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RECORDING THE AMBIGUITY: THE MORAL ECONOMY OF DEBT BOOKS IN A RUSSIAN SMALL TOWN

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In this paper we draw upon important distinctions suggested by classics of anthropology in order to develop a theoretical approach to the phenomenon of debt. Building on the opposition between the logic of the gift and that of the market, we elucidate moral tensions that call debt relations into being. However, instead of reducing debt to either of these rival principles, we interpret it as a combination of both that allows for mediating between them in a highly ambiguous moral context.

Using evidence from a small Russian town, we analyse how interest-free debt functions within face-to-face interactions in local shops and how it structures the ordinary lives of shopkeepers, salespeople and consumers in the community. We discuss a moral situation that turns the framing of everyday purchases into a problem and demonstrate how a material device — a debt book — enters into a transaction in order to resolve it. A debt book turns out to be a specific graphic technology, a destructive device that subverts both marketization and communitarian aid by suspending the framing of interaction. In the resulting atmosphere of ambiguity, debts become an object of strategic manipulation for the members of community that demands good negotiation skills and use of moral arguments.

Although the constitution of debt economy is highly dependent on the dynamics of marketization and economization, it can in fact accommodate very different moral regimes.

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Introduction

Perhaps the biggest debt that anthropology owes to Bronisław Malinowski is that he delivered the nascent discipline from simplistic illusions about human nature. By dismantling the myths of both the unbounded altruism and unbounded egoism of primitive humans, he opened up a field of investigation of human complexity. The most essential thing about human sociality is not that people are predisposed towards a certain kind of relationship, but that they can differentiate between different modes of interaction. Instead of dogmatic beliefs and quarrels about places of good and evil in human nature, anthropology opened up a whole new field of inquiry unbound by preconceptions.

Malinowski has famously argued that there is no greater insult for a Trobriander than suggesting that 'he conducts his Kula as if it were *gimwali*' (Malinowski 2002, p. 73). That is, humans are able to develop institutions that allow for distinguishing between these two different logics — the logic of the gift and the logic of the utilitarian exchange. The main moral imperative for a human being thus involves neither sacrificing his own interests nor disregarding the interests of others; it entails not confusing those two basic principles, keeping gifts and utilitarian exchanges separate.

This rule operated smoothly among Trobrianders, who possessed a very elaborate apparatus to distinguish between Kula and gimwali (which includes different types and stages of gifts, strict specification of items involved, ritualized patterns of behaviour etc.). However, things get much more complicated when the boundary between the gift and the market starts shifting. The restructuring of communal life under the pressure of relentlessly extending markets has been the subject of the main anthropological narrative, at least since Karl Polanyi. The gradual autonomisation of the economy represents the key dynamics of modernity and leads to a situation in which the growing number of practices is governed by economic principles, rather than by the logic of the gift that cements the political community (Polanyi 1957a, p. 250). At the extreme, this results in a completely 'disembedded' economy, which means that not only are economic processes no longer influenced by communitarian principles, but the communities themselves become embedded in the economic sphere (Polanyi 1957b, p. 57). The recent account of economization suggested by Çalişkan and Callon takes the same direction, albeit in a different way: marketization, which is the key dimension of economization, is conceived of as the generation of 'market socio-technical arrangements' that vary substantially in 'shape, constitution and dynamics' (Çalişkan & Callon 2010, p. 3). This approach allows for giving due place to the institutional creativity of human societies and bringing into the light the manifold of devices de-

ployed in order to perform the distinction between the gift and the market under the conditions of constant economization and de-economization (famously called 'double movement' by Polanyi).

The general question is, then, what are the tools used by human communities when they face ambiguity generated by the emergence of alternative framings? What institutional and socio-technical mechanisms do they use to differentiate between utilitarian exchanges and gifts, that is, between what is economized and what is regained from economization? And if there are no such mechanisms at hand, how do communities cope with these difficulties?

In this paper we argue that debt can function as an important institutional solution to these problems. Due to its dual nature, debt can serve as a mediator between the gift and the market. Rather than resolving the ambiguity, it enables agents to defer the definition of the situation. To substantiate this theoretical claim, we will use the data collected in 2010 and 2014 in a small Russian town called Kologriv. The empirical results presented below rely on an ethnographic study that included 23 in-depth interviews with shopkeepers, salespeople and customers[4]. Kologriv is a small town with nearly 3400 inhabitants, located in the Kostroma region in Central Russia. Kostroma is an economically depressed region: it used to rely on its woodworking and agricultural industries, but as of now both of them are almost non-existent. In Kologriv the situation is particularly difficult: whereas neighbouring cities have kept at least some woodworking plants operating, Kologriv is totally unproductive. The town is surrounded by small sawmills where local men fell trees, saw them and sell the wood boards to woodworkers from other regions. Nearly 60% of the population serves as public employees and are thus highly dependent on federal and regional budget funds. In addition, Kologriv is unfavourably located: it has no railway connection and only one road leads from town; the nearest railway station is two hours away. The road is barely negotiable and almost no public transport operates here — these factors all make Kologriv a relatively isolated community[5]. Although Moscow is not far away in terms of distance, for locals, it may as well be on another planet.

In Kologriv, market institutions fostering levels of consumption are combined with ethics and the discourse of subsistence. As a result, many ordinary transactions in local shops are permeated with visible tension and provoke divergent moral judgments about sympathy and the re-

[4] This information was gathered during the fieldwork project involving members of Laboratory for Studies in Economic Sociology and members of Sociological Club 'Gorod' at the Department of Sociology, Higher School of Economics, Moscow. The authors are deeply indebted to all the members of the team who participated in data collection and processing.

[5] One of the rare appearances of Kologriv in Russian belles-lettres happened in the famous novel '*The Twelve Chairs*' (1928) written by Soviet satirists Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov who referred to the town as 'the symbol of provincial backwoods and backwater'.

sponsibility of both sellers and customers. We will show that debts are the main mechanism employed to relieve this pressure.

However, putting the whole mechanics of debt into operation would be impossible without a particular material device — debt books. Simple as they might seem, debt books function as both a calculative mechanism that creates an opposition between a salesperson and his or her customer, and a memory bank in which the structure of mutual obligations between the members of a community is inscribed. By generating moral discourse over the settlement of debts, debt books reveal and perpetuate tension around both market institutions and the integrity of a local community.

A framing issue: Moral ambiguity and technological infrastructure

In Kologriv, one can feel at once the flavour of three different epochs that are nowadays constantly compared and contrasted in almost every public discourse in Russia. The first period is the Soviet time, which is usually associated with productiveness, relative prosperity and clear guidelines, all provided by the state. However, consumption lagged far behind production, and economic growth enhanced opportunities for consumption slowly [Kornai 1992: 303]. Access to a number of consumer goods was limited by deficit and not by low paying capacity.

The second period, after the Soviet collapse, is recounted in dramatic terms in life stories told by local inhabitants. It is represented as a drama about the people abandoned by the state in the 1990s and 2000s: '*There is a sense of being deceived among the people… a grievance. It was a time when people didn't get what they had earned*'. This entails, firstly, that inhabitants of small towns were generally left to their own devices and forced to take care of their subsistence by themselves, and secondly, that the level of consumption correlated more tangibly with money and earnings. The market reforms deployed during these years have profoundly changed the ordinary lives of people and generated a whole set of new economic practices that used and abused the new institutional settings in various ways. In the literature, these years are usually described using the term 'transformation' and associated with the rise of informality and networks of mutual support that significantly relied on Soviet heritage (Burawoy 2001; Humphrey 2002; Ledeneva 1998, 2006). This has created a range of moral issues related to new practices of pursuing self-interest — a situation that exposed whole categories of economic actors, such as entrepreneurs who were able to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, to moral pressure (Radaev 1997).

This second period of subsistence has gradually evolved into the third stage: the national economic growth that continued during the 2000s (interrupted only by the 2008 global crisis) has

resulted in a general, although very uneven, rise in real incomes among the population. This, in turn, has made many commodities, including cars and durables, affordable for more consumers. These new opportunities have partly reconciled people with market institutions; although marketization is underway, it is not necessarily associated with destitution. This, however, happens along with ever-growing economic differentiation: while the income of ordinary people is rising much slower than that of elites, the former desperately try to catch up with the elites in consumption standards. Consequently, a growing share of the population resorts to consumer credit[6]. This generates additional tension: the rush for commodities forces households to spend more than they earn, so that they continue experiencing a lack of money, which has recently led to the quick spread of microcredit organizations all over the country, and Kologriv is no exception.

The uneasy fusion of attitudes corresponding to these three epochs creates a particularly tangled moral situation that is reflected even in minor ordinary interactions over consumption in Kologriv. Since resources flow into the city mainly through local shops, transactions between shopkeepers/salespeople[7] and their customers inevitably reveal the tension behind the current economic situation. There are about thirty local shops in this small town, and most of them sell food and household cleaning supplies as well as construction materials, appliances, electronics and furniture. Shopkeepers are mostly local entrepreneurs who operate as retailers buying goods in neighbouring areas and reselling them in Kologriv; however, in recent years the growing share of shops has moved into the hands of retailers from outside the town, which further reinforces the opposition between supply and demand. Only a few traders in electronics and appliances have agreements with banks and offer consumer credit opportunities, either at interest or by installment (that is, interest is paid by the shopkeeper himself on the condition that the first payment is large enough). All other shops officially offer no option of buying on credit.

However, retailers operating in these settings constantly face the problem of choosing an appropriate mode of behaviour. This can be seen in regular transactions: salespeople often hear customers in their shops complaining that they have no money to pay for their purchases. Theoretically speaking, a salesperson can perceive such a declaration as a rejection of the deal and hence refuse to transfer goods to a customer. Since participants in the situation agree that it takes

[6] 27% of the Russian population currently serves at least one bank credit, according to both 'Monitoring Survey of Financial Behaviour in Russia' conducted by the Laboratory for Studies in Economic Sociology in the fall of 2013, and the survey conducted by 'Public Opinion Foundation', Russia's biggest pollster, in March 2014.

[7] Local shop owners often control family businesses that comprise sawmills apart from retail. In such cases sales assistants are employed workers; some of them earn a percent of the shop revenue. However, some entrepreneurs with no other activities serve behind the counter by themselves.

place in a ‘market economy’, this solution would not appear to them as completely inadequate. However, as anthropologists have noted countless times, requests for provision usually are not rejected in human communities, and some items are unlikely to be fully marketized. Thus, facing a request justified by an urgent need, a salesperson is inclined to give food or construction materials for free. But this, of course, makes him/her liable, as such complaints and requests are not infrequent, and it would be unwise on entrepreneurs’ part to bear the responsibility for the lack of currency within the community. The situation is further complicated by the fact that a salesperson usually acts as a representative of shopkeeper. As an employee, s/he obviously is not authorized to make such decisions; however, s/he has to make them on a regular basis, thus taking responsibility for the livelihood of clients, the prosperity of the employer and his/her own job and status in community at the same time.

In the situation described above, both options are unacceptable for the supply side: neither can it let be perceived as an immoral profit-seeker by the community, nor can it subsidize the livelihood of the community. Still, the decision has to be made, and what is at stake here is much more than the technical details of a particular deal: the supply side (more specifically, the salesperson) has to choose the logic of relationships with a particular customer. The adoption of a ‘take it or leave it’ strategy would be immediately recognized as an attempt to frame the whole relationship between these particular persons as a utilitarian exchange, whereas the readiness to provide free aid would destroy the image of the profit-seeker and damage future market communication.

How do sides come to a decision on the framing of the situation in such ordinary but tense cases? What do they rely on to establish a shared understanding of what is going on between them – a utilitarian exchange or an act of support? In a small community like Kologriv, one option at hand is the proximity between the salesperson and the customer – the social (kinship) distance that provides the transaction with the trust necessary for a non-market transaction (Sahlins 1972, pp. 191-202). Although the kinship distance is to some extent operative in Kologriv (shopkeepers are more willing to give their relatives credit), it cannot be regarded as a parameter that is totally exogenous to the transaction. In fact, the history of previous transactions between two particular actors can make them more or less ‘relative’ to each other irrespective of the formal kinship distance: kinship relations are rather subject to constant strategic manipulation by those involved in them (Bourdieu 1980, pp. 312-330).

There has been recently much debate on the conditions required to produce a market transaction. Polanyi’s great insight was that nothing is ‘economic’ *per se* and no interaction constitutes a market simply by virtue of its content, that there is always a great deal of institutional

creativity and cognitive interventions needed to econom*ize*, market*ize* (or de-market*ize*) an exchange (Polanyi 1957a). This has been appreciably extended by the analysis of market's material infrastructure. The marketization of a thing (or a relationship) is not just a question of agreement between actors on the rules; indeed, since parties to the transaction often hold opposing views as to what is the appropriate framing, such agreements would be nearly impossible to perpetuate. In order to make the market frame indisputable, it is necessary to turn transactions into something habitual, routine, easily accountable and technically clear. The work of routinization is thus done by material technologies that constitute the infrastructure of interactions and make marketization 'a socio-technical construction, not a purely social one' (Çalişkan & Callon 2009, p. 384).

Technologies responsible for framing markets and rendering mere things 'market-things' can be as sophisticated as bulky equipment for a 'Dutch' auction (Garcia-Parpet 2007) or a stock ticker (Preda 2009) or as simple as a trolley and shelves in a supermarket (Cochoy 2007; 2008). In a paper that in a sense prefigures the whole performativity program in economic sociology, Callon and Latour (1997) consider a community in Corsica where the market trade of cheese becomes feasible due to a counter and a box that serves as a cash desk. When members of one and the same community, even close relatives, find themselves in such settings, they immediately understand that they are involved in a market transaction and payment should come immediately with no haggling allowed, irrespective of personal relationships between partners.

Neoliberal policies promoting marketization usually consider reciprocal gift exchanges within communities as a part of the informal economy to be eliminated. In fact, they often proceed not by means of setting up better institutions, but simply by replacing technological infrastructure. Combatting informality always goes hand in hand with installing 'formalities' that make life easily accountable for the neoliberal state (Guyer 2004, p. 155). Devices responsible for 'formalization' are at the same time capable of reframing everyday interactions. The introduction of a cash-register machine does not just ensure that transactions are recorded, but it also enhances the space for 'calculative agency' (Callon & Muniesa 2005).

Recent studies have placed a strong emphasis on discovering devices that facilitate economization by performing, provoking and constructing markets of different sorts (Callon, Millo & Muniesa 2007; Araujo, Finch & Kjellberg 2010; Muniesa 2014). However, in some cases marketization inevitably falters and the market frame fails even with the necessary infrastructure at hand. Much less is known about the material and technological infrastructure standing behind alternative framings of interactions. In what follows we shall argue that sometimes framing ambiguity can be overcome with manifestly non-market devices. Even though such devices are ra-

ther destructive for markets and generate controversy over moral issues instead of clarity, they are capable of producing rather stable institutional regimes.

Debt books as destructive devices

In Kologriv local shops are equipped with technological apparatuses signalling the presence of the market: counters, showcases, price tags, price lists and, in some cases, cash registers. But this environment does only part of the marketization job: nobody really expects that interactions between customers and salespeople/shopkeepers inside the shop will be mere continuations of their relationships outside. Still, although everybody seems to agree that this is not a place where people exchange gifts, customers are often reluctant to accept the terms of market transactions and prefer to appeal to salespeople's conscience. In such cases both sides seem to be in a stalemate.

One might suggest that when it is impossible to make a choice between two polarities, a compromise should be sought. Perhaps the two most important distinctions between the market exchange and the gift are related to time and equivalence: there should be a time interval between giving gifts and counter-gifts and the equivalence of counter-gifts cannot be demanded (although an adequate answer is expected) (Malinowski 2002; Mauss 1970). In order to modify a market relationship and make it look more like a gift, one should resort to an institution that combines elements of the gift and the market. Debt represents an example of such an institution, as it allows payments to be deferred and protects transactions from degenerating into a gift relationship[8]. A time interval is introduced, but at the same time debt preserves the requirement of equivalence. Debt is neither a market nor a gift: it arises out of the conflict between the two.

This combination explains why debt does not necessarily imply interest. Both economists and sociologists frequently ran into conceptual problems when trying to account for the phenomenon of interest-free debt. For economists, market mechanisms operate on the assumption that time intervals create uncertainty, and hence interest is indispensable for agents trying to hedge their investments (Knight 2006, p. 168). For sociologists, the logic of the gift implies that equivalence is insulting, and hence every gift 'must be returned with interest' (Mauss 1970, p. 40). Both analyses turned out to be wrong (Hudson 2002; Graeber 2011), most likely because for a long period economists and sociologists did not recognize that debt does not conform to the logic of the market or the logic of the gift but combines elements from both.

[8] We do not discriminate here between credit and debt relationships. Convincing reasons for treating them as two sides of the same coin can be found in Peebles (2010).

Due to these properties interest-free debt is used in Kologriv to mediate between conflicting principles of the gift and the utilitarian exchange. In agreeing to sell on credit, shopkeepers and salespeople admit that they have some responsibilities to the community. The rhetoric of survival is often employed by customers describing debt relationships: '*I can't imagine how we would survive without it. Life is, so to say, below the average level – so, we have to borrow in shops, to borrow and to pay back.*' Shopkeepers thus demonstrate that they do trust customers: open distrust is likely to be perceived as an insult (independently of a customer's credit reputation). On the other hand, selling on credit is not philanthropy, and debt is also a tool that protects ordinary shop transactions from degenerating into an altruistic extreme.

Debts are very widespread in Kologriv: the vast majority of local people are in debt in one or several shops, and no shopkeepers can do without debts. '*There are notebooks with the list of debtors in every shop here. They sell for the record*'. The supply side is highly critical of debts and dreams of them to wither away; however, both salespeople and shopkeepers admit that refusing to sell on credit would quickly close their shops down. When differences in prices and choice of goods between shops are negligible, the opportunity to buy on credit becomes a competitive advantage. Customers usually have preferences, and these are affected by the personality of shopkeepers and relationships between customers and shopkeepers. Refusing to sell on credit is likely to be interpreted according to the logic of the gift — that is, as an attempt to increase the social distance. It will definitely motivate customers to reconsider their relationships with other members of the community and push them towards other shopkeepers. Most importantly, shopkeepers confess that they '*try to put themselves in debtors' shoes*', and such compassion turns out to be a crucial requirement for businessmen within the community.

Although interest-free debts seem to be indispensable for both supply and demand, setting up the debt frame would be impossible without a simple but meaningful device — a debt book. For a visitor, these small notebooks are less noticeable compared to the cash registers (usually the books are hidden under the counter — perhaps with an eye to protect customers from unnecessary temptation), but everybody knows that every salesperson has one at hand. Debt books with accurate records remind clients that the deference of payment is not a matter of reciprocity — debtors owe the exact sum of money that is equivalent to the value of goods provided.

The word '*record*' from the quotation above is, in fact, synonymous with '*debt*': local people often say '*get recorded*' instead of '*buy on credit*'. Russian words for 'getting recorded' ('*записываться*', '*писаться*') also designate 'writing', which is indicative of the graphic nature of debt. Debt as something that is graphically recorded is different from a verbal promise and

obligation. That is, when a salesperson opens the debt book and registers the exact sum owed by a customer, the frame of the gift is subverted. Explicit quantification and calculation are incompatible with the logic of a gift relationship that favours generosity. In this sense a debt book possesses certain traits of a calculative device that acts by detaching the transaction from the web of personal relationships: it is the surface on which incommensurable members of the community are exposed to a universal principle and universal formal scale for obligations (Callon & Muniesa 2005, p. 1231; Guyer 2004, p. 155ff.).

However, a debt book destroys the logic of market exchange as well. For one, the market transaction of lending money fixes not only money itself, but also time. Time has to be somehow convertible into money, either by imposing interest or at least by indicating the sanctions for not paying a lender back in due time. Debt books in Kologriv do not calculate over time explicitly. It is usually assumed when goods are sold on credit that customers will pay the shops back on the next payday, that is, within a month. At the moment when a salesperson puts a customer's name in the book, s/he predicts how many times that particular customer will come to buy on credit until s/he can pay the shop back, and reserves in advance some free space in the notebook for further debts. That is, when the line of credit is opened, both sides have some expectations concerning the payment date, but these are usually not negotiated, or only in very unspecific terms.

Gregory distinguishes between the motivation of the capitalist and the gift-giver in the following way: 'The aim of capitalist is to accumulate profit while the aim of the "big-man" gift transactor is to acquire a large following of people (gift-debtors) who are obliged to him' (1982: 51). The former maximizes net incomings, while the latter – net outgoings. That is, those with the largest amount of money lent obtain higher prestige within the village. In Kologriv, confusion arises at the moment when shopkeeper decides to make an account of profit and loss. This is usually done by simple calculations offsetting debit and credit entries. However, debt records enormously complicate the accounting process (Gregory 2012, p. 383). Debts cannot be unambiguously assigned neither to debit, since they are not 'currency in hands' that could be invested back in business, nor to credit, since they are potential income and writing them off is in any case the last resort. Debts are in fact 'pending money' as their meaning depends on whether they will ever be collected.

In addition, despite their formalizing impact on transactions, debt books have no legally binding effect. In fact, there are three types of debt graphics in Kologriv that differ in terms of their legal power. The most popular are notebooks that function by summing up the unpaid purchases over a certain period of time— they are legally void and operate on the basis of mutual honesty. The second kind of debt relationship is produced by receipts — sometimes in shops that

operate with cash registers, salespeople preserve the receipts for unpaid purchases with customers' signatures on them (their further debts are usually summed up on the same piece of paper). This interaction is more formal since it limits the opportunities for salespeople to cheat by overstating the amount of debt, which happens at times under the first mode of recording. Finally, when customers request that payments for large purchases be deferred (for instance, provisions for a feast), such debts are accompanied by a legally binding paper, a due-bill that can be presented to the court. Only in the third case, which is quite uncommon in Kologriv, one can speak of a proper market transaction; other forms of debt create rather vague obligations that can neither be neither ignored nor made more precise.

As a result, a large percentage of the local population is involved in such indeterminate relationships, a significant proportion of the goods delivered in the town are neither sold nor given for free, and large sums of money are not owned by anybody in particular. The value of purchases sold on credit may vary from twenty rubles (the price of a loaf of bread) to several hundred and even more. An active line of credit for one customer can reach several thousand rubles, which is nearly half of a local doctor's monthly salary. Shopkeepers have various policies concerning the limits of both individual credit and the total value of goods sold on credit, but sometimes the amount of unpaid money registered in a single active debt book can exceed 300,000 rubles, which is considerably more than a shop's monthly profits.

In the final analysis, debt records usually turn out to be destructive for both gift and market frames. In that sense they introduce ambiguity into the relationships between supply and demand rather than clarify the mode of interaction. However, although there is no shared understanding of the conditions of transactions among parties, debt books can relieve excessive pressure from customers and salespersons in their immediate interactions. When contradictory moral patterns operate simultaneously, the legitimacy of a shopkeeper's revenue is uncertain, just as that of a customer's request for debt (since consumers are known to spend income on commodities beyond basic necessities instead of paying debts back). Debt books transfer this ambiguity beyond the space of the shop and allow actors to avoid direct confrontation or at least to defer it endlessly. Rather than ending immediately inside the shop, such a transaction continues over a long period of time and generates a complicated system of moral obligations that permeate the local community.

To pay and not to pay: strategic manipulation with debt time and debt money

One particularly interesting effect of debt books is that they can lead to lengthy communications about debt, a protracted exchange of moral arguments that transcends the limits of concrete transaction, but always remains structured by the book. Debt enables both parties to avoid conflict during the act of purchasing and to save face, but it also means that such issues will reappear. Salespeople and customers are engaged in constant moral arguments over the settlement of debts. Generally, it is accepted in Kologriv that '*debts should be paid back*'. Nonpayments are considered dishonest by both customers and entrepreneurs. It is unlikely that somebody would incur debt in bad faith, with a premeditated intention not to pay.

However, since the settlement time is not specified in the book, it can be subject to manipulation. When families suffer from a lack of money, time becomes a crucial resource. There is almost no problem of money allocation in Kologriv: '*You receive your salary, and then you pay debts. Only little sum is left, and this is used to pay for utility bills, every month. And what is left then is enough for week or two… So, you go to the shop and borrow again. Many people live like this here. From debts to debts.*' But this is true only for those who pay their debts on time, as they are only in control of their own money. Manipulating time enables customers to have control over others' money: depending on how long customers are able to defer the payment, they can save enough money to buy expensive goods — for instance, a car. It is not by coincidence that local people also use the word 'borrow' instead of 'buy on credit', as selling on credit often functions as an interest-free cash loan with the lender exercising no control over the uses of funds. Shopkeepers are usually the only lenders available on such terms: '*You can borrow only in shops. Otherwise you have to look for somebody to lend you. You won't probably find anybody to borrow from… Look, there's nobody to borrow from. Everyone is just as poor as we are*'. It is thus unwise to pay debts on time, as it means rejecting one's only opportunity to manage his/her time and money.

Therefore, two contradictory imperatives are in operation simultaneously: to pay and not to pay. The relationship between them can be described using Bourdieu's idea of misrecognition that is deeply rooted in the logic of the gift. According to Bourdieu, nobody should acknowledge, neither publicly nor to himself, that an adequate counter-gift is mandatory, even though this truth is deeply inscribed in practice. Gifts depend on this self-deception, and revealing the truth would automatically destroy the gift relationship (Bourdieu 2000, pp. 191-192). With respect to debt we notice the opposite misrecognition: while everyone admits that debts

should be settled, in practice local people act out of understanding that it would be sheer madness to follow this rule all the time. Again, admitting that there is actually a whole debt economy behind the simple practice of selling on credit would betray the fact that creditors subsidize the community far beyond the limits of pure survival.

This observation calls for the cautious use of a 'moral economy' approach to post-socialist settings. There are a number of studies arguing that 'despite radical changes in ideology and legal regulations, people actively strive to hold onto the valued elements of the older moral economy' (Hann 2003, p. 37). Building on Scott's (1976) influential analysis of subsistence economies, some of these studies tend to oversimplify the effect of marketization and commodification in post-socialist countries, suggesting that such processes merely erode traditional modes of production and present people with a simple choice between resisting these influences and starving.

While some critics tend to reject the 'moral economy' argument on the ground that post-socialist communities demonstrate the ability to adapt to institutional change instead of just resisting to it (Wegren 2005), our analysis rather suggests that a 'moral economy' is a much more complex phenomenon not limited to (although often disguised as) economy of survival. The fact that debt functions not only as a mechanism of assuring subsistence but also expands opportunities for status consumption implies that new patterns of behaviour may become immersed into moral economies, rather than simply being rejected by them. In our case manipulation with time is a sign that people may in fact preserve the rhetoric of poverty and survival while creating a variety of institutional tools to keep consumption well above the subsistence level.

It is an ordinary tactic for many customers to have a line of credit in several shops simultaneously, so that total amount of debts exceeds their monthly salary. At the same time, a family's real financial situation may differ substantially from what is declared. People try to keep information about their wealth a secret: it is dangerous to have the reputation of being well-off since this may multiply requests for help and simultaneously decrease their chances of obtaining credit in shops. '*Clever people usually don't say if something good happens to them. Whether good or bad, everything becomes gossip here*'. By concealing their real wealth, families can expect to save enough money to buy something expensive. As one shopkeeper puts it, '*some people look so pompous, but that's just for show – pretending they have money… It turns out they have none. Others behave modestly, they're not conspicuous, but money… they have lots of money*'.

That is, despite constantly resorting to the rhetoric of subsistence, the inclination to buy on credit is weakly related to customer's actual well-being. Salespeople complain about customers' willingness to borrow without real necessity: '*It is a sort of disease… If she doesn't borrow,*

she feels bad… She makes the round of shops and borrows a little everywhere... This is something I just cannot understand'. Buying on credit is seldom the last resort; for many local people it is normal mode of consumption behaviour.

Our informants differ in their opinions on when such a system of relationships got its current significance. Debt books can be traced back to the times of the Russian Empire (although they were mostly used by nobility), but people tend to relate their emergence with one of the last periods in national and local history. While some associate it with Soviet times that lacked institutions of capitalism, others think that debt books became popular during hard times of post-socialist subsistence; still others believe that the widespread use of debts broke out with the growth of wellbeing when people started daring to buy commodities beyond basic necessities. This divergence reflects the fact that debt and debt books bear traces of three different epochs and in certain sense integrate these historical periods into a rather intricate moral situation.

Since many debtors do not pay lenders back in the expected time, shopkeepers and salespeople have to concern themselves with collecting debts. In order to '*wring*' money from debtors, they try to exercise pressure on them all of the time, and not only in shops — the spirit of debt relationships permeates many everyday interactions, including glancing past each other on the street. There is a widely used practice of '*greetings*' — the salesperson asks a friend or a relative of the debtor to 'send his/her greetings' to the debtor. And when a non-payer comes for another purchase, the debt book immediately reminds him of the fact that there is still unresolved ambiguity about previous transactions. When expressing their dissatisfaction to such clients, salespeople fall back upon the vocabulary of prestige: '*It must be that you don't respect me at all*'[9].

Tactics of collecting debts, or 'wringing money', are many. Most of them imply exerting moral pressure; physical violence is used only in extreme cases. Sometimes shopkeepers decide to make debt public by posting up the list of debtors — in this case, again, a graphic recording of what has been well known as it is can make debtors pay out of concern for maintaining a good reputation. Several other methods of collecting debts are meant to put debtors in situations where they cannot plead subsistence. For instance, since many debtors live on pensions and receive their monthly payments from local postmen, salespeople may join the postmen on the payday into the homes of their debtors and compel them to settle their debt immediately.

[9] Principal character of Anton Chekhov's play 'Ivanov' (1887), a half-ruined noble man, owes a large sum of money to Zinaida, the wife of a landlord, and asks her for a deferment of payment. Zinaida pretends that she is frightened by this suggestion and reacts with the words, '*How is that possible? What kind of order do you suggest?*' That is, Ivanov's suggestion is perceived as an attempt of *reversal of the order*.

After all, collecting debts is a moral, not legal issue. All parties to conflicts about debts constantly appeal to the moral of communal life in order to legitimize their behaviour. 'Debt money', the unsettled debts, can be said to belong neither to the customer nor to the seller, but to the community in general. The fact that being well-off is a dangerous reputation implies that attempts to 'privatize' debt money are likely to incur sanctions. Should shopkeepers decide to suspend selling on credit, from a purely financial point of view, this would probably result in more uniform spending over a month, a reduction in the demand for durables and expensive goods and, eventually, in greater economic differentiation within the town. As Roitman shows (2005, p. 83ff), changing the mode of regulating debt relationships can raise doubt concerning the legitimacy of wealth, and that is what both shopkeepers and customers do not want to happen.

In an article on the notion of economic surplus, George Dalton has distinguished between a surplus as an empirical fact and as a rational (analytical) construct. An economic surplus appears as a result of equilibrium price modelling — if the market price is above the equilibrium price and the quantity supplied is larger than the quantity demanded, then a surplus arises. This logic seems to fail in our case: debts change the economic notion of a surplus, as they distort the law of price equilibrium in the market. In Kologriv the quantity of goods supplied depends not only on the level of prices, but also on the amount of debts demanded and returned. As Dalton points out, 'in an empirical sense it (surplus) can refer to some specified portion of material output which is recognized as being in some way different from the socially defined norm. What difference, if any, the surplus makes, depends on how it came into being and the special institutional apparatus and values of the society experiencing it' (Dalton 1960, p. 489). To be an entrepreneur in a closed community means knowing how to maintain the balance between the gift and the utilitarian exchange — that is, to manage debts.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is twofold. On the one hand, we would like to point out that debt relationships are always played out within the field of basic distinctions that are constantly perceived and reproduced by those involved in such relationships — those between gifts and commodities (Gregory 1982), and between communities and markets (Gudeman 2008). Tensions produced by the inherent necessity of making these distinctions is what causes people to create debts and argue over them. On the other hand, it is our intention to demonstrate that although the shape and dynamics of debt relations are largely dependent on the conflict between opposing logics of the gifts and the market, debt does not necessarily reduce to either of these modes. Nor does it introduce a separate principle of interaction. In the case presented here, it combines the

properties of two rival principles and mediates between them. Although it relieves some pressure from shopkeepers and salespeople, it defers rather than resolves the conflict.

There is a strong emphasis on the processes of economization and marketization in the literature, so that much attention is devoted to the technological base for performing the economy. However, the ‘double movement’ described by Polanyi implies that human communities are prone to exercise strong protective counteraction. That is, tendencies that do not follow the logic of marketization are also reasonably expected to rely on some kind of non-market materiality and technological infrastructure. Such devices as debt books in Kologriv are notable for the subversive effect they have on both market and gift frames. By simultaneously inducing calculative agency and discourses of prestige and respect, debt books operate as destructive devices that preserve the tense coexistence of multiple moral regimes.

By exposing the contradictory nature of debt, we would like to argue that as a monetary obligation between humans, debt can take on rather different functions regarding economization — or, to borrow a term from Viviana Zelizer (1994), it can assume different social meanings. For instance, in Kologriv besides the debt economy described here, there is a whole economy of consumer credit in operation — one that completely differs from the former in the range of goods traded, as well as in the conditions and sources of credit. One way to look at the dynamics of the double movement of economization and de-marketization is to consider the changes in the nature of obligations that humans make.

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