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Trading places: Post-socialist container markets and the city

Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja

Abstract: This article discusses a vast, new and semi-legal marketplace of shipping containers on the outskirts of Odessa, Ukraine. It is suggested that such markets, which have sprung up at several places in post-socialist space where routes intersect, have certain features in common with mediaeval trade fairs. However, today's markets have their own specificities in relation to state and legal regimes, migration, and the cities to which they are semi-attached. The article analyzes the Seventh Kilometer Market (Sed'moi) near Odessa as a particular socio-mythical space. It affords it own kind of protection and opportunities to traders, but these structures may be unstable in a changing economic climate.

Keywords: city, container markets, fairs, migration, xenophobia

Cities have an interesting relationship to spatially distributed activities that happen in them and yet are not *of* them. World trade in consumer commodities is one such activity, involving cities in new kinds of extended relations and consequently new configurations of power and spatiality. This article discusses a new kind of market-place—the large container markets that have emerged in Central and Eastern Europe and Asia—which puts into focus the problematic relationship between cities and global networks.

Much attention has been paid to the idea of “global cities,” the few powerful centers where control of dispersed economic activities is focused (Sassen 2001). In a reconsideration of the model, such cities are conceptualized not so much as single entities but as components of

networks (Sassen 2002). In this second model, many corporate control functions are outsourced to transnational business service firms, with the result that a far larger number of cities are seen to be active in world networks. As Taylor (2004) points out, an inconsistency then arises between the idea that globally integrated organizations need central places where capital is managed, serviced, and coordinated, and the concept of networks as circuits from which “flows” may escape and new ones are constantly created (Smith and Doel 2007: 4ff.). Looking at a far wider range of actors, such as technologies, migrant labor and diasporas, brain drains, remittances, fashions, advertising, and cultural products, anthropologists have pointed out that the various global flows may be cross-cutting

and that they are often blocked by nation-state politics (Appadurai 1996). Networks, even within cities, let alone between them, can founder in a multiplicity of slippages, obfuscations, collusions, and ineptitudes (Latour 1996, 2005). In this situation, certain sites are “humanized” by coagulations of people, their disagreements, and confusions, while by contrast the sites of the most transparent global connectivity and flows often come to appear as “non-places” (Augé 1995). The localities of global and regional linkage, such as airport concourses, supermarket aisles, cash points, long-distance bus stations, trading floors or Internet cafés, often become such “non-places” where one is essentially anonymous and uncared for, though somehow connected with other people.

This article analyzes a situation where the problematic relation between the city and global flows is again evident, but it provides a contrary example to the notion of “non-place.” Container commodity markets are a new type of transnational trading nexus and yet these huge sites are very much *places*. Along with face-to-face encounters between traders and purchasers, they contain diasporic networks of new migrants, whole villages of local peasants turned salespeople, and ethnic clusters of trust, cooperation, and hostility.

The article argues that such markets flourish precisely when, and because, they are allowed to evade the tentacles of the corporate control of the city. Essentially international, they are nevertheless only quasi-legal, and they arise and expand in the interstices of legitimate business, in the cracks of exchange rates, on the shadowy side of cities. The legal networks and municipally sanctioned trade operations of the city are vastly exceeded by the sub-rosa tides of cheap goods and services of the container market, all in fervid demand by purchasers. In relation to the city, which is also commercialized, such a market is like its bad boy alter ego.

Here we analyze one example of a container market—the Seventh Kilometer (locally known as Sed'moi)—located seven kilometers outside the port city of Odessa, Ukraine. The ethnographic material we collected between 2005 and

2009 is bound to be partial given the sheer vastness of the market and the multiplicity of transparent and clandestine, illegal and public economic arrangements it encompasses. Observing the market place and having casual conversations with people working there was one way of grasping the diversity of people and sociality of this place. For more in-depth insights, we have relied on case studies involving differently positioned actors—from a local Russian salesperson whom we assisted for several days in her container, to a young Ukrainian owner of three containers and a group of Afghan traders, relatively recent arrivals to Odessa, with whom we socialized both in and outside the market. In addition we have relied on the data collected by the Odessan historian and ethnographer Alexandr Prigarin.

Container commodity markets and town-center markets

In the early 1990s, with the rush to capitalism, a new kind of commodity market began to appear across the vast territories of the former Soviet Union. Some of these markets have escalated into great transnational wholesale and retail trading points, attracting buyers and sellers not only from neighboring countries but also from China, the Middle East, Vietnam, and Africa.¹ The “shops” consist almost entirely of steel shipping containers stacked two high in rows long enough to be called streets. Ever expanding, these grimly bustling markets have their own administration, police, and security guards, and they have put in place bus services, parking areas, cafés, toilets, hotels, and medical facilities. The daily turnover can reach tens of millions of dollars (Myers 2006). What is interesting about these markets is that they are characteristically located in a “grey zone” just outside the city boundary and yet they exert a huge influence on the city’s regional clout, income, employment, immigration, and transport links. The use of extraterritorial land raises constant conflict over taxation and the destination of the huge profits generated. But just as significant

for this article is the liminal quality of these market spaces, the specific social relations that are crystallizing there, and the mythic narratives already associated with them.

Arising in a post-socialist context where trade was conceived as “speculation”—that is, selfish and unworthy (see Humphrey 2002: 42ff.; Humphrey and Mandel 2002: 7)—these markets still bear the mark of social marginality. “When I worked as a school teacher,” a middle-aged saleswoman Olga told us, “I used to tell my students that they should make an effort to study well, because otherwise they will end up working in the market. Now it is me who works here. When I see my former students shopping here, I hide in the container, it is so shameful.”

Yet somehow these markets knit into a constantly shifting nexus of thousands of far-flung globalized operations, tailing off into the local shopping expedition. Each ramifying network embodies the cultural, even quasi-cosmological imaginaries of its practitioners. The markets have become domains, significant players in the game of power. As a local newspaper observed about one such container market, “Over fifteen years of its operation it has been called different things. But in fact it is a state within a state, with its own laws and rules. It has become a sinecure for the rich and a trade haven for the poor.”²

This article analyzes the relation among power, space, and economy in these new economic forms. Such commodity markets can be contrasted with the “traditional” markets located *in* cities. Odessa also has an old and famous central marketplace called Privoz (along with other old and more recent markets in several urban districts (*raiony*) and countless small street markets). Location is always a crucial aspect of any market, and in the case of the Seventh Kilometer its very name designates its location seven kilometers out of town along the main road leading to the airport and to Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria. By contrast, Privoz (lit. bring in) is in the center of town. It was one of those markets where fishermen’s wives sold fish, where collective farmers sold vegetables, tailors retailed illicitly made jeans, and sailors traded contraband of all kinds—in other words

a market embedded in local and regional social relations. Adjacency to the port of Odessa is more important to the Seventh Kilometer than to Privoz: the containers arriving by ship can be directly transported to the open-field site of the Seventh Kilometer, which would be impossible within the confines of the city center.

Odessa, formerly the main port of Russia (later the USSR) on the Black Sea, has always been a city of trade, and today is saturated with commerce. Streets are lined with shops, restaurants, international fashion concessions, malls, and arcades; backyards are filled with tiny companies, basements with Internet cafés, avenues with thriving street markets. In this situation, Privoz is being transformed. The Soviet and early post-Soviet familial and ethnic trade networks are being taken over by firms, the majority of the sellers are no longer those who produce the goods for sale, haggling is less possible than before, the site is divided between two corporate owners, and part of the market has been sectioned off as a smart, chrome and marble, multi-storey shopping complex called New Privoz (*Novyi Privoz*). The city fathers are intent on turning the rest into a multi-storey mall, though they claim that the central section on the ground floor that has the official status of an architectural monument (*pamiatnik arkhitektury*)—the fruit arcade—will be left intact to convey the cheery traditional flavor of the old city market. The reconstruction commenced in early 2007 but the proliferation of new shops was put on hold in the spring of 2009 because of the economic crisis.

Often, the very same goods are sold in the center of town as in the teeming out-of-town Seventh Kilometer, though the prices are higher in the center. As local people often complain bitterly, Privoz is becoming more like a supermarket disguised in traditional garb and decorated with attributes of authenticity (e.g., a bronze life-size statue of the legendary fisherwoman, Sonia, in the new seafood pavilion). The administration of the Privoz complex has been taken over by corporate bodies, and the market divided up, cleaned up, and subjected to plans for architectural verticalization. Mean-

while, the Seventh Kilometer, expanding over open fields, is an entity that sees itself extending horizontally into areas called “sectors,” “stations,” and “fields.” The hustle of the Seventh Kilometer has nothing of the simulacrum quality of Privoz, and it fiercely resists any plans toward gentrification. Traders try to hold back the tendency to replace containers with pavilion boutique shops, because their narrow profit margins depend on the conditions for trade and taxation of the former.³

Odessa—and perhaps any city—always needs and creates for itself (or allows to be created) a notional space of “outside” that is, as Foucault argues, intrinsically heterogeneous (1986: 25–26). Raw and single-minded as the pursuit of money at the Seventh Kilometer is, this commodity market also evokes various imaginaries among the townsfolk—it has its own temporality different from that in the city, it welcomes foreign people who are often excluded from Ukrainian social life, and opens out into vistas of far-off sources and destinations. Over the past few years, the Seventh Kilometer has created new powerful internal trading structures—for which townsfolk struggle to find words. Trying to imagine how such gigantic fortunes can be made, they ask themselves what are the underlying structures? Syndicates (*sindikaty*)? Holdings (*kholdingi*)? People are using foreign words, pointing to the sense of globalized otherness of the place. Despite (or rather, *along with*) this distancing effect, these new commercial structures are the brute reality of socio-economic life. It could be argued that because the rock-bottom, indecent intensity of money-making in the Seventh Kilometer underpins the economy “of the state itself, it is the prim boutiques and significantly less-bustling marble-and-chrome malls of the city center that are a less solid, more illusory, instance of the post-socialist market.

A description of the Seventh Kilometer commodity market

The container market sprawls over 170 acres. For comparison, the largest shopping center in

the United States, the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, occupies only ninety-six acres (Myers 2006). But the Seventh Kilometer is nothing like a shopping mall. It has no pretensions to comfort, pleasure, design, or atmosphere. Instead, buyers must shoulder their way through narrow, dusty, open-air alleys between steel containers, opened at the front to reveal heaps of the cheapest goods. Sed'moi trades in clothes of every imaginable kind, shoes, furniture, electrical goods, domestic utensils, cleaning goods, sports equipment, photographic and computer equipment, videos and music, jewelry, cosmetics, leather goods, ceramics, spare parts for cars and other machinery, do-it-yourself and home decoration goods, souvenirs, and practically anything transportable that can be traded (even some food and animal products). Legal, transport, and employment services are also big business there. Numerous Vietnamese currency exchangers, discreetly giving the appearance of “someone just waiting,” lurk in the alleyways. The market has its own website, administrative building, and police. It is not surrounded by a wall or protected by anything beyond a fence—the traders' security is provided by their own steel containers and by the fearsome twenty-four hour guards.

Founded in 1989, as perestroika reforms were getting underway, Sed'moi claims to be the largest market in Europe. According to the journalist Steven Myers (2006), it has roughly 16,000 traders and a staff of 1,200 (mostly guards and janitors), but Odessans estimate a far larger number, a total of 60,000–80,000 people working at the market,⁴ making it the region's single largest employer. Daily sales were quoted at US\$20 million in 2004 and most likely have grown since then. An estimated 150,000 customers arrive each day (Myers 2006), coming not only from all over Ukraine but also from a radius of up to 300 miles into Russia and other East European countries. Buses, lorries, taxis, route-taxis (*marshrutki*), and private cars stream into the vast park beside the market.

Every day, except for Fridays, business starts at around 4 am; the really illegal transactions—guns and drugs—are rumored to take place at

night (Polese 2006). After the market closes, around 3 pm, when all the buses and cars have departed, nothing remains but a desolate landscape of battered containers, a few box-like concrete shops with steel shutters, and plastic bags blowing in the wind. Two nights a week (Mondays and Thursdays) are dedicated exclusively to the wholesale trade. For shoppers, the practice is to make an overnight daytrip of it, with most coming to buy wholesale (*optom*) in order to resell in small towns and villages. Setting out in the morning by bus, villagers can reach Sed'moi by nightfall, catch the night or the early morning sales, grab a bite to eat, pile back into the bus or trains groaning with goods,⁵ and be home by nightfall the next day. Some villages in the poverty-struck Ukrainian countryside have their own depots, called "Our Sed'moi" (Nash Sed'moi), which middlemen traders (*perekupshchiki*) periodically replenish from the main Odessa site.

If Sed'moi is a "state within a state" (an expression one can often hear in Odessa), it is one that is surprisingly easy to enter. The market asks no questions about the nationality, visa, or asylum status of either traders or purchasers. However, the Ukrainian state boundaries are another matter.⁶ The purchasing hordes do face certain slightly tricky moments when they return across international frontiers with their great bundles, for protectionist policies are still the preferred way of encouraging local business. In this situation large firms have to pay duties, but for the crowds of individual purchasers, as the anthropologist Abel Polese (2006) observed on the train running between Odessa in Chisinau, Romania, trade and smuggling are essentially indistinguishable. Well-established routines ensure that the goods pass through and border guards are satisfied.⁷

Setting up as a trader at Sed'moi involves a minimum of duties, licenses and "proper" taxation. What one needs is connections and money. One way of raising the money, prevalent in the 1990s, was to sell one's apartment to buy a container and then live in the container at the market. The containers may be bought as "real-estate"—their price shot up from around

US\$1,000 in the early 1990s to US\$240,000–250,000 in 2007—and then franchised out to employees. These employed managers hire sellers (*realizatory*) to retail the goods of the owner. Olga, the former schoolteacher and seller in a wholesale container, told us she received 3 percent of the profit on everything she sells. It is quite easy to obtain such dead-end work and it is not uncommon for sales people to set up their own networks of *realizatory* to maximize the turnover. Olga, for instance, gives some goods from her container to an acquaintance, who then resells them at a rented "table" (*stol*) in the most expensive retail section of the market and returns the items she does not sell to Olga. The owner of the goods and the container is not informed about Olga's commercial strategies.

Another option is to rent a container from the owner in order to set up one's own separate trading business. In this case, the renter is responsible for obtaining the goods as well as selling them. This is a riskier path—huge losses can be made, as well as great profits. Just the rent of a well-located container was around \$4,000 per month in early 2008. Besides the official small market fee (*rynochnyi sbor*) for services like cleaning, most containers pay a monthly flat rate tax that in practice has no relationship to the actual profits, and they also pay a monthly US\$50 to *krysha* (protection, lit. roof). The latter fee goes to the market's police who then turn a blind eye on counterfeit goods, expired or absent licenses, and so on. Some of our informants among the container owners claimed that they did not pay that fee because their paperwork was in order. They told us, "During the last inspection the police said: 'Oh, you have all factory certificates and a quality control document. What a pity.' And they just left."

What is clear is that the normal taxes, rent fees, customs dues, town rates, and licenses of the city are almost entirely in abeyance for the administrators and owners of Sed'moi. Meanwhile, it is up to the individual traders to comply (or not) with such regulations. The Deputy Director of Sed'moi has been quoted as saying that the market's owners pay roughly US\$11 million per year in federal and local taxes—a con-

tribution disputed by the Odessan city authorities—but as for the income and other taxes and customs duties of the vast army of traders, that is not his business. “We never tried to control it,” he said. “We are not the tax authorities” (Myers 2006). But even the tax authorities were not in control, and between 1988 and 2000 the Odessa City Council did not even have any fiscal information on the economic activities of the market.⁸ Evidently, it is the difference in the costs and scale of trade in the container market as distinct from the city that is the main reason for the astonishingly low prices at Sed'moi.

Both purchasers and traders are a motley crowd, many of whom do not have Ukrainian citizenship. The purchasers mostly come from nearby regions and countries. Some of the traders are local, but they also include increasing numbers of Chinese, Turks, Russians, Vietnamese, Armenians, Georgians, Central Asians, and Africans.

Sed'moi's site at the meeting of maritime and land trade routes, its proliferation of long-distance merchandise, diverse ethnic composition, and uneasy relation to the city of Odessa as a polity reminds us of the conditions under which trade fairs arise. The question arises why such container markets do not exist in developed capitalist economies, but have emerged across the world in the post-socialist environment. Medieval trade fairs developed to link trade across politically divided regions and borders, and they seem to have flourished best at places where caravan routes intersected and a nearby city provided protection. They declined in the nineteenth century with the development of regularized international trading, banking, insurance, and reliable communications, all of which reduced the popularity of face-to-face transactions (Allix 1922; Braudel 1979). They reemerged in the form of generalized trade fairs after the division of Europe and political instability in the wake of World War I (Carreras and Torra 2008).⁹ The literature on commodity fairs suggests that they flourished when, on the one hand, free trade across borders was not made impossible by warfare and when transaction costs were not prohibitively raised by the need

for protection (Munro 2001: 20), and, on the other hand, when political conditions created barriers and hampered the smooth generalized operation of banking and insurance, when travel was still relatively insecure (necessitating caravans or their equivalents), and people of different cultures were mutually mistrustful, even though they wanted to trade with one another. Lack of trust extended both to credit and to the products themselves, with the result that items could not be ordered in advance and purchasers would travel to fairs to inspect the quality of the goods they wanted to buy. Meanwhile, political bodies encouraged the growth of local fairs by giving customs concessions to merchants, in order to benefit from the riches generated (see, e.g., Holtfrerich 1999 for the history of the Frankfurt fair). If the analogy is correct, it suggests that contemporary container markets have emerged along with structural similarities—notably changeable politics, new national frontiers, strategic sites, an insecure traveling environment for racially marked others, and local authorities keen to access the profits.

The Seventh Kilometer as a transnational nexus of homes

The Seventh Kilometer is a place to which traders retreat, providing protected spaces with lockable steel doors and its own inner sociality. At the same time, it is maximally open to transit and distant sites. These are two different aspects of the heterotopology (Foucault 1986: 24) of the market.

Quite a few people sleep overnight at the Seventh Kilometer, in their containers. These steel boxes become not just shops (ground floor) and storage (upper container), linked by an inner ladder, but also homes. Furthermore, there are ethnic enclaves. This happens because some types of commodity are allocated their own trading streets, and trade in these commodities has become the preserve of particular nationalities (giving the market a bazaar-like quality).¹⁰ The clearest examples are Turks who sell leather goods, Vietnamese who specialize in currency

exchange,¹¹ and Africans who sell trainers. Until recently, Bulgarians dominated the sale of cleaning items (e.g., washing powder, soap, pails, dishcloths) as well as perfumery and cosmetics. Chinese and Russians sell several kinds of goods, but one can go to the market and see a long row of containers selling jeans and all the sellers are Chinese. Food vendors pushing their home-made carts among the shoppers, yell their multi-cultural wares—hot coffee, roasted peanuts, as well as Ukrainian, Central Asian, and Georgian foods.¹²

We will use the example of Afghan traders to illustrate a type of sociality present in the market. One prosperous diasporic network began with a young man, Abdul, who came to the Odessa Medical University as a student in 1990 and after a couple of years started to trade in his spare time to make money. In the early 2000s, he invited his two brothers from Afghanistan to join him in Odessa, and soon both found employment at the market. The group grew, relying on their compatriots as fellow traders, partners in business, and employers. Some Afghans, have received Ukrainian citizenship that allows them to travel freely in search of new suppliers worldwide. At first Abdul and his partner, Kemal, traded mainly Turkish and Polish shoes, whereas one of the brothers who later joined him in Odessa, had a base in Dubai. Later Kemal, a Ukrainian citizen, made reliable contacts with Chinese dealers in shoes and he now regularly travels to China to order new collections. Abdul's brothers have diversified into electrical goods supplied from various sources. These Afghans are fairly visible in the market; although they employ local Slav and Tajik sellers to help them with daily trade, they also serve customers themselves. Abdul is on good terms with numerous Slav traders who often pass by his container for a drink and a chat at the end of a trading day.

Sed'moi is everything to these Afghans—their source of wealth, their workplace, and their playground. It is where they make their conquests among the local girls, where they can show off, where they can play their music, and be themselves. Above all, they feel safe at Sed'-

moi with its heavy police presence. In the city the Afghans as well as other visible foreigners, such as the Chinese, easily fall prey to policemen looking for bribes. Real or imaginary problems with documents and residence permits are a common pretext to approach a "foreigner" and demand money, while at the market the role of the police is to secure smooth trade and a safe environment for traders and customers. Our Afghan and Chinese interlocutors told us that they prefer to travel to the market in a pre-booked taxi (even though it is more expensive than a cab stopped on the street) in order to avoid policemen who wait for them to come out onto the street.

Traders of non-Slav appearance are easily identified as "people with money" and they are also liable to racial attacks in the city. Several Vietnamese currency exchangers are said to have been murdered while they were carrying money. The locals have a repertoire of insulting terms: *negry* (Africans), *cherniye* (Blacks; Indians, Afghans, people from the Caucasus, Gypsies), *churki* (from Central Asia), *zver'ki* (lit. little animals, any small group of foreign-looking people). The expression "not Russian" (*ne Russkii*) has become a joking term for anyone who seems different, not one of us, and it is used by all kinds of Russian-speaking people. In other words, "we" are Russians by default.¹³ In this environment, "Blacks" such as the Afghans are especially vulnerable to attacks. The Afghan traders mostly rent apartments in Odessa rather than sleep at the market. But they travel to and from the city only in convoys for safety, which recalls the caravans of the medieval fairs.¹⁴ Outside the market, their social life is with one another. Unlike Slavs, they do not go on vacations and their leisure activities in the city are planned so as to avoid potential confrontations with the local hooligans. If a trader has an Afghan wife, she does not work at the market and stays at home. Constant contact by phone is maintained with the family patriarch in Afghanistan and remittances are sent regularly. Fridays are rest days and the traders go to a mosque.

Just as in the earlier trade fairs, most goods come from great distances. Personal transport

of goods—resembling that of local operations at the early modern fairs—is still part of the operations at Sed'moi, but the larger part of trade is now conducted via carrier agencies. Thus, though the purchasers still feel the need to inspect the goods, the trader-carrier-producer relations are increasingly conducted on the basis of trust, albeit usually unwritten and uninsured in the case of China.¹⁵ The shoes sold by the Afghans now come mostly from China. These days one Afghan, representing several linked businesses, will travel to China, where he inspects and chooses the shoes. He makes an order, and the shoes then arrive by sea at Odessa port transported by a carrier. In the past, and even now for small firms, it was necessary to pay in advance. Now, if a trader has a reliable, longstanding contact in China, the payment is made when the goods arrive. Our Afghan contacts are increasingly turning to the Chinese, as they had problems with oversupply from the Turks. Russians, and Ukrainians, who used to sell locally made shoes in the early 1990s, have long since been forced out of the market by cheaper and more fashionable Chinese goods. The globalized turn to China has also pushed aside Turkish goods. Chinese factories are amazingly quick to react to demand. Cameroonian sellers of trainers told us that if a certain model sells out, they inform their Armenian “master” who rents the container, he contacts the Chinese, and boxes of the sold-out type and size of will be at Sed'moi in a week or two.

According to the local anthropologist Aleksandr Prigarin (n.d.) it is now increasingly difficult for anyone to work his/her way up the ladder at the Seventh Kilometer—that is, to move from being a mere day-to-day seller, to regular employee, to renter of a container, to owner of a container, and finally to owner of a string of containers. Prigarin writes that capital has become transnational. Powerful, well-organized holdings, combining financiers, suppliers, and owners of clusters of containers, are made up of relatives, or diasporic networks, or groups of friends. It has become increasingly difficult to compete with the volume of money and goods commanded by these conglomerates. Neverthe-

less, there are some determined people who manage to make their way into profitable positions. Andrei, for instance, is an owner of three wholesale containers at the market selling counterfeit designer handbags and by the age of twenty-four he was employing dozens of people as *realizatory* from a nearby village. He started modestly with money borrowed from family members and friends and gradually built a network of partners in Moscow and St. Petersburg who shared costs related to the acquisition of the latest designs from the European fashion houses. This network happens to include Afghans, the “smoked ones” (*kopchenye*) as he calls them, whom Andrei otherwise deeply distrusts. Even the downturn of the late 2008 and 2009 has not undermined his confidence—he temporarily gave up his rented villa and cut the commission rate of his sales people to 1.5 percent. His attitude toward his employees is summed up in one phrase: “These people are just the instruments for me to make real money.”

In many ways, Sed'moi is a world of its own. To its denizens it is a place of security, mini-power, and opportunities not found in the city. Here reviled alien outcasts can feel at home; here the unemployed can find work; here a precious space has been created where an entrepreneurial person can make money almost independently of the state. Alternatively, from the perspective of upright state employees of Odessa, this market is nothing but the dump where the detritus of world petty capitalism gets blown. Perhaps it is not surprising then that Sed'moi is an occulted, fantasmic place in some ways. Unlike the kind of sites of supernatural danger analyzed by Mary Douglas (i.e., located in the zones of indistinction where different classifications overlap), the heightened occult awareness of the people at Sed'moi is created by its separateness, its irreducibility to either the space or the time of the city.

Spaces and times of the market

The Seventh Kilometer has both a history and what can be seen as myths of origin. When it

started, it was probably just another of the illegal spontaneous (*stikhiinye*) markets that sprung up in and around Odessa during the Soviet period. Shut down in one place, they would spring up in another. Word of mouth would spread through the city about where to find the *tolchok* (lit. shoving place). Mostly the markets were in streets or squares that belonged to nobody. But sometimes an official with space at his disposal would conjure up his own market under disguise—for example when the director of the House of Culture of the Stal'kanat factory allowed groups of "collectors" and "musicians" to trade there in return for a "rent" paid to him. Sed'moi was set up under the aegis of the director of the State Farm Avangard together with two cooperatives on "his" fields, and to this day the director is legally one of the key shareholders of the market situated on the land, which is now under dispute with the city authorities.¹⁶

This long-running dispute and a court case clouds the origin of the market and provides fertile ground for fantasies. Resonant myth-like rumors claim to say how the market started. According to one such story, the real owner of Sed'moi is not the director of the Avangard and his co-shareholders but is someone else—whom no one has ever seen. This image of the faceless, timeless, invisible proprietor coexists with another origin myth; both stories erase history and supplant it with ageless images. A former agricultural specialist at the Avangard said, "You see that hill? There was a tree up there beside a crossroads. One day three old women sat under the tree, laid out a newspaper and put some things out to sell. Then more people came. That was the beginning of Sed'moi."

The market area has a certain spatial symbolism and affect. It is laid out in rectangles, like an ancient Roman garrison, and although it does not have town boundaries that have to be constantly renewed, as in the Roman city, there is a notional centre. This is constituted by an area called the "Field of Miracles" (*Pole Chudes*), where fortunes are said to have been made in a few transactions, and by the First Container Ground, which is held to be almost equally auspicious. The remaining areas shade off into "the

periphery." Market people said, giving no reason for their statement, that dangerous places in the market are the crossroads and the areas near cafés.

With regard to temporal organization, the market is also different from the rhythm of the city. In Odessa, Sunday is the day of rest for working people but the shops do not have a day off. When Slavs dominated Sed'moi, Monday was the holiday because Monday is said to be a "heavy," "bad" day for activities. Later, when Muslim traders came to dominate, the day off was changed to Friday, and the Christian traders agreed, because Friday for them is a fast day. As in Russian tradition, nightfall and dawn are sacred times, and Prigarin (n.d.) argues that the daily regime of trade may be influenced by these ideas—many Slav traders try to arrive before dawn, cross themselves and their goods, and after this rite anticipate successful trade.

Sed'moi is the scene of a range of magical, religious, luck bringing, and misfortune averting rites and omens. Spells (*zagovory*), many of them adapted from Orthodox Christian prayers, are widely used among the Slav traders. If the first customer is a man this brings luck for the whole day. Hence the first male customer has to be enticed by an especially low price, sometimes even lower than the wholesale price. The first money taken each day should not be broken; that is, change should not be given for the first purchase. Of course, many of these customs are common in the city as well; but in contrast to the shared repertoire there are also omens and rites that traders confront only at Sed'moi and that are either alien to the Slav culture or found to be bizarre. An example of the former is when the trader "beats" (touches) all his goods laid out for sale with the day's first takings so that they will then partake of good fortune. The first money is then set aside. Sometimes a part of the "first takings," normally a coin, is displayed on the selling table for luck. This custom is said to have been introduced by traders from Central Asia in the late 1980s¹⁷ and it is now widely copied (Prigarin n.d.). An example of a custom specific to Sed'moi was given to us by Olga, who told us with an embarrassed look that when she

started it was explained to her that dog shit found at the container door was a sign of good luck. She found this odd, but accepted it for her market life. Such customs enchant the market-place and make it a separate place. Outside it, the same people, who see themselves as practical and modern, do not engage in such practices.

Power: The city versus the market

Sed'moi's geographical position at the edge of the city has made the land ownership and the resulting liabilities a subject of intense dispute. In the fall of 2007 a power struggle was (and still is) raging between the city authorities and the market owners. The city is battling in the courts to retrieve around 500 million griven (around US\$100 million) as compensation for unpaid rent for supposedly city land. The market owners knew their profits were at stake and the traders were anxious that their profits would also be endangered. On 29 September 2007 they held a mass protest meeting. They agreed to picket the Odessa City Council and to send a petition with 11,000 signatures to the municipal authorities. They decided to prepare a referendum for a vote of no confidence in the Mayor, Eduard Gurvits, whom they held personally responsible for the court case.¹⁸ In the wake of these protests, the mayor hinted that he would be prepared to accept the compensation not in money but in kind: "The founders of 'the 7th km' have to pay the city their due. A different question is how they will do it ... they can build a hospital ... or enlarge the road to the 'the 7th km.' This would be much better than building a personal church."¹⁹ In one way or another, not unlike the princes who desired to benefit from (medieval) fairs, the city boss is prepared to make some concessions but above all he claims a share of profits.

The city could eventually succeed in taking over the market, and the forces of regulation and order would tame it. It seems this is what has happened with the great market on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, which was relocated close to the city center and has now

become significantly bureaucratized and cleaned up. The Ulaanbaatar market, however, was never as international as Sed'moi, and its almost entirely Mongolian traders therefore were more vulnerable to state pressure.²⁰ In June 2009, a similar wholesale market in the outskirts of Moscow, Cherkizovsky market, was temporarily closed by central government authorities "as a source of corruption, offences and various crimes" (Franchetti 2009). The other possible scenario at Odessa is for the market to retain its semi-independence. In this case, it will retain its otherness, even while strengthening its state-like quality. The internal hierarchies would presumably go on consolidating themselves—and, as indeed already seems to be happening, spread their tentacles to outlets in the city. For example, urban boutiques acquired in order to resell goods from Sed'moi, and stalls hired at Privoz and other city markets for the same purpose, are increasingly coming under the direct control of Seventh Kilometer "syndicates."

It is already the case that Sed'moi has become such a super-desirable alternative and subversive power that it can be seen as the mercantile theater not just for Odessa but for Ukraine in general. During fieldwork in 2007 we asked a Russian trader at Sed'moi, "Who is the master (*khoziain*) of the market"? Without hesitation she replied, "The president of course." Taken aback, we could not at first understand that she meant the president of Ukraine. In the perception of this trader and several others we talked to, Kiev, the capital of the country, tried several times to move the market closer to itself. They said that the move had been blocked by opposition from Odessa's authorities, who argued that thousands of jobs would be lost and the whole south of the country thrown into economic ruin. Next, Yulia Timoshenko, one of the key figures of the Orange Revolution, threatened to close the market down for violating tax regulations. Odessans interpreted this as a political gesture to the city—"vote Orange or else." Finally, President Viktor Yushchenko paid a visit to the market. Some arrangement was made. Now, the traders assured us, the president visits every two months and pockets US\$20 million

each time. The reality of such a deal is shrouded in mystery.

Perhaps the mystery and lack of transparency is the essence of this kind of market space. For many people realize, and the traders certainly know, that its glorious profitability depends on the market *not* being regulated, transparent, fully taxed, or nationalized. As for Odessa and its attempt to drain off a reliable stream of funds, people talked only of the looming combat. The city is divided into two bodies of opinion—half for the mayor and half for the market. With the 2008–2009 economic crisis, Sed'moi's profitability began to decline. With some containers locked, empty, and rents falling rapidly, many traders have to find alternative ways of making a living.

Conclusion

This article described a mercantile space that bears an uneasy relationship to the city. There is a multiplicity of ways that such a transnational nexus challenges, yet links into, the (relatively) legal mainstream economy, culture, and society. The market has its own organization of time, with its Muslim day of rest in a Christian country. It has its own spatial layout and architecture—a lateral, cell-like, modular, spreading aesthetic that contrasts with the vertical ambitions of the city center. The market's internal policing provides physical security and the possibility of home-like sociality for the various strands of multi-national trade networks; and this contrasts with the xenophobia that seems to have reemerged in Odessa. Unlike the gray and anonymous "non-places" that proliferate at Western sites of connectivity, the container market has become a place of intense social interaction.

Until recently, the Afghan traders were not thinking of going home; nor were they even thinking of returning to Dubai, despite the relatively benign, multicultural atmosphere there. Here at Sed'moi they could make more money, and the cellular network structure whereby each nationality minds its own business suited them

well. These people slept in the city overnight, but they did not really live in it. Their lives were out at the market, with its strange combination of constant long-distance contacts and containers as makeshift quasi-homes. However, the home-like physical security provided by the market is not matched by economic security, and it is unclear what will be the fate of the international traders in the ongoing financial crisis. This restless market nexus remains just beyond the city's grasp. Of course, Odessa is not a global city in Sassen's terms, but it aspires to similar functional controls of the international flows of trade that pass through its region. However, in the post-socialist nationalist environment the conditions for such control positively to support trade flows, as opposed to blocking, siphoning off, or stifling them, are highly uncertain. A case in point is the Cherkizovsky market in Moscow, which was temporarily shut down by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in June 2009 amid contests over land ownership and murky stand-offs between the federal government, the city Mayor Luzhkov, and the market's owner Telman Ismailov (Franchetti 2009; see also Semenov 2009). It is among such uncertainties that we find the struggle for power over the market in profitable times—along with the inability to protect it during downturns.

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Notes

1. The three largest such markets known to us are the Seventh Kilometer in Ukraine (analyzed here), a market at Karasu on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and one at Novo-Uissursk in Far Eastern Siberia. Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia also has a gigantic market, but it is much less international and container-based (Pedersen 2006).
2. From the Ukrainian weekly *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 2004, quoted in Stephen Myers (2006).
3. Unlike with a shop, the economic tactic here is to benefit purchasers of large amounts of different goods by making access convenient for shoppers' trolleys; these can be rolled straight into a container and do not have to be lifted over a threshold.
4. See <http://retailstudio.org/realestate/5737.htm>.
5. “At the Odessa railway station people cluster up so densely that railway officials have to filter passengers approaching the train and divide them into several waves. Everybody has, at least, a trolley overloaded with boxes filled with recent purchases” (Polese 2006: 32).
6. With regard to immigration, Polese writes, “Ukraine has waived off registration at local authorities within three days, still the rule in other former USSR countries, but introduced registration (an immigration card) at the border. According to the new rules of 2001, foreign passport holders must declare their destination and address of stay. I have witnessed several times the awkwardness of both border officials and passengers, as the latter were likely to indicate on the card the train station as their place of stay, normally for a few hours” (2006: 32).
7. The system of smuggling differs from border to border. So does the type of goods. As Polese

writes, “The Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Belorussian trains are opened like tuna cans to find hidden cigarettes, whereas the buses between Ukraine and Poland—apart from the traditional hiding—use the system of sharing. In this case, because neither alcohol nor tobacco is involved no train will be surgically opened and the system is consolidated and stabile” (2006: 33).

8. See <http://www.odessaglobe.com/our-letters.php?id=736>. Accessed July 2009.
9. The golden age of generalized trade fairs was the 1930s, the 1940s, and the first half of the 1950s, when international trade was at its lowest. As economic growth resumed, generalized trade fairs declined and new specialized sample fairs developed (Carreras and Torra 2007: 14).
10. For an interesting discussion of contemporary migrant trade networks in the North Africa-Mediterranean region and the “spirit of the bazaar,” see Peraldi (2001).
11. See <http://petrosjotter.blogspot.com/2006/12/seventh-kilometer-market-odesa.html>. Accessed March 2007.
12. The co-responsibility of any Vietnamese for any such transaction—after several beatings-up in earlier days—guarantees that customers will now get a “fair” exchange rate (Prigarin n.d.).
13. This may seem strange in a Ukrainian city. Odessa, however, has always been a Russian-speaking town.
14. Some traders also carry a self-protection devices.
15. The conduct of trade through personal understandings and without insurance is generally the norm in China, as the economic historian Wang Gungmu commented to us in a personal communication.
16. Formally, there exist both a closed joint-stock company, Promrynok 7-moi Kilometr, and a limited company *Avangard*.
17. Mongol traders in Ulaanbaatar also observe this custom.
18. See <http://www.odessaglobe.com.novosti/4151/>. Accessed 21.12.2007.
19. Here, the mayor refers to the huge church built by the director of Avangard next to the farm's headquarters, which he dedicated to his namesake saint.
20. Pedersen's study of this market traces its emergence to origins in the “wild” or black markets of socialist times. Several aspects of such markets are similar to those we have noted. “Ar-

guably, it is here possible to identify concepts and practices, which can be traced back to Inner Asia's medieval markets. Consider the fact that the most popular Mongolian term for a market—*zah*—also means 'border', 'edge' and 'margin'. ... this concept does not just refer to the relative or spatial margin of Mongolia's different city centres (*töv*), at whose outskirts the first markets of the contemporary period were located. *Zah* also denotes a sort of absolute or liminal exteriority, namely the intermediate position occupied by male or female traders seen from the perspective of the patriarchal nomadic household" (2006: 67). However, the history of the main Ulaanbaatar market during the 1990s took a different path from that in Odessa and this market is now firmly under city/government control. "What was once perceived to be a transgressive 'public' realm operating beyond the reach of any 'private' agenda now seems to be in much closer tune with the social and economic conventions of the extended household and the (neo)liberal nation state" (Pedersen 2006: 68).

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