

## **GENTRIFICATION OF ROMANIAN FARMERS' MARKETS AS SOCIAL/POLITICAL AGGRESSION**

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### **Abstract**

During the ethnographic work on Romanian farmers' markets that I have carried out over the last decade, I have noticed many cases of markets hidden/obscured by urban-architectural interventions on their historically consecrated sites. Along with abusive gentrifications, undertaken in the absence of public consultation, I have inscribed these brutal interventions in a series of annoyances brought daily to the inhabitants by the municipality.

In the margins of the main field research, which aimed at the sociability and resilience of pre-modern solidarity and mutual aid relationships within the markets, I also made some observations on the symbolic, discursive/propagandistic meaning, imprinted by the municipal power on this type of reconfiguration of the markets and the commercial fairs historically generated by them. In this article, I also try to capture certain ideological patterns of these transformations. The conclusion focuses on the violent effects of the gentrification of farmer's markets on vulnerable age groups, causing social exclusion.

**Keywords:** farmers' market, Maussian relations, Marxist relations, public space, post-socialist Romania, third places

### **The merchant spirit**

Although visiting farmers' markets seems to be coming back into fashion among young people after the era of consumerist „symbolic bulimia” of the post-

socialist transition (Mihăilescu and Iancu: 37), the impression that older people predominate in the markets is not wrong.

There are differences between the time spent in the market by the youngsters and the elders; between the intensity of the market experience by both groups etc. The young ones tend to shop in a hurry, focusing on sourcing produce and daily thrift. Older people are more eager to socialize and have quality time. As such, if we were to imagine the interactions of individuals with the social corpus of the market as cycles, we would find that older adults on both sides of the counter (that is to say, both as customers and merchants), carry out the widest and most intensely participatory cycles.

This theoretical model is drawn by the anthropologist Judit Bodnár. While studying a Budapest market, she observed how the participants' presence and activity affected various levels of manifestation of market life (Bodnár: 194). There is a superficial level of hurried passers-by who stop only sporadically to shop but who give a cadence to the daily life of the market with their presence. Then there are increasingly inertial levels of interaction. Street vendors' appearances are marked by seasonality or related to certain events. Established merchants, with reserved stalls or shops, mark the market with their important regular presence. At the end of the axis are older adult merchants or shopkeepers, whose memory covers the market in a wide-ranging temporal panorama. Judit Bodnár defines the merchant spirit of a market as the synchronic overlap of the various layers of social interactions intensity; and, in diachronic view, as a memory that is transmitted over generations, creating the specific landscape of the market.

It follows from this that the long-established market-goers are the repositories, continuators and bearers of this spirit of the market, which can be considered an endemic tradition and part of the fair-goer-festival strand of popular culture, with all the related register of practices, rituals and norms.

(In this regard, it should be recalled that the Saint-Ouen flea market outside of Paris was designated as a „protected area for its atmosphere” and that the centuries-old Campo de' Fiori market in Rome, which has always been held in a vacant lot and unbuilt, has been designated as a monument of intangible cultural heritage.)

## **Rural solidarity in urban areas**

According to my research, these merchants' congenial clients are more or less integrated into the same networks of kinship or economic interest and therefore also play a role in the realization of the entire social reality that makes up the market.

In general, merchants past retirement age are categorized as gardeners (the other two categories being professional farmers and collectors-distributors).

Gardeners are traditional householders who maintain a subsistence economy-based existence. They trade the surplus production of their own family household. They refer to this type of action as „self-sufficiency” (a socialist-era term). They differ from other growers in that they don't „cover” their crops (with solarium areas or greenhouses) and they don't „spray” them (with pesticides or fertilizers).

A widespread characteristic of their generation is the combination of several activities during their work-active year. Employed either in agricultural cooperatives or in state productive units, they did not interrupt the activities of their own household, managing to perpetuate the type of traditional peasant economy, with all the practices and class habitus inherited from previous generations. According to Vintilă Mihăilescu, this type of „diffuse households” owned by „worker-farmers” were „reinforced precisely in the most difficult of the last decade” by socialism (Mihăilescu: 30-31). Their resourceful strategy consisted of combining a secure but lower-paid job with an alternative economic activity that allowed for additional earnings. Selling at the farmers' market was evidently the latter.

Retirement, far from meaning a retreat, brought them the time to go to the market. Some of them have admitted to being „addicted” to the market, to relationships with clients and other merchants.

During the first days of observation at the Decebal market in Bistrița, I caught a dialogue between a buyer and a merchant (both over 65 years old) that surprised me. The buyer asks: „How much are the cucumbers?” The vendor tells him the price and waits to find out how many cucumbers he has to weigh. The buyer adds: „Ah, no! I don't want to buy. I wanted to know their price, because I also planted cucumbers in my garden.”

To me, at the moment, it seemed rude and unethical to ask for the price without intending to buy. I expected a nervous response from the other side of the counter.

The second moment of astonishment came when I heard the merchant, far from being bothered by the rudeness, answer extremely cordially. The discussion continued in a friendly manner. They were talking loud enough to be heard and attract other interlocutors. I could hear bits of conversation in the Bistrița idiom, from which I could make out some key words, such as seedling, seed, plot. It was obvious that they were sharing their experiences and gardening tips. At one point, a burly man (about 60 years old), with a more urban appearance, who was walking with heavy bags behind his wife, stopped in front of the two and told them something like a joke (I didn't hear what), causing their hilarious reaction. Then he continued on his way, replying over his shoulder to the ironic remarks of the other two.

As I myself observed and verified over time, older men like to boast loudly and externally about their technical knowledge, including agronomy/animal husbandry as well as auto mechanics and construction.

For this merchant, it seemed that the expansion of a network of acquaintances sharing the same community ethos was more worthwhile than selling a kilo of cucumbers. Although separated from the stall, the two are symbolically located on the same side of it; their relationship falls into the register of primary sociability. After witnessing the merchant's joy in speaking expertly to practically everyone present, I started to see things differently and began to believe that the questioner has done a favor to the asked.

Clearly, this was an exchange of symbolic favors, as well as a desire to establish a Maussian type of mutual aid and reciprocity (*cf.* Gagné).

Such a long-term relationship gradually comes to defeat the physical boundaries of the counter. During the first days in the field in Năsăud, I could not distinguish from a certain group of men (mostly over 60 years old) which one of them was the merchant and which were the customers, as they were all (literally) on the same side of the counter. Then I got used to such „men's choirs”, assimilable also to some „council of elders”, in which the merchant is given the central role, like a leader of an ad hoc committee. The debates are spoken out loud, as if to be heard by the rest of the world on the market.

Women have a more discreet way of meeting around the counter, similar to a quilting bee or a neighbourly chat over the fence. And the theme is different. Women usually share household tips and confidence. Those more experienced and older are also tasked with leading the gathering.

In the small and charming Independence Market in Bistrița I discovered a special social ecosystem, dominated by women: both merchants and clients. Gender specificity left its mark on this market, which I felt was gentler, more generous, more „maternal”. I had learned about the neighborhood of five-story blocks in the area that it is mostly inhabited by families of clerks, teachers and retired soldiers. I was trying to explain myself about the quiet, slightly bourgeois atmosphere of this market, visited by pretentious, sometimes demanding customers, who receive amiable, disarming attention from the merchants. I noticed an urban-rural confrontation across the counter (city woman versus peasant): exchange of recipes, advice and preparation tips, etc. which bring together the two worlds - the village and the city - in a true exchange of ideas.

A custom encountered both in the Transylvanian markets and in the Obor Market of Bucharest is for a lady friend (usually retired) to stand in front of the stall without buying, but only to keep chatting with the merchant („to keep her company”). In addition to the social-colloquial role, this practice also fulfils that of a lure for nearby buyers, curious to find out „what’s to buy”.

Some of the participants in these „councils of elders” have a bag with them, denoting the intention to buy. But it is clear that going to the market represents their daily routine, beyond the mere economic reason, a way of socializing and spending quality time together, which makes the farmers’ market a so-called third place, fulfilling thus the meaning of a popular agora.

### **The farmers’ markets as third places**

The theory of third places (parks, cafes, bistros, etc.) was developed by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who defined them to be more than simple spaces for everyday leisure: they are forums for civic discourse and a reaffirmation of democracy „from the grassroots” (Oldenburg: 48).

The areas between the rows of stalls have a sociable vocation, which is an important characteristic of the farmers' markets. More or less planned meetings take place within these transit intervals. Here they discuss dozens of minutes, even hours, from small business „combinations” to mundane, light, leisure topics. It is yet another third place in town, frequented mostly by seniors, where tensions caused by economic instability are eased through deliberative discussions, „union-style” mutual help meetings or simple banter.

I reported my findings to Radu Dreptate, the director of Bistrița City Hall's Social Services Department, and he replied, „The farmers' market is a social club for retirees.”

Among other things, Radu Dreptate manages a Day Center for seniors, located near a former commercial fairway in Bistrița. Below is a summary of his story.

On Independence Boulevard, near the former „Big” Shop, on the old mill road, an informal farmers' market had been established. During the last century, peasants sold vegetables, fruits, and animal products from their carts or trunks. They were bought in bulk. People stocked up supplies at home. It was an area heavily frequented by our grandparents and parents. The market is no longer there, the „Big” has also closed, but seniors still like to come here to walk and socialize. Now they go to church (he shows me the newly built Christian temple), to the park (it can be seen behind the church) and, more recently, to the Day Center for seniors (located across the little park) built by the city. Our grandparents needed such spaces.

This story seems to prove my theory. If the seniors continued to meet at the former market site, even in the absence of its economic function (sale and supply of agricultural products), it means that there is a non-economic function of the market that is at least as important to them. It means that significant social relations had been established between them, which they kept over time and which affectively bind them to the site of the former market.

I appreciated everything the municipality built for pensioners: the park, the church, and the club. But I couldn't help thinking: wouldn't it have been more to their liking if the former market on Independenței Boulevard had been preserved?

I was soon to discover, however, that on Tuesdays, an informal flea market was held nearby, in a parking lot behind the blocks. One day a week, the whole

neighborhood comes alive and is charged with a vital cheerfulness, marked, however, by an air of nostalgia. All ages are present, but it is the „council of elders” core around which the entire participation coagulates. It was exactly the confirmation I needed to test my theory. Tuesday fair naturally inherits and continues the tradition of the old fairway on Independenței Boulevard. This weekly gathering of merchants and buyers (sometimes the roles are reversed) has all the characteristics of a social fact embedded in neighborhood life. Certainly, the authorities are aware of the phenomenon and tolerate it, but they keep it behind the blocks. It remains in an underground zone of rumors and personal contacts. It is like the kind of manifestation that the mayors are ashamed of, as something retrograde and „kitschy”.

The typical village ethos of solidarity and mutual aid is seen as a shameful reminiscence, along with the informal character of market trade. The chaos, irregularity, and unpredictability of the farmers’ market do not fit with the representations of space from the last half century, typical of modernizing political regimes. The discourse about space, re-semanticized according to the major predicates of the two historical intervals, reconfigures both the historical form of the markets and their accessibility (*cf.* Lefebvre).

## Historical watersheds

In late socialism (1975 – 1989), the markets give way to *in situ* integrated shopping complexes: usually modern, stately buildings, whose grandeur is meant to define them as citadels of socialist commerce. Examples in this regard are the Unirea and Bucur „universal” stores in Bucharest, intended to dominate as grandeur the central Unirii Market and the Obor, respectively. Their new access roads and infrastructure connect them more efficiently with the rest of the modern arteries, an aspect neglected in the case of the old markets, which will often be assigned modern, hall-type premises equipped with utilities. The only aspect that is omitted is pedestrian access, the human dimension, the touch of “warmth” of the *perceived space* (*idem*).

Then comes the transition to the consumer society (1990 – approx. 2007), in which major urban-planning interventions stagnate, giving way to a proliferation

of informal trade areas, in new, empirical formulas: kiosks, tonnelets, improvised stalls on curbs, railings or directly on the ground, targeting a wide range of both food and non-food items. A mark of that era is the appearance, in many large cities, of so-called „Russian” markets, in the squares where buses stop with small traders from the Republic of Moldova, who come to unpack affordable and relatively scarce commodities on the Romanian market, from fast moving consumer goods to household appliances. Although this small traffic of ex-Soviet goods has ceased for at least two decades, there are still areas in some cities officially designated with the toponym *La Ruși (At the Russians)*, which have meanwhile become fords for the current bazaars and/or modern commercial spaces (following the model of fords generated by historical markets).

The latest wave of discursive re-signification of space is produced by neoliberal consumerism (approx. 2007 – present), which emphasizes the overall gentrification of the fords and adds new edificatory marks, in accordance with the new ideological layers. This is the case of large Orthodox churches (for example, the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Făgăraș, which manages to overshadow the medieval Citadel-castle, on a site that already files away the prestigious farmers’ market beyond the socialist blocks) – vectors of a “national monumentalization” (Sidorov), but also of a “reconsecration (and) re-signification of public space”, in order to “reestablish moral order” after decades of communist atheism (Tateo: 25).

This is also the case with some lofty secular buildings, intended to house corporate offices or mall-type commercial spaces, such as Activ Plaza Mall in Zalău, located right on the edge of the Central Farmers’ Market.

## **Examples of Urbanistic Aggression**

Decebal Farmers’ Market in Bistrița is a market „hidden” or „obscured” by a typical urban planning style of the 1980s, which favored so-called modern retail spaces, such as the Decebal shopping complex, with a facade on the boulevard, and treated the traditional market with contempt and superiority, as something shameful, backward, like a poor relative from the countryside. Today, the large building with the imposing gable has become a deserted vestige, a ghost of the



ambitions of a bygone era, but the farmers' market continues to be hidden, practically invisible to a visitor from outside the city.

The entrance to the farmers' market is through a side street and is dominated by a supermarket from a large multinational network that also sells vegetables and fruits. A hurried buyer, who is not necessarily looking for the quality and freshness of products from the short chain, will enter the supermarket faster and will miss the opportunity to compare its offer with that of from the market.

Also, the Central Farmers' Market in Năsăud is an example of a dramatic translation from the old Habsburg center of the city a few streets away, on a secondary artery.

## **Conclusion**

Traditional markets appear to be seen by Romanian municipalities as degrading, archaic, and „like in the countryside”. In recent decades, a wave of brutal gentrification under the same banner of modernization have followed the socialist trend of enclosing markets behind attractive buildings intended for „modern” and „civilized” trade. Due in large part to heavy taxes that raise the cost of goods, the new brutalist, mall-like halls exclude the prior retailers and customers. As a new link in the producer-consumer supply chain, merchants, carriers, and resellers gradually move into the newly constructed commercial spaces. Products obtained from indifferent middlemen are turned into generic superstore commodities without a backstory.

Natural human relationships and chitchat interactions between rows of stalls are discouraged and inhibited by the new halls' layout, which is more in line with the logic of superstores. The new gentrified markets lack the convivial vocation of third places. They have a neutral coldness that makes them more similar to the non-places George Ritzer theorized (superstore, fast food, airport terminal, etc.).

The unfair competition of superstores and hypermarkets, which plagues the commercial fairways originally drawn by markets, adds to the danger of gentrification.

In face of these urban risks, economic ones are added, resulting in increasing difficulties for small producers (most of whom are elderly gardeners who rely on

the farmers' market) to exist in the current environment. All of these variables work violently on older adults (on both sides of the counter) as social exclusion factors. The farmers' market is under threat not only as a source of fresh and cheap items, but also as a third place for sociability and accessible leisure for the seniors, as a venue for the trade of ideas, and as a site of cultural intersection and rural-urban cooperation.

On a global scale, traditional farmers' markets are reviving as part of a growing trend and broad international movements (Downshifting, Degrowth, Slow Food). They intend to restore a natural way of life as part of a global strategy to prevent economic-ecological and food catastrophes.

In this context, the seniors of farmers markets, with their baggage of past experiences and cultural history, are the most competent specialists to implement the future.

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