

The Epoch of Magna: Capitalist Brands and Postsocialist Revolutions in Georgia

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Revolutions and Brands

The Georgian Rose Revolution of 2003 brought with it a radical, almost millenarian, epochalism, a desire to wipe the old Georgia from the face of the earth and erect a new Georgia in its place.¹ But there is certainly nothing new in these revolutionaries' belief that they are living in a time of change. After all, they came of age in another period of dynamic change, the chaotic "transition" of the early 1990s, and they define their revolution as a fulfillment of the promise of this period, a reaction to the trauma of it, or maybe both. Of course, the term *transition* itself contains a not very well hidden teleological narrative: that this transition is heading somewhere specific, that it has a goal of some sort. But wherever it is going, there is no question what the transition is from: socialism. Like some sort of Zeno's paradox, the socialist past will continue to haunt the present for as long as postsocialist reformers and revolutionaries continue to seek to expunge every trace of it. Hence, it follows that "westernization" must always be approaching, never arriving, in the same way that the socialist past leaks, *keeps* leaking, into the postsocialist present, so that the whole pre-Rose Revolution period from socialism to Eduard Shevardnadze seems to these revolutionaries as one undifferentiated, unredeemable era vaguely identified with socialism or its pervasive taint in the forms of corruption and criminality.²

In both these periods of dramatic change, certain kinds of western symbols, especially western brands, became symbols of revolutionary change. What I am interested in examining is not the semiotics of brand as such, but the way that brand can serve as a semiotic resource to articulate these epochal changes in two somewhat different ways.

First, brands are metaphors of capitalism. For example, the arrival of western branded goods, in particular Magna cigarettes, in large quantities in Tbilisi in the early 1990s seemed to herald the coming of a new capi-

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1. Paul Manning, "Rose-Colored Glasses? Color Revolutions and Cartoon Chaos in Postsocialist Georgia," *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (May 2007): 171–213; Paul Manning, "The City of Balconies: Elite Politics and the Changing Semiotics of the Postsocialist Cityscape" and "The Hotel/Refugee Camp *Iveria*: Symptom, Monster, Fetish, Home," both in Kristoff Van Assche, Joseph Salukvadze, and Nick Shavishvili, eds., *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where Europe and Asia Meet* (Lewiston, Me., 2009).

2. Manning, "Rose-Colored Glasses?" 187–91.

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talist epoch, so that the transition might instead be called “the Epoch of Magna.” Thus a specific capitalist brand that was particularly ubiquitous was seized upon as a “meta-symbol.” This brand no longer worked to differentiate one product from its competitors nor to persuade consumers, but had instead a metaphoric function of envisioning changes and demarcating boundaries within the social whole or space-time in which the object originates or circulates.³ Such metaphoric deployment of brands does not require any actual concrete (metonymic) consumption, hence the semiotic function of brand to differentiate products and their consumers is mostly irrelevant. Therefore, the metaphoric deployment of brands to imagine the horizons of circulatory space-times often involves radical simplification of the symbolic field of brand. Everything happens as if there were only one, or maybe two, brands of cigarettes, just enough brands to symbolize the social or spatio-temporal divisions you have in mind, for example, one brand symbolizing capitalism (Magna), and possibly another indigenous Georgian socialist brand mobilized in contrast to symbolize socialism (for example, Kolkheti cigarettes).

Second, branded goods are not merely metaphors for the capitalist order, they are part and parcel of it. Brands attached individually to goods, indexing specific producers and addressing specific customers, are metonymic indexes of capitalism.⁴ In capitalist countries, it could be argued, such “brand as metaphor” or “meta-symbol” is really a second-

3. The anthropologist Daniel Miller sees a brand become a “meta-symbol” when a specific brand (his example is Coca-Cola) comes to stand, not for itself as a circulatory object, but for the whole space-time in which it circulates: “Coca-Cola comes to stand, not just for a particular soft-drink, but also for the problematic nature of commodities in general. . . . It may stand for commodities or capitalism, but equally Imperialism or Americanization. . . . So Coca-Cola is not merely material culture, it is a symbol that stands for a debate about material culture.” Daniel Miller, “Coca-Cola: A Black Sweet Drink from Trinidad,” in Daniel Miller, ed., *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (Chicago, 1998), 170. For Coca-Cola more generally, see Robert J. Foster, “Commodity Futures: Love, Labour, and Value,” *Anthropology Today* 21, no. 4 (August 2005): 8–12; Robert Foster, *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guineau* (New York, 2008). For circulatory “space-time,” see Nancy D. Munn, *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua, New Guinea) Society* (Cambridge, Eng., 1986), 9–11. I am focusing here on the metaphoric function of brands, but as Munn argues, insofar as circulatory objects, including branded ones, indexically presuppose and create a specific space-time, as well as by their qualities serve as a microcosmic condensation of that space-time, circulatory objects are actually Peircean indexical icons, signs that stand to their object both by an existential relation of contiguity (index, metonym) and a relationship of resemblance (icon, metaphor). Since brand iconography is often created by deploying signifiers drawn from imaginative geographies of alterity, not only are brands recruited to stand for space-times, but space-times (as imaginative geographies) are frequently quarried to provide materials for creating brands. Rosemary J. Coombe, “Embodied Trademarks: Mimesis and Alterity on American Commercial Frontiers,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (May 1996); Anne Meneley, “Extra Virgin Olive Oil and Slow Food,” *Anthropologica* 46, no. 2 (2004): 165–76; Anne Meneley, “Like an Extra Virgin,” *American Anthropologist* 109, no. 4 (December 2007): 678–87; Paul Manning and Ann Uplisashvili, “‘Our Beer’: Ethnographic Brands in Postsocialist Georgia,” *American Anthropologist* 109, no. 4 (December 2007): 626–41.

4. A metaphor is a linkage based on *resemblance*, a metonym is a linkage based on actual *connection, contiguity, or association*. In this sense metaphoric linkages belong to the Peircean order of *icons*; metonymic ones to the Peircean order of *indexes*.

order development depending on the logically prior quotidian fact that brands are physically attached to products and differentiate them in relation to both other products as well as various producers and consumers. For those raised in western capitalism it is a familiar experience that concrete individual acts of consumption of branded goods can index both the imagined properties and also the actual changing economic fortunes of the consumer, but for socialist consumers the way that branded products act as individual emissaries of capitalism, each with their own chosen kind of consumer, itself seemed strange and unfamiliar. As Alexei Yurchak shows, under late socialism, western brands in the form of detached labels or empty containers, externalized and separated from the product and deployed without any regard to brand recognition or differentiation, had few of the semiotic functions that define brand in a capitalist market context. In fact, their very “semiotic bareness” separated them from the quotidian world of socialism and allowed them instead to stand in the aggregate for an imaginary space where these various brands originated, the Imaginary West.⁵ With the transition, this semiotic bareness is filled in. Empty cans and bottles are filled, labels reattached to products, and we move from brands as abstract metaphors of the new economy or brands as metonyms of the Imaginary West to brands attached to, and differentiating, real consumer goods. Differences between brands take on meaning as they index differences of style, price, quality, as well as questions of authenticity and falsification, creating new forms of social differentiation. Here we move from an abstract “totemic” principle, which uses oppositions between brands to signify (typological) divisions within a social imaginary, to a more familiar “fetishism” in the act of consumption in which oppositions between brands index oppositions between individual consumers.⁶

5. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 197. See also Krisztina Fehérváry, “Goods and States: The Political Logic of State Socialist Material Culture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 2 (April 2009): 429, 453–55.

6. My use of fetishism with respect to brand here is not to be confused with commodity fetishism, which is a way of perceiving the relations between commodities in exchange as “animated” by an alienated property of humans, quantitative value. The Marxian concept of commodity fetishism applies to commodities in their alienated state; the form of fetishism described here occurs when commodities are individually appropriated and singularized as inalienable possessions and involves the transference of other subjective qualitative properties of consumers to brands and vice versa. For an overview of the alienation/appropriation framework and a critique of its application to socialist commodities, see Fehérváry, “Goods and States,” 436–37. On the polysemy of the semiotic figure of the fetish that makes such incommensurable uses possible, see Paul Manning and Anne Meneley, “Material Objects in Cosmological Worlds: An Introduction,” *Ethnos* 73, no. 3 (2008): 289–96, and references there. My deployment of “fetishism” as the opposite of “totemism” follows what I believe to be the traditional understanding of the two categories since the nineteenth century, but recently revived in an insightful discussion by W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2004), 76–111. Certainly the historical opposition between these two concepts, totemism and fetishism, seems to treat this as being the core distinction between them: the earliest definitions of totemism are simply sociocentric communal versions of fetishism, where the fetish is associated, not with the individual, but with the tribe. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* 99. Such sociocentricism

Both of these deployments of brand index in different ways the fact that the transition was a crisis of values, as all that was solid in the socialist world melted into air.⁷ The transition was also a moment of translation, as western goods that had had a special status as rare prestige valuables or had been displayed as empty containers under socialism now became a commonplace sight. Western goods could now be bought for rubles, instead of foreign currency, encouraging price comparisons. These western goods now seemed within reach, because they were physically on display as real consumer goods, even if hyperinflation and economic collapse meant that they were scarcely attainable. But the sudden explosion, the physical presence, of western goods in large quantities alongside socialist goods produced a moment when the two could be contrasted and compared, providing at least food for thought about the transition, if not food for actual consumption. New notions of value emerged from attempts at translation between these two worlds of products that now stood side by side on the streets of Tbilisi as elsewhere in the postsocialist space.⁸

If the comparison and contrast between newly arriving capitalist and vanishing socialist brands made the transition of the early 1990s into a culture of translation between socialism and capitalism, then the symbolic appropriation of brands also played a role in constituting the recent Rose Revolution as a culture of erasure, in which western capitalist brands were deployed to banish, once and for all, the last vestiges of socialism. Many examples of this exist, but one will suffice: the Tbilisi metro.

As Alaina Lemon noted in the earlier days of the transition, “there is a long history in Russia of using public transit to talk about transition,” and the same is true of Georgia.⁹ The metro, of course, particularly in Moscow, but also in Tbilisi, is one of the greatest visible achievements of socialism, and as such “can still evoke both utopian socialist dreams and

of the referent of the totemic object relation, along with the naturalism of the signifier, is retained as the essential core of totemism by Levi-Strauss. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, 1963). Here I follow Marshall Sahlins’s influential adaptation of Levi-Strauss in treating the “totemic principle” as: “a series of concrete differences among objects of the same class to which correspond distinctions among some dimension of social order—as the difference between blue collar and white is one between manual labor and bureaucratic.” In this “modern totemism,” the classic Levi-Straussian “totemic principle”—“articulating difference in the cultural series to differences in the natural series, is no longer the main architecture of the cultural system. But one must wonder whether it has not been replaced by species and varieties of manufactured objects.” Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976), 180, 176.

7. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996); Alaina Lemon, “Your Eyes Are Green like Dollars’: Counterfeit Cash, National Substance and Currency Apartheid in 1990s Russia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (February 1998); Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca, 2002).

8. On these points in Russian, see the excellent discussions by Lemon, “Your Eyes Are Green Like Dollars,” and Humphrey, *Unmaking of Soviet Life*; for Georgia, see Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, 2006), 171–213.

9. Alaina Lemon, “Talking Transit and Spectating Transition: The Moscow Metro,” in Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland, eds., *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor, 2000), 14.

‘underground’ irony about them.”¹⁰ The metro in general, additionally, had a certain status as an incarnation of the notion of “cultured” public life under socialism, you might say that the metro was a temple of socialist “culturedness” (Russian *kul'turnost'*), an exemplary instance of socialist iconography (both technological and aesthetic).¹¹ Culturedness referred not only to the objective material display of things but also to personal hygiene and manners. Even today, the metro exemplifies all that was best about socialist public comportment.¹² To my knowledge, people *still* do not spit or smoke or do other disgusting “uncultured” things with their bodies in the metro. To any westerner familiar with the smells often associated with western public transport, this fact is in itself quite amazing and unprecedented.

But the transition is a permanent revolution, and this is particularly true of the Rose Revolutionary period of Georgia, which defines itself generationally by the leaders’ intense antipathy to the traumatic past of their childhoods, which includes both the past of socialism and the past of the transition in the early 1990s, when criminal paramilitary organizations like the infamous Mkhedrioni (Horsemen) and civil wars ravaged the country. The Rose Revolution has been characterized by its particularly thorough, one might say obsessive, attempts to *erase* any and all visible signs of the socialist and the immediate postsocialist past. Since Rose Revolutionary discourse involves an absolute orientalist identification of “civilization” and “modernity” with “westernization,” and their opposites with “the Orient,” this means at the same time erasing all signs of the Orient: replacing socialist-era buildings and monuments; eradicating post-socialist “oriental” bazaars, kiosks, shops, and garages; building scores of fountains and new monuments, such as “European” supermarkets; and most of all, painting old socialist things in bright new pastel colors.¹³ The theory seems to be some sort of sympathetic magic: if Georgia can be made to *look like* Europe, then it will magically *become* part of Europe.¹⁴

10. Lemon, “Talking Transit,” 15.

11. Andrew Jenks, “A Metro on the Mount: The Underground as a Church of Soviet Civilization,” *Technology and Culture* 41, no. 4 (October 2000): 697–724. On “culturedness,” see, for example, Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, “Directed Desires: *Kul'turnost'* and Consumption,” in Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, eds., *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution, 1881–1940* (Oxford, 1998). For Georgian ideologies of culturedness, see Manning, “Rose-Colored Glasses?” 190–91; Manning, “City of Balconies,” 82–87. Unless indicated otherwise, all foreign language words are Georgian and transliterated as in Georgian. In the transliteration of Georgian words, an apostrophe indicates a glottalized consonant, while in Russian transcription, the prime indicates a soft sign. Georgian orthography does not currently make use of capitalization, so I have adapted Georgian transcriptions to use capitalization.

12. Jenks, “A Metro on the Mount,” 713–16.

13. Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 173n1; Manning, “Rose-Colored Glasses?” 192–99.

14. Part of the campaign for rebuilding Georgia in the image of Europe involved a complete makeover of the town of Signaghi as a tourism destination. My colleague Zaza Shatirishvili describes the reaction of one of his colleagues to the new Signaghi thus: “In the spring of 2008 one of my oldest and best friends called me from the city of Signaghi and told me ‘It is wonderful, wonderful! This is already no longer Georgia, it

Each attempt by the reformers to eradicate the stain of the socialist and postsocialist past in one place merely makes the presence of the stain more visible somewhere else. The permanent revolution produces as a regular, but unintended, consequence a series of palimpsests that constantly renew the haunting memory of the actuality of the transition.

Perhaps because the metro is underground, and the wealthy classes that constitute the Rose Revolutionary government and its supporters rarely ride in the metro, the Tbilisi metro had, at first, seemingly escaped the notice of these ever-vigilant westernizers and was therefore spared their scorched-earth/pastel-paint iconoclasm. But by 2007, the government apparently decided to make this last space of socialist culturedness fully western, hoping, perhaps, to make it attractive again to people like themselves, perhaps with some sort of avant-guard pedagogical function with respect to the “dark, unenlightened” (*bneli*) masses of Georgia whom they regard as being hopelessly tainted with the birthmarks of socialism. The easiest way to do this might have been to encourage spitting, smoking, and other unpleasant bodily practices, but the government solution has been different: the socialist metros have become the place in Georgia where displays of western-style brands and advertising (alongside insistent Rose-and-Cross nationalist iconography) is most aggressive and plentiful. In 2007, the change was sudden and remarkable. Not only were muted, indirect socialist-period lightings, classical alabaster lampshades, and expensive stone walls removed and sold off, replaced with bright direct fluorescent lights and plastic and aluminum detailings, but old socialist murals celebrating achievements of culture or productivity were replaced with enormous new advertisements celebrating western consumerism, and every five meters one finds an enormous flat screen television broadcasting advertisements. While it is not uncommon to find the historical field of the transition (where the palimpsest of socialism haunts the capitalist present) figured unintentionally throughout Tbilisi by socialist murals celebrating productivity partially occluded by advertising billboards implicitly celebrating consumerism (figure 1), in the metro the reformers have moved aggressively to eradicate and replace each and every last visible sign of socialist aesthetics and iconography with western capitalist ones.

Apparently they felt the best way to banish the ghost of socialism from the metro was to use the iconography of brands and advertising, these western capitalist media apparently serving some oddly mystical apotro-

resembles some middle German town.’ . . . This phone call set in motion a whole series of thoughts in my mind. Instantly I understood why they are fighting street commerce and street merchants, why they removed the ‘*Marshrut k’a*’ [small bus] lines from their field of vision, why they painted everything so colorfully and tastelessly. . . . The thing is that, taken all together, they are fighting ‘the Orient’—street merchants, bazaars, these are all ‘the Orient,’ they are all signs of ‘orientalness.’ And we are Europeans, aren’t we? Among us ‘the Orient’ (if we are not talking about the extinct Babylonians) is always an expression of ‘backwardness’ and ‘lack of taste,’ isn’t it?” Zaza Shatirishvili, “Kalak Signnaghisa da Vak’uri Snobizmis, *Sant’a-Esh’eransasa* da ‘Chinuri Sindromis’ Shesakheb,” *Lib.Je* (2008), at www.lib.ge/body_text.php?6920 (last accessed 30 August 2009).



Figure 1. Billboard advertising Coca-Cola superimposed over old socialist period mural for SakMtavarEnergO (the socialist period electric company).

paic function with respect to socialist hauntings. Which means, even now, brand and advertising still seem to have a kind of “western” quality. By now, Georgians are obviously used to the idea of goods having brands, accustomed to the idea of advertising. But a little under a decade ago, and generally under socialism, “brand name” (what are called in Georgian *pirma*, *pirmis*, also *pirmeni* from Russian *firmennye*, literally goods “of a [specific] firm”) strongly implied “western.”¹⁵ Although indigenous brands have proliferated, the old association between “brand name” and “western” still seems to hold. This helps to explain what has happened in the metro: brands and advertising are the flag and battle standard of westernization, in this final assault on the last bastion of socialism. This revolutionary use of brand iconography is a continuation of the semiotic ideology underlying the Rose Revolution itself.¹⁶ The first of a series of revolutions branded by color or plant, the revolutionaries themselves were quite explicit about the “Rose Revolution” and its subsidiary logos and trademarks (the student movement *Kmara!* “Enough!”) as a brand:

15. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 196–97. In the late socialist period especially it would have been standard to use the Russian word *firmennye* in Georgia. I thank Nino Tsitsishvili for this observation.

16. Manning, “Rose-Colored Glasses?” 171–73, 204–6, 207n11, more generally for the political recruitment of emblematic socialist and capitalist goods, see Fehérváry, “Goods and States,” 429.

revolutionary activities were now referred to as “marketing techniques” to “promote the brand” and “achieve brand recognition.”¹⁷ In the transition of the early 1990s, brand was a portent of revolution; in the early 2000s, “revolution” is itself a brand.

Transition as Translation

If the culture of the transition of the Rose Revolution is basically envisioned as a kind of erasure, in which a thin layer of multicolored paint covers the solid grayness of socialism, the culture of the transition in the early 1990s was a culture of translation, in which goods from the two cultures of circulation, socialist and capitalist, were sometimes categorically opposed, and sometimes hesitantly equated.¹⁸ Because the values of goods and currencies alike were in flux, goods were sometimes priced and sold in separate spheres of exchange: *valut'a* goods (also *valiut'a*, goods that could only be purchased with international foreign currency), ruble goods (goods that could only be purchased with hyperinflationary Russian rubles), and coupon goods (a very rare species of goods that could be bought only with nearly worthless “dead money,” the short-lived Georgian “coupon”), encouraging people to see each kind of goods as completely separate things that cannot be compared.¹⁹ At the same time, however, western goods sold for rubles in kiosks encouraged the idea that western and socialist goods could be compared, not only in price (as values), but in quality (as use-values); goods from the different spheres of exchange could be not only compared abstractly but actually exchanged concretely.

This ambivalence echoes a more general western view of socialism as a kind of antimodernity in which socialist categories (like public and private, commodities, money, and so on) seem uncannily doppelgängers of western ones, “so different . . . yet so eerily familiar.”²⁰ In western accounts, the Soviet economy is sometimes said to have, and at other times to lack, translational equivalents of categories basic to western political economy: commodities, money, even trademarks and brand names. On the one hand, the Soviet economy is essentially characterized by a basic lack: it lacked equivalents of all the categories of political economy. Yet to make a concrete and detailed analysis of socialism’s failings, translation between political economies was necessary, so, on the other hand, it was found to have all these same categories, just extremely defective or even

17. Giorgi Kandelaki, “Georgia’s Rose Revolution: A Participant’s Perspective,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 167 (July 2006): 5, 7, at www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr167.html (last accessed 30 August 2009).

18. On metaphors of the grayness of socialism contrasted with the colorfulness imputed to capitalism, see Fehérváry, “Goods and States,” 427–29.

19. Lemon, “Your Eyes Are Green Like Dollars,” 39; the classic anthropological account of spheres of exchange is Paul Bohannan, “Some Principles of Exchange and Investment among the Tiv,” *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 1 (January 1955): 60–70.

20. Susan Gal, “A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction,” *Differences* 13, no. 1 (2002): 80.

pathological versions of them, as if socialism were a “through the looking glass” version of capitalism.²¹

The socialist commodity is one such example. The socialist commodity is a mysterious thing, maybe even more mysterious than the capitalist commodity. According to early socialist theorists of the socialist commodity, like Boris Arvatov, the socialist commodity was an anticommodity, animated, like the capitalist commodity fetish, not by exchange value, but rather by use-value, as Christine Kiaer summarizes his position.

The commodity form renders the objects passive-uncreative, fixed, dead. They may serve as substitutes for relations between producers, but this is an inherently static and formal function, governed by the spontaneous forces of the market: “The Thing as the fulfillment of the organism’s physical capacity for labor, as a force for social labor, as an instrument and as a co-worker, does not exist in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie.” . . . This negative list of qualities lacking in commodities enumerates, of course, precisely the desirable qualities of the socialist object. By imagining an object that is differently animated from the commodity fetish—animated in socially productive terms by virtue of its material form and its use value, rather than by virtue of its exchange value—Arvatov attempts to return a kind of social agency to the fetish.²²

According to certain western mythologies of socialism, too, the socialist commodity is an anticommodity, not a “differently animated” one, but rather an empty simulacrum of a commodity, seeming to lack either use-value or (exchange) value. As a use-value, it is shoddy, yet durable; it is drab, generic, anonymous, brandless; it is addressed to (a dictatorial conception of) human needs, not (liberated) human desires.²³ As an exchange value, it seems to be only a weakly animated version of the capitalist commodity fetish, never able to mysteriously exchange itself independently as a capitalist commodity can. Uninspired by dreams of realizing surplus value, the exchange of a socialist commodity is always embedded, gift-like, in personal networks, always subordinated to use-values. Like the weakly

21. In some schools of neoliberal commentary, this genre of absolute opposition between the west and the Soviet sphere analyzes the Soviet economy in the terms of the Orwellian chiasmus of a Yakov Smirnoff joke: “In Soviet Russia, car drives *you!*” An example of this Yakov Smirnoff shtick applied to the analysis of the postsocialist economy would be, for example, Anders Åslund’s attack on what he calls the “myth of output collapse after communism.” In brief, the postsocialist collapse of economic output is a myth, according to this shaggy dog version of the joke, because socialist economies did not “produce” at all, therefore, there was no output collapse after communism, because there was no production to begin with. Using a few anecdotal examples, Åslund shows that, like some looking-glass version of a commodity chain, rather than value being added at each step from raw materials to finished commodity, value is detracted or destroyed. Anders Åslund, “The Myth of Output Collapse after Communism,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Publications* (2000), at www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=611&prog=zru (last accessed 30 August 2009); Anders Åslund, “Ten Myths about the Russian Economy,” in Andrew C. Kuchins, ed., *Russia after the Fall* (Washington D.C., 2002).

22. Christina Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 111. I thank Bruce Grant for drawing this article to my attention.

23. For a brilliant discussion and critique of this received view, see Fehérváry, “Goods and States,” 429, 432–53.

animated, dying or dead non-valut'a currencies that purchase such non-valut'a commodities, no transaction involving a socialist commodity is fully alienated, fully animated by value; they are always attended by personal networks or human agencies that have the potential to "revive" them.²⁴ Like the capitalist commodity, the socialist commodity seems, in every way, a microcosm of the political economic macrocosm that produced it.²⁵

Take the more specific quality of brand. One might begin a discussion of socialist brands with the conventional introduction of a Georgian fairy tale: "There were, and there were not, socialist brands." As noted, socialist commodities are often imagined as drab, colorless, brandless, generic use-values compared to the colorful branded packaging associated with western goods. And yet, the "same" socialist use-values were often differentiated from one another by name and packaging.²⁶ Compared to the extensive semiotic adumbration of brand in the colorful packaging of western goods, the relatively simple forms of differentiation of socialist goods could hardly be said to qualify as brand. More important, even if we can compare the sign vehicles of western and socialist brands, they really could not possibly have the same functions (for example, indexing distinct producers and "goodwill") in a state-directed economy as they did in a competitive market context.²⁷

Far from illustrating some sort of latent universal human need for branded commodities, given free expression under capitalism but driven underground in socialism, the socialist equivalent of brand, like the socialist appropriation of western brand, reflects the specificities of the socialist culture of circulation. Branded products were found in only a small sector of the socialist consumer economy, essentially common luxuries, suitable for giving as gifts and addressed to human desires—cigarettes, alcohol, chocolates—whereas goods that address simple human needs were often presented in generic form without packaging or distinguishing marks.²⁸ Brand-name goods were part of a sphere of socialist consumption identified with "cultured trade": they were the material underpinnings of the concept of cultured consumption. Socialist brands rivalled western brands: they promised a brighter future and had both a pedagogical function and a civilizing function with respect to the uncultured masses.²⁹

24. Borrowing Aka Morchiladze's characterization, see below; also Lemon, "Your Eyes Are Green Like Dollars"; Fehérváry, "Goods and States," 438–43; Alena Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998).

25. Fehérváry, "Goods and States," 428–29.

26. Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia* (Oxford, 2003), 67–86; Manning and Uplisashvili, "Our Beer," 627–29.

27. Ironically, as Fehérváry notes, the presence of plural named socialist state brands alongside a more general singular state brand (evidenced in aspects of product quality, packaging, and consistent design features) often led to a situation where the socialist state brand was unable to capitalize on the "goodwill" produced by its own named brands. Fehérváry, "Goods and States," 442.

28. Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne*, 43–66; Fehérváry, "Goods and States," 440.

29. Kelly and Volkov, "Directed Desires"; Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne*, 14, 73; see also Julie Hessler, "Cultured Trade: The Stalinist Turn towards Consumerism," in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London, 2000), 182–209.



Figure 2. Capitalist and socialist “brands” of cigarettes: Magna and Kolkheti. Among other distinguishing features, Magna packs have shinier packaging, even after you remove the cellophane (which socialist cigarettes also did not have).

On the one hand, then, western goods could appear to be distinguished stereotypically from socialist ones by this single property, brand. The transition, then, under this understanding, was a transition from brandlessness to brand, a transition from a grey productivist wasteland to a colorful consumerist paradise.³⁰ On the other hand, since some socialist goods in fact had something like brands, socialist products could be understood to be like capitalist commodities, and socialist “brands” like Kolkheti or Astra could stand in opposition to capitalist counterparts like Magna or Marlboro, as “our brands” to “theirs” (see figure 2). So the transition begins like a Georgian fairy tale: “There was, and there was not, brand under socialism.” How does the rest of the story go?

The Epoch of Magna: Brand as Metaphor

One might well have expected the transition to have been heralded by a bottle of Coca-Cola, after all, as Daniel Miller points out, Coca-Cola is one of the brands most likely to serve as a meta-symbol of capitalism.³¹ But since Coca-Cola required a local bottler, Coca-Cola did not become part of the “brandscape” of Tbilisi until later and remained somewhat exotic during the transition period. Instead, one of the most noticeable and affordable western brands to arrive in Tbilisi in the early 1990s was Magna cigarettes. In 1992 all of Tbilisi smoked Magna, a brand I had never seen before, and Magna, in turn, became a symbol, not of a product, but of the time, the place, the people, indeed Georgia’s entire postsocialist predica-

30. Fehérváry, “Goods and States,” 426–29.

31. Miller, “Coca-Cola,” 170.

ment. In Aka Morchiladze's novel, *Paliashvilis Kuchis Dzaghlebi* (The dogs of Paliashvili Street, 1995), set in the gloom, poverty, violence, and chaos of this period, only the search for an affordable pack of Magna cigarettes connects the thoughts of a character named Zaza, who finds Magna as "good to think" as they would be to smoke, if he could afford a pack.

The crisis of the transition is writ large in the figure of Zaza, the hero of this story. Zaza is a typical example of the indifference to materiality and consumption among the intelligentsia: to be interesting, the concrete materiality of the object must be sublimated to illustrate some abstraction. Therefore his ruminations about Magna as a metaphor for the times (brand totemism) render him unable to see the emergent social division, conflict, and danger concretely indexed in the practices of brand consumption (brand fetishism) around him.

Morchiladze, the nom de plume of Gio Akhvlediani (born 1966), is himself a good figure for the transition period. Since his first novel, *Gas-eirneba Karabakhshi* (A trip to Karabagh, 1992; made into a film in 2005), he has been Georgia's most popular, and prolific, novelist. It is the general consensus that Morchiladze is the keenest observer of Georgian realia, especially his vivid representation of Georgian urban heteroglossia.³² Certainly, I am not the only one to recognize in this novel the same characters and situations that actually populated Tbilisi in the early 1990s. One Georgian interviewee from the same age group as Morchiladze, Zaza Sopromadze, commenting on why Georgians love Morchiladze's writings, draws attention to the intimate self-recognition that forms the basis of his popularity: "I really love Aka Morchiladze. He is so easy to read and somehow he tells the stories of my generation. I just think, that we are right there, on the pages of the book, me and my friends, and everything that happens around us."³³

It is not only Morchiladze's realism that gives his novels their straightforward ethnographic relevance. After all, many, if not most, of Morchiladze's most popular novels have settings that border on the fantastic. For example, Morchiladze's only novel that has ever been translated (into German) is a fantasy, a strange nonlinear tale titled *Sant'a Esp'eranza* (Santa Esperanza, 2004), strange not only because of its nonlinear narrative, but also because the novel takes an unusual form, a bag containing folios that can be read in any order. Each folio represents a playing card from one of four differently colored suits. The bag full of folios forms the deck for an imaginary game (*Int'i*) played on an imaginary island in the Black Sea (a map is included). The island both forms the setting for the novel and gives it its name, *Santa Esperanza*. Only the island itself is imaginary, the novel is otherwise contemporaneous and connected with our own narrative universe. According to Morchiladze, Santa Esperanza represents a

32. Zaza Shatirishvili, "Axali kalmasoba: Zurab Karumidzis *Ghvinomuki Zghva* da Aka Morchiladzis Tp(tb)ilisuri dialogia," *Arili* 4 (March 2001): 4–6.

33. "Interviu Zaza Sofromadzestan," *Alia* 66 (1743) (4–6 June 2005), at www.susif.ge/Publikacia5.pdf (last accessed 30 August 2009).

“Hong Kong” fantasy, yet a strangely realistic one, of a Georgia colonized, not by Russia, but by Britain.³⁴ I discuss this novel at some length because it represents an imaginative geography, an aspirational fantasy of a *different* Georgia, one opposed to the realistic portrait of the real Georgia. Such imagined places are not inconsequential, especially, as Edward Said reminds us of the imaginative geographies of orientalism, if they are real in their consequences: it is not hard to imagine that this novel, written at the same time as the Rose Revolution (2003–4), represents an imagined Georgia like the one the Rose Revolutionaries are trying to incarnate in reality.³⁵ As Zaza Shatirishvili has recently argued, this novel represents another kind of “Hong Kong fantasy,” a fantasy of a city freed of its backward rural hinterland, of a Tbilisi no longer shackled to the remainder of Georgia.³⁶ Written ten years earlier, the narrative universe of *The Dogs of Paliashvili Street* is in principle no different: a real place (Tbilisi in the early 1990s) haunted by imaginary places in the west (like the city of Nice, which exists primarily in the world of fantasy, after all), whose real existence is betokened by the arrival of bright red packs of Magna cigarettes in kiosks along Chavchavadze Prospect.

Much more than anything else, it is the way Morchiladze deploys the polysemy of Magna cigarettes, which operate both as signifiers of an imaginary aspirational world no more palpable than Santa Esperanza, as well as concrete commodities that can be bought perhaps somewhere near the real Paliashvili Street, to organize a narrative about the transition, that has caused me to base my own ethnographic narrative on his fictional one. Magna cigarettes, a commodity, are a problematic symbol for the main character of the novel, Zaza, in two discrete ways. On the one hand, Magna seems a perfect abstract symbol for the arrival of a new epoch, “the Epoch of Magna.” On the other hand, Magna dominates his thoughts because Magna is a real commodity, a real use-value that he desires. Zaza is a smoker and, for a smoker, a pack of cigarettes is never entirely abstractly symbolic: Magna is both a metaphor and a metonym of Zaza’s predicament. On the one hand, Magna is an abstract metaphor, a sign of the times, an example of brand totemism. On the other hand, one cannot smoke metaphors, one can only smoke real packs of Magna, which Zaza cannot afford to buy. Therefore, Magna is also metonymic, a concrete index of his personal problems, an example of brand fetishism.

The two ways that Magna is a sign of the times—abstractly and concretely, metaphoric and metonymic, iconic and indexical—are always connected. Concretely, there is the problem of obtaining a single actual pack of Magna with the “dead money,” hyperinflationary coupons, in his pocket. More abstractly, there is the metaphoric symbolism of brand. Unaffordable packs of Magna represent a novelty, the commodity as spectacle.³⁷ The spectacle of a myriad unattainable packs of Magna in every

34. Sonja Zekri, “Once Upon a Time in Georgia,” *Signandsight.com* (13 December 2006), at www.signandsight.com/features/1094.html (last accessed 30 August 2009).

35. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), 2–3.

36. Shatirishvili, “Kalak Sighnaghisa.”

37. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, 1983), 35–53.

kiosk along every street allows Magna to stand as a meta-symbol for the times and the place.

For Zaza Magna metaphorically represents Georgia's predicament in at least three different ways: as a sign of the times, of the place, of the people. Zaza muses: "In the 'hall' I am standing and counting money. As a rule it should come out to be enough for me to buy a pack of 'Magna,' but it depends on where I buy. This 'Magna' is a perfect symbol for the epoch, isn't it—It came into Tbilisi almost as a herald of the end of communism. We could just call it the "Epoch of Magna.""³⁸

Magna stands for a time—the end of communism heralded by the arrival of Magna in Tbilisi. But it also stands for a place, as Zaza muses that Magna is so ubiquitous that the city's coat of arms should be replaced with a pack of Magna: "On Chavchavadze [Prospect] the kiosks are stuffed with packs of 'Magna.' 'Magna,' 'Magna'—If they were to change the seal of Tbilisi, perhaps the best would be if it were a pack of Magna. So, do you remember 'Magna's' prices? I remember, but I am too lazy right now, it is freezing and I think I lost an ear somewhere."³⁹

On the one hand, Magna works as a metaphoric herald of the transition, standing for the arrival of new times and the transformation of a city into a postsocialist space. But the metaphor of transition between space-times also works as a metonymic translation between peoples: Zaza knows that this same brand circulates in the west and is consumed by Puerto Ricans *there*. Knowing that Georgians are smoking the brand of cigarettes associated with Puerto Ricans in the United States brings Georgians into the racial and ethnic hierarchy of a world system. Because Georgians smoke Magna, they must be Latinos, because Magna is a brand for Latinos. Maybe even more Latino than real Latinos in Latino-ness. But, he reasons, that is appropriate, because "we Georgians too are Latinos and we are even more Latino than Latinos in our Latino-ness. Who would deny this?"⁴⁰ Zaza muses that it was some mistake that Pablo Escobar, the Medellín Columbian drug lord, was born in Colombia, where they killed him, instead of Tbilisi, where he would have been feted as a national hero.⁴¹ Magna, the most visible of all the brands that attended the transition, comes to stand for brand as such, the most obvious visible divider between the capitalist and the socialist commodity form, and from there, it comes to stand for all the ways that the postsocialist time and space of Tbilisi differs from the socialist one: the Epoch of Magna.

With a nod to Derridean *différance*, we might add that Magna, too, represents the endless difference and deferral of the west, the Imaginary West that can never be experienced directly, only through its products.⁴² In the Epoch of Magna, the Imaginary West comes to Tbilisi in the form of Magna cigarettes, but one cannot go *there*, to the west. Zaza's inability to purchase an actual pack of Magna parallels his own unattainable desire to

38. Aka Morchiladze, *Paliashvilis Kuchis Dzaghlebi* (Tbilisi, 1995), 4.

39. *Ibid.*, 8.

40. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

41. *Ibid.*, 5.

42. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, chap. 5.

emigrate. Not only is Zaza obsessed with a western good, a pack of Magna, he is interested in the west in general. Zaza's concrete desire for a pack of Magna (rather than the local brand Kolkheti) echoes his more abstract fantasy about emigrating to the Imaginary West, specifically, the French city of Nice. He talks about Nice all the time. At this time his own circle of friends has emptied out and social life in Tbilisi seems to have come to an end, for everyone is leaving for the west, for interchangeable places like Kansas City or Nice. If the arrival of Magna points toward the changes wrought by postsocialism in Tbilisi, for Zaza an actual pack of Magna is just as unattainable for him as the Imaginary West, the city of Nice, itself.

The individual packs of Magna seem real enough: they are concretely visible everywhere in the equally new kiosks along the street, but they are just out of reach. They are presented as spectacle but are not available for consumption. Under socialism, what there was, if anything, was there to be consumed, but under capitalism, goods on display may yet remain permanently out of reach. Under socialism, it was often said that consumption was an unfulfilled promise, a mere image for propaganda, but capitalism under postsocialism provides individual promises of consumption that went unfulfilled, promises incarnated in tantalizing, little portion-controlled commodity spectacles, packs of Magna, for example.⁴³ So it must have seemed to the average consumer not yet domesticated to capitalist norms of distribution and consumption.

This reduction of real commodities to tantalizing spectacles was due to another problem, one of exchange: "It was a time of dead money," as Morchiladze describes the period elsewhere, explaining how he published his first novel in this period, through a circuitous set of transactions that crossed the entire postsocialist space:

For example my friend had a firm of some kind. He went to Turkey and brought a batch of footwear there and then took it to Siberia. . . . At the end of the day, he was left with 35,000 [hyperinflationary Georgian] coupons. It was dead money unless you managed to revive it some way or the other . . . and we gave it to the printing house I think. I don't even remember, I think it was a printing house that belonged to the psychiatric clinic of Gldani. . . . This is how "The Trip to Karabakh" was published.⁴⁴

Money had ceased to be money. Zaza's other problem is that post-socialist Georgian money (hyperinflationary coupons) cannot be exchanged for western goods, or much of anything for that matter, unless it can be "revived somehow," re-embedded in a personal network. Such money only talked to friends, it had nothing to say to strangers. Western products were now visible everywhere, but they were unattainable for Georgian coupons, unlike the socialist equivalent, Kolkheti, which could

43. On the mythology of socialism as a frustrated desire for consumption, see Fehérváry, "Goods and States," 427, 432–35.

44. Marina Vashakmadze, "A Flight over the Cuckoo's Nest and Back" (interview with Aka Morchiladze), *Mudmivi/Magti Magazaine* (2000), at <http://www.magtigism.com/magazine/2000-2/2000-2-8.html> (accessed 22 April 2009; no longer available).

be bought with this “dead money.” Zaza tries to buy a pack from a street vendor along his route:

Further along, an old Assyrian woman played with a pack of “Magna” in her fingers.

“What does ‘Magna’ cost?”

“Five hundred and fifty, two packs for a thousand.”

“In coupons?”

“I won’t sell.”

“Go, you . . . If you won’t sell then I will buy at the metro.” A second time I fail to get “Magna.” . . . You know, “Magna” has a better ring to it, than “Kolkheti.”⁴⁵

The choice of Magna as a brand name to stand for the transition is not arbitrary. Even nonsmokers remember Magna, for it was, perhaps, the most typical low-value branded consumer good in Tbilisi in the early 1990s. Magna represented the species of brand most typical of the genus. Being intrinsically valuable, generically addressed to smokers, and relatively durable, it became for some a lot like a substitute for money in hyperinflationary times. One nonsmoker friend of mine, an unemployed or scarcely employed brigade leader in a shoe factory, was listening to the radio one morning and heard a story in which it was announced that the currency in force at that time was going to be discontinued. He immediately took all his money that day and bought packs of Magna, later selling them, like the old woman, for the new currency.

Marlboro, Rothmans, Magna: Brands as Metonyms

For Zaza, who is a smoker after all, the temporarily unattainable packs of Magna denote the unattainable desire to emigrate to the French city of Nice. Cigarettes become both metonymic incarnations of distant, virtually imaginary spaces, as well as metaphors for them, with the desire for Magna being similar to the desire to emigrate to Nice. But a pack of Magna not only serves as a metaphoric and metonymic sign of imaginary spaces just beyond the horizons of circulation, it is also a sensitive index of social and spatial oppositions of a local geography, especially indexed by differences of price. Another change in these times was the novel experience of individual packs of cigarettes having different prices, according not only to brand but also to the time and place of purchasing. Socialism included price controls; the end of socialism, shock therapy, involved the novel concept of fluctuating (always upwards) prices.

In 1992–93 in Tbilisi everyday conversation revolved around the prices of things in the west and in Tbilisi. For socialist consumers the big surprise was that cigarettes in the west all cost the same, more or less. This seemed like a peculiar socialist heresy within the homeland of capitalism. In this period, in the novel as in everyday life, price had become variable and therefore conversationally topical. In Morchiladze’s novel, one character, Petruccio, a writer, imagines that if he had \$1,800 he could

45. Morchiladze, *Paliashvilis Kuchis Dzaghebi*, 10.

publish a book about contemporary Tbilisi. He evaluates this number in terms of how many packs of his adopted brand of cigarettes, in this case Rothmans, it would purchase: "Even your grandchildren would still be smoking them."⁴⁶

In Tbilisi at that time it seemed axiomatic that different cigarette brands could not have the same price: the hierarchy of prices reflected each brand's relative global prestige as well as the brand's place of origin, and, moreover, the hierarchy also varied by the prestige of the Tbilisi neighborhood in which the purchase was taking place. If the opposition between brands as such indexes global oppositions of imaginary geographies as places of production, then the price variability of a single brand attaches new local values to people who smoke that brand and the places they buy it, as places of consumption.

This leads to new differences, new ways that differentiation of brand and differentiation of persons are linked together metaphorically and metonymically. With the advent of a consumer society where access to goods is organized by differences in price and where brands command different prices, there is an emergent hierarchy of persons based on their brand. Differences of brand, linked to differences in price and currency, also index individuals' ever-changing situations and positions within a fluid economic context. The lack of durability of consumer goods like cigarettes, the fact that an honest smoker goes through a pack of Magna in a day or two, makes them all the more responsive as indexes of a person's economic position at that moment. And this was a period in which a person's economic situation changed radically *every day*.

In a situation of economic collapse and hyperinflation, having cigarettes, and specific brands of cigarettes, indexes variable, individuating properties of individual persons (not durable categorical oppositions between social groups) at any given moment. Purchased for different amounts of money, and different kinds of money (dollars, rubles, coupons), packs of cigarettes of different brands become exchange goods that index a person's means. Not in general, but *that day*, because an individual's economic means vary day by day. Variation of price in time (hyperinflation) is matched by variation in space, by neighborhood, with prices increasing as one moves from railway station to prestige neighborhood, from wholesale to retail.

In this period, socialist forms of distinction and prestige between neighborhoods based on relatively rigid status-categories were fast becoming capitalist ones measured in different prices for everything. Prices differed according to neighborhood, not just brand, if brands have prestige based on price (Marlboro, HB, Rothmans, St. Moritz at the top, Kolkheti at the bottom, Magna in between), then so does price reflect the prestige of the neighborhood (Tbilisi's most prestigious neighborhood of Vake at the top, obviously). In the novel, Zaza seems oblivious to this, but his friend Zazucha, fluent in slang and the new realities, is almost hyperaware of these differences: "Buying something in Vake gives off a different *mughami*

46. Ibid., 61.

[slang, “impression”]. If you buy something here, that’s like saying you are doing well. Especially if you buy them on Kazbegi. Everything there is very expensive, it goes up almost to double the price and if you buy it, you are a *k’lient’i* [slang term for “guy”]. In short, prestige.”⁴⁷

Moving from brand (type) to individual pack (token) and then to individual cigarette, the circulatory career of the cigarette moves from a commodity that indexes the properties of the buyer relative to a market to a possible gift. Individual cigarettes can be passed as a kind of “free good,” their exchange indexing camaraderie, sociability, even equality and generalized reciprocity between strangers.⁴⁸ Zaza, who never manages to buy a pack of Magna, or to emigrate to Nice, for that matter, does not lack for cigarettes from his friends. Each time Zaza smokes someone else’s cigarettes, he seems to recognize the cigarette’s classification as a “free good,” a commodity embedded in specific social relationships. He seems less aware, however, of their varying market values, of which brand is emblematic, and of the role this plays in classifying persons individually and reflecting categorical differences of emergent class differentiation.

A typical representative of the socialist intelligentsia, Zaza is remarkably perceptive about abstractions (brand as metaphor, brand totemism), but at the concrete material level he seems to be entirely unaware of what is happening around him (brand as metonym, brand fetishism). At the metaphorical level, then, Zaza can see how brands come to stand totemically for oppositions between places and categories of people, but he cannot see how these metaphoric differences, incarnated in individual packs of cigarettes, have become metonymic indexes of emergent individualizing differences between him and his companions in economic and social terms. He does not seem to grasp how his socialist period peer group is increasingly differentiated by emergent indexes of a stratified political economy, class, status, prestige.

For Zaza these differences marked by brand and price seem obscured by the classification of cigarettes as a “free good,” whose exchange indexes easygoing egalitarian sociability. Thus Zaza seems only marginally aware that the cigarettes he is bumming off his friends, but not buying, as he perpetually puts off or forgets to buy a pack of Magna, locate him in social space in respect to these other people. Now everyone has their brand, and these brands all have different prices, a frequent topic of discussion, and so it follows that aspects of individuals can be inferred by their choice of brands and by whether or not they can afford their chosen brand. Brand individualizes products as well as consumers. People have their own brands: Zaza smokes Magna, or would if he could afford to; his friend Petriochka smokes exactly three Rothmans a day, and so on. But

47. *Ibid.*, 45.

48. The term is Erving Goffman’s: “I use the term ‘free good’ to refer to those things perceived as ones a possessor can give away at relatively little cost or inconvenience even though they may be urgently needed by the recipient. . . . Free goods, as here defined, provide an interesting source of social solidarity. Their range varies greatly according to ecology.” Erving Goffman, “Felicity’s Condition,” *American Journal of Sociology* 89, no. 1 (July 1983): 37n29.

this individualization is not merely a free expression of individual choice and empowerment (as western marketing enthusiasts like to pretend), however, because as Zaza finds, he can choose Magna as his brand as much as he likes, but the “dead” coupons in his wallet make that choice largely unrealizable in practice.

Under socialism, cigarettes may have been cigarettes, but there were still differences between the relatively harsh, nasty, proletarian, and masculine unfiltered cigarette Astra and filtered brands like Kosmos or Kolkheti. In fact, the character Zazucha jokingly insults a woman he likes, Keta, by saying “you left your cigarettes in the car” and tossing her a pack of Astra, thus classifying her jocularly as a certain kind of virago.⁴⁹ But socialist cigarettes really were in a sense “free goods,” for there was little or no hidden dimension of emergent class or prestige differences in the sociable exchange of Kosmos, Kazbek, Kolkheti, or what have you. Differences began to emerge under postsocialism, though: a Georgian cigarette like Kolkheti is virtually free and (barely) satisfies the need to smoke, but is no object of desire, while a western brand is expensive and an object of desire, and thus becomes a special gift, rather than a free good. For example, when Zaza requests a cigarette in the editorial office where he pretends to work, one of the men there immediately pulls out a pack of the serviceable but unimpressive local brand Kolkheti. The new coworker Nana, whom Zaza has just met, insists he smoke her cigarettes. She returns with a pack of St. Moritz cigarettes for him specifically. Clueless as he is, Zaza wonders whether her father is well connected, or rich, whereas everyone else concludes that she obviously likes him.⁵⁰ The opposition between the truly “free good” (the socialist cigarette Kolkheti) and the luxury western good St. Moritz allow us to deduce many things. One thing we can deduce is that Zaza is as clueless about flirtation as he is about the materiality of brand if he cannot see that an offer of Kolkheti “means nothing,” while an offer of St. Moritz, especially for him, from a woman, “means something.”

The Dogs of Paliashvili Street

This fairy tale of brand does not have a happy ending. If brand-name cigarettes move from free goods to special gifts indexing not only economic privilege but bids for greater intimacy, in other contexts this revaluation of once free goods indexes a collapse of the egalitarian norms of socialist urbanity that characterized Tbilisi. In some cases, cigarettes like Marlboro, the top of the hierarchy, index not only wealth and prestige but also the new ways that wealth is acquired, in a city of violence, guns, and chaos, where a Columbian drug lord or a local “thief of the law” (*k'anonieri*

49. Nevertheless, for some married women I know who are secret smokers, the cheapness of Astra can make it the *ideal* cigarette, since, due to the secrecy involved, its other associations are irrelevant.

50. Morchiladze, *Paliashvilis Kuchis Dzaghebi*, 14–15, 17.

kurdi) is a figure of prestige.⁵¹ In such a situation, a brand like Marlboro can only be a sign of danger. The Marlboro smoker who invades Zaza and Zazucha's neighborhood *sakhink'le* (a kind of socialist restaurant specializing in a specific kind of Georgian food, *khink'ali*, or meat dumplings) and threatens an old city-dweller who offends him with death is the image of the "New Georgian" appropriate for the times.⁵² The character Zazucha immediately identifies this impatient Marlboro smoker who wants to be served an order to go as a new sort of Georgian who is identified primarily in terms of categories of consumption, corruption, and violence: "I know his type. *Nashebi* [slang, "chicks, girlfriends"] wait for them. He has a seat in a good *sost'avi* [slang, "clique, circle"], sucks at some organization's [expense, i.e., has a sinecure]. He loves amaretto and khink'ali. . . . I know the type, I even have friends who are that way. He talks about food, about drink, about clothing, about cars, and about guns. He likes [Mafia films like] *Once Upon a Time in America*, *Scarface*, and *Carlito's Way*."⁵³

Clearly a smoker of Marlboros is not someone who participates in the sociable exchange of cigarettes as free goods. This conflict between old socialist norms of urban and urbane sociability and the New Georgian type is illustrated in a powerful scene in the novel. An old, drunk, poor but proud city-dweller seeks to bum a cigarette from this man by appealing to urban norms of sociability and a common urban identity. Under socialism, urban dwellers shared a kind of easygoing and cultured camaraderie and saw themselves in opposition to villagers and hicks.⁵⁴ This poor old man appeals to a common "city-dweller" (*kalakeli*, *tbiliseli*) identity to provide the normative context for the generalized camaraderie, using urban styles of speech and address:

"Brother [*dzmaojan*, using the Armenian-derived urban suffix *-jan* indexing egalitarian intimacy and urban identity], please make me smoke, we are people of the city [*kalakeli xalxi vart*]."

He [the Marlboro smoker] was already halfway out the door and was greatly annoyed. They can't stand it when people bother them, can they? He puts his hand in his pants pocket, pulls out Marlboros and looks at the old guy.⁵⁵

But the Marlboro smoker, the "New Georgian," sees the exchange as one expressive, not of egalitarian camaraderie between city-dwellers, but of emergent hierarchy. For him, giving a cigarette is an act of service, of charity, to the poor, to a beggar, not the exchange of a free good. Accordingly, he refuses to move *even one step* to give the cigarette to the beggar;

51. Manning, "City of Balconies," 76–78.

52. In my experience, Georgians only hesitantly use the term *New Georgian*. For imaginings of "New Georgians" through their semiotic displays, particularly architecture, see Manning, "City of Balconies," 82–98. For comparison with the Russian mythology of the "New Russians," see, for example, Mark Lipovetsky, "The New Russians as a Cultural Myth," *Russian Review* 62, no. 1 (January 2003): 54–71.

53. Morchiladze, *Paliashvilis Kuchis Dzaghlebi*, 48.

54. Manning, "City of Balconies," 82–87.

55. Morchiladze, *Paliashvilis Kuchis Dzaghlebi*, 49.

the old man must come to him. Zazucha, sitting with Zaza watching the exchange, comments

He [the Marlboro smoker] is clearly pissed off. His type have complexes, don't they, that they are great guys [slang, *magari rozhebi*] and helping anyone represents a service.

"Am I supposed to bring it to you, or what, I don't understand." He said it in such a way, that you would think it was a really big deal.

The old guy, though poor, is proud. He maintains the composure of a city-dweller [slang, *kalakuri uch'iravs*]. The other old guy [his companion] remains sitting, holding his breath, looking at the ceiling.

"I don't want it, brother, go on your way," the proud old guy who posed the question announces suddenly.

"What?" the khink'ali customer [the Marlboro smoker] is ruffled.

"Go on your way, brother, and learn some manners."⁵⁶

Infuriated at being treated this way by a mere beggar, the Marlboro smoker storms out. The old man, apparently quite drunk, collapses, and Zaza and Zazucha help him out the door. The Marlboro man, on his way to run an errand while his khink'ali are being prepared, tells Zaza and Zazucha that the old man is dead if he finds him there when he comes back for his khink'ali.

This powerful scene portrays an emergent social classification by cigarette. The Marlboro man's refusal to participate in the exchange of cigarettes as free goods leads to the realization that cigarette brands now not only have different *economic* value but indicate different *normative* values as well. Once shared socialist values of equality and mannered sociable interaction between city-dwellers, expressed in a cigarette exchange between strangers, are fast disappearing. But in this interaction, the old city-dweller's values confront the new realities of economic differentiation, as well as the violence and danger bred by these economic differences. The Marlboro man, by implication a member of the criminal paramilitary organization the Mkhedrioni, converts a sociable interaction into a hierarchical display. Giving a cigarette becomes a charitable service, that, if not properly appreciated, results in a death threat. In this dystopian world, the character Zaza never gets a pack of Magnas and never emigrates to Nice, because someone very like the Marlboro man kills him in the street.

This little exchange over cigarettes is a metonym for the more general predicament of Tbilisi in this period. In the postsocialist city, the space outside the front door is no longer a sphere of cultured public comportment, or indeed of culture at all. Under "wild capitalism" the streets have been returned to the natural order. In the chaos of the period in which most of the characters are happy to get home alive, without being shot, brands like Magna have indeed become one of the symbols of the public spaces of the city, but, on the other hand, so has violence, incarnated in the figure of the "Marlboro man" and packs of wild dogs, erstwhile domestic pets abandoned en masse. My own memories of walking the streets of Tbilisi in this period of the transition include all these elements: men

56. Ibid.

wearing sunglasses sitting in cafes with their automatic weapons propped up against their tables, the packs of wild dogs that used to sleep on the grassy parkways in front of socialist monuments, and the sign on the front door of the local western hotel indicating that automatic weapons were not welcome on the premises. The precarious socialist achievement of cultured public urban comportment had disappeared. Erstwhile “parks of culture” became abandoned wildernesses, in which the skeletal remains of mechanical rides for children, stripped and sold for scrap, were melancholy reminders of socialism. Erstwhile public spaces were populated with naked private interests: socialist citizens turned into armed bandits, domestic animals gone wild and rabid, and commodities disappearing from socialist stores and reappearing as tantalizing spectacles in the windows of innumerable kiosks.

The distinction between private and public was overlaid in postsocialist Tbilisi with the distinction between *shinauri* (“inner, domestic”) versus *gareuli* (“outer, wild”): the human order now ends at the front door of the private domicile, the *public* space is a *wild* space characterized by an absence of order.⁵⁷ Zaza’s friend Petriochka, a journalist, ultimately ends up capturing the nature of public social life in Georgia by doing an ethnographic sketch, not of public social life between people on the streets, but of the wild dogs of Paliashvili Street, which forms the centerpiece of the novel and after which the novel is named.⁵⁸ One might think such an ethnographic sketch of wild dogs (entitled “The Private Lives of Abandoned Dogs”) was some sort of metaphor, had some sort of hidden meaning, perhaps an Aesopian fable about politics.⁵⁹ The problem is, of course, that it was not a metaphor at all, not a Levi-Straussian totemism where natural figures (wild dogs) stand metaphorically for human social divisions but a simple realistic description of the dominant form of private life inhabiting the public spaces of the city. This is why Petriochka’s editor deems this sketch to be unpublishable, why he labels it “top secret” and hides it in the second drawer of his desk.

This fairy tale does not end well for the western brand Magna, either. I never did see the familiar red packs of Magna cigarettes again in Tbilisi. They are still found elsewhere in the world, but not in Tbilisi. Perhaps it was because a rumor went around that Magna, and only Magna, cigarettes caused cancer.⁶⁰ Perhaps it was because the brand Magna was so identified with a time and a place, the Epoch of Magna, that their fate was tied to the chaotic violent period they came to symbolize, along with packs of wild dogs and armed bandits, the period that epitomizes, incidentally, the traumatic past that the Rose Revolutionaries seek to erase.

57. I owe this general observation about the negative Georgian valorization of public exterior spaces to Kevin Tuite. Kevin Tuite, “The Autocrat of the Banquet Table: The Political and Social Significance of the Georgian *supra*” (2005), 16–17, at www.mapageweb.umontreal.ca/tuitekj/publications/Tuite-supra.pdf (last accessed 30 August 2009).

58. Morchiladze, *Paliashvilis Kuchis Dzaghlebi*, 66–72.

59. *Ibid.*, 72.

60. I thank Ann Uplisashvili for this information.