and work in East Germany. The GDR signed similar agreements with Poland and Hungary in the 1960s, with Algeria, Cuba, Mozambique, and Angola in the 1970s, and with China and North Korea in the 1980s⁵. Other countries, such as Czechoslovakia, signed agreements with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam about sending thousands of contract workers in the 1980s, while Poland and other socialist countries signed students’ exchange programs with Vietnam since the 1960s.

Trading Activities

Mass migration to the GDR, to Czechoslovakia and to Poland in the 1980s differed from previous migrations of students in particular with regard to language skills and knowledge about the culture and history of the respective countries. The most important difference was,

¹ Bayly S. Op. cit. P. 126.

² Enduring Socialism. Explorations of Revolution & Transformation, Restoration & Continuation / eds. H. G. West, P. N. Raman. N. Y. ; Oxford : Berghan Books, 2009.

³ Schwenkel C. Op. cit.

⁴ Dennis M. Die vietnamesischen Vertragsarbeiter und Vertragsarbeiterinnen in der DDR, 1980–1989 // Erfolg in der Nische? Die Vietnamesen in der DDR und in Ostdeutschland / eds. K. Weiss, M. Dennis. Münster : Lit Verlag, 2005. P. 7–49.

⁵ Gruner-Domic S. Beschäftigung statt Ausbildung. Ausländische Arbeiter und Arbeiterinnen in der DDR (1961–1989) // 50 Jahre Bundesrepublik – 50 Jahre Einwanderung. Nachkriegsgeschichte als Migrationsgeschichte / eds. J. Motte, R. Ohliger and A. von Oswald. Frankfurt : Campus, 1999. S. 215–240.

however, that contract workers in the 1980s had one common interest: earning money, buying goods, and sending them back to Vietnam. Doing business was their primary motivation for living and working in CEE countries for a certain amount of time.

Trading was very popular in many socialist countries in the 1980s. A man in his late fifties, whom I met in Hanoi in 2012, told me that he had worked in a leather factory in 1988, situated in the northern part of East Germany. He traveled to East Berlin every weekend to meet people from Russia and Poland at the main train station to purchase “illegal” music cassettes with West German pop music and then sell the cassettes to East German colleagues in his workplace after his return. Moreover, Vietnamese contract workers were producing so-called “irregular” goods, selling them to locals and, in addition, sending tons of wares to their home country¹. Likewise, though not officially permitted, people in Ukraine (Transcarpathia), in particular local agricultural cooperatives, organized “tourist trips” to Prague and other cities in Bohemia and Moravia during the socialist period. People participating in these trips sold products to middlemen in Bohemia and bought other goods to be transported back to Ukraine². Thus, cross-border ties in COMECON countries were forged and maintained between individuals taking part in the shadow economy prior to the breakdown of Communism.

In the GDR, Vietnamese contract workers stayed for four or five years and eventually returned to their home country. Incorporation into the host society was not expected. Aside from a German language course of only two months, the contract workers were not “integrated”. Living in specially designated housing, they were ghettoized and controlled. The socialist government of East Germany observed the activities of Vietnamese contract workers, namely smuggling and other “illegal” activities. However, the contract workers were not simply passive victims of the intelligence service, but also proactively participated in various economic activities in order to improve their living and working conditions in the former GDR³. For example, besides their jobs in East German companies, a number of them bought sewing machines in the GDR and sewed blue jeans and other clothes for East German citizens during their leisure time in the workers’ homes.

¹ Dennis M. Op. cit.

² Uherek Z. Immigrants from Ukraine in the Czech Republic: Foreigners in the Border Zone // Postsocialist Europe. Anthropological Perspectives from Home / eds. L. Kürti, P. Skalník. N. Y. ; Oxford : Berghan, 2009. P. 278.

³ Dennis M. Op. cit.

With their earnings they were able to support their spouses, children, and parents, who were not allowed to join them in the host country. However, as scholars have noted, remittances are not just about money¹, and Vietnamese migrants also brought along social remittances, to be understood as practices, ideas, and skills that shaped their encounters with the host society. Sewing and selling clothes and thus economic exchange is an example for at least one kind of positive relationship between former Vietnamese contract workers in the GDR and East Germans during the 1980s. Racist sentiments in the GDR notwithstanding, various kinds of business and economic exchanges occurred between locals and Vietnamese in many places.

In order to maintain transnational connections with friends and relatives in Vietnam as well as with co-ethnics, kin, and former classmates in other former socialist East European countries, Vietnamese contract workers relied on personal and economic networks. After 1990, some Vietnamese women from the former GDR married Vietnamese or Polish men in Poland, and Vietnamese from Russia settled in the Czech Republic or in Germany. These global socialist networks, or what I have called *socialist cosmopolitanism*², were forged and maintained through visits, letters, and in particular through the sending of consumer goods to the country of origin. Due to the conditions of the agreement between the GDR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from April 11, 1980, and the new agreement from July 1, 1987, Vietnamese in the GDR were allowed to transfer part of their net income as well as goods to Vietnam. Many Vietnamese preferred to send consumer goods, such as household items, textiles, and electronics, as the exchange rate between GDR marks and the Vietnamese currency would have led to great losses in value.

Besides their work in state enterprises, Vietnamese in the GDR were quite busy and successful in “trading” even during the socialist period. Trade took place in Poland as well, where a number of Vietnamese, mostly students, were living in the socialist period. However, after 1990, thousands of Vietnamese came to Poland as regular and irregular migrants. According to people I met in Poland, it was very easy to organize documents on the black market. Contrary to Poland, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) signed bilateral agreements with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam about sending contract workers. In the socialist period, “a characteristic feature of the Viet-

¹ Levitt P., Lamba-Nieves D. Social Remittances Reconsidered // Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies. 2011. Vol. 37(1). P. 1–22.

² Hüwelmeier G. Socialist Cosmopolitanism meets Global Pentecostalism ... P. 440.

namese ethnic group on the territory of the then CSSR became its illegal trading in scarce commodities and attractive goods (digital watches, Walkmans, jeans, down jackets etc.), which they sold to the majority population¹. After 1990, Vietnamese continued in engaging in trade in many former socialist countries, based on networks they created during the socialist period.

In the German case, immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, former contract workers from Vietnam started trading on the streets of the eastern part of Berlin. After the end of the socialist period, they lost their jobs and did not know what would happen in the near future, as they no longer had a legal status in the new country, and no money. According to what Vietnamese told me in Berlin, they put blankets on the sidewalks to sell everything they bought in the western part of Berlin in the early morning. As consumer goods and textiles were not available in the eastern part of the city, Vietnamese traveled to West Berlin, bought rice cookers, batteries, and electronics, and sold these items within a few hours to people living in eastern Berlin neighborhoods. A number of Vietnamese petty traders purchased their goods, in particular textiles, from Turks who had already established their businesses in the western parts of Berlin.

Conclusion

Post-socialist bazaars are transnational trading points, attracting buyers and sellers from many countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Asia. By traveling to various places to conduct business and by ordering goods from as far away as China and Thailand, Vietnam, India and Pakistan, traders and clients transgress geographical, social and cultural borders on an everyday basis, simultaneously maintaining social, economic, political and religious ties with friends, relatives and business partners in their respective home countries and in other areas. Although current freedom of movement between these countries and new technologies enable many of these cross-border ties, transnational connections in post-socialist marketplaces are based on *socialist pathways of migration*². Prior to the breakdown of Communism, economic transactions formed part of migrants' experiences in a number of socialist states, in particular between those countries that signed bilateral agreements, such as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the

¹ Martinkova S. Op. cit. P. 134.

² Hüwelmeier G. Post-socialist bazaars ... P. 43.

GDR. These agreements contributed to the emergence of transnational ties, linked not to neoliberal capitalism but to cold war political alliances. Thus, ethnographic research in post-socialist bazaars highlights the relationship between transnational networks and post-socialism.

Cross-border relations continued to be quite important for migrants after the breakdown of Communism, due to networks previously created during the socialist period, reactivated and intensified after the fall of the Wall, and maintained and fostered up to the present. Multi-ethnic wholesale markets in the eastern part of Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague, are places where bargaining and trading takes place among various groups of migrants and locals. Besides the goods on offer in the markets, a number of services also attract individual visitors. Manifold ways of encounter and exchange take place on the grounds of post-socialist bazaars, such as healing, performing religious practices, gambling, and celebrating wedding parties. Thus, beauty shops, medical treatment, and economic exchange exist side by side in these cosmopolitan places¹. Hence, marketplaces in post-socialist countries are localities of intense social interaction².

The historical shift contributed to the transformation of transnational connections, as family reunion and travel resulted in new trade ties and intensifying economic activities for many migrants in post-socialist countries. On the other hand, power relations emerged among various groups in post-socialist marketplaces, due to the implementation of new legal categories after 1990. Status of residence, citizenship, tax rules, registration of business, and the arrival of different groups of new migrants altered social and economic relationships. Tensions and conflicts between people with different class, ethnic and religious backgrounds are negotiated in the bazaar. Moreover, links between surrounding multicultural neighborhoods and marketplaces in urban settings are established. Thus, post-socialist bazaars, conceptualized as nodes of cross-border activities and as localities of cultural diversity, play an important role in the process of coexisting across national, religious and ethnic differences.

¹ Ibid.

² Humphrey C., Skvirskaja V. Trading Places: Post-socialist Container Markets and the City // Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology. 2009. Vol. 55. P. 61–73.