

## **The Epoch of Magna: Brand totemism and the imagined transition/translation from socialism to post-socialism in Georgia**

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The period of the so-called 'transition' from socialism to post-socialism in Georgia, when I began my fieldwork there in 1992-3, was characterized by a sudden implosion of the local economy as well as hyperinflation as price deregulation and shock therapy went into effect. Socialist production collapsed in this period to something like 25% of the production of the Soviet period, making indigenous goods ever rarer in socialist period stores. Suddenly, too, Western goods emerged from the hard currency stores and were now found, for rubles, in the kiosks lining the streets. Such changes were found in all the Union republics. In Georgia, the insult added to injury took the form of civil unrest, coup de etats, ethnic conflicts and wars. There were armed men with machine guns at cafes everywhere, gunfire at night every night all over the city, semi-legal militias engaging in general banditry. And those were the good times, ahead lay a coming period of power outages, increasing hardening of the lines of poverty, mass emigration, poverty.

The transition, of course, was a crisis of values, as all that was solid in the socialist world melted into air. It was also a moment of translation, as new Western currencies, goods, that had had a special status as a rare prestige valuable under socialism now became a commonplace sight. Now socialist consumers were confronted by the tantalizing presence of novel consumer goods that were also absent, because financially out of reach of the everyday consumer. But the sudden explosion, the physical presence, of Western goods in large quantities alongside socialist goods produced a moment when the two forms of commodity, socialist and capitalist, could be contrasted and compared concretely in quantitative and qualitative terms, providing at least food for thought about the transition, if not food for actual consumption. New notions of value, qualitative and quantitative translations between items from the two orders, arose from attempts to grasp the indexical copresence of items from both series on the shelves of kiosks along the streets of the post-socialist cityscape.

The culture of the transition was also then a culture of translation, in which goods from the two cultures of circulation, were sometimes categorically opposed, and sometimes hesitantly equated. This local ambivalence about these two orders is something shared with the Western view of the socialist anti-modernity, where the Soviet economy is sometimes said to have, and at other times lack, translational equivalents of categories basic to western political economy: commodities, money, even trademarks and brand names. Essentially, on the one hand, the soviet economy is characterized by a categorical deficit, it lacks translational equivalents of all the categories of political economy, but, on the other hand, to make a concrete analysis in detail of its failings,

translation between political economies is necessary, it has to be found to have all these same categories, but extremely defective or even pathological versions of them.

The socialist commodity is one such example. According to certain western mythologies of socialism, the socialist commodity is an anti-commodity, seeming to lack either use-value or exchange-value; it is shoddy, yet durable; it is generic, anonymous, brandless; it is addressed to human needs, not human desires. In every way the socialist commodity seems a microcosm, an indexical icon, of the political economy that produced it. Here I want to attend to just one dimension of the concrete comparison of socialist and capitalist goods that was occasioned by the so-called transition, the phenomenon of brand. Brand is something socialist products were said not to have, or, if they did have it, it was somehow a rather different thing than capitalist brands, unrelated to basic premises of intangible wealth like goodwill within a market context, or consumer loyalty within a consumer society. It is true, the equivalent of brand, if it exists, is found only in a small sector of the socialist consumer economy, essentially luxury goods addressed to human desires, cigarettes, alcohol, chocolates, whereas goods that address simple human needs were presented in generic form without packaging or distinguishing marks. And socialist brands, where they existed, served primarily to identify the producer, but they did not, as capitalist brands, seek to identify or interpellate a kind of consumer who might feel an affinity or kinship for the brand.

On the one hand, then, Western goods could appear to be distinguished from socialist ones by this single property, brand. The transition, then, under this understanding, was a transition from brandlessness to brand, and one single property of a commodity, albeit a semiotically salient one, brand, could come to stand as a meta-symbol for the transition itself. And from among these western brands, some single, particularly salient brand could seem to encapsulate the entire transition from socialism to capitalism. Alternately, socialist products could be understood to be like capitalist commodities, and socialist 'brands' could stand in opposition to capitalist counterparts, as 'our brands' to 'theirs', soft drink brands like Laghidze's and Coca-cola providing figures or 'meta-symbols' that could be mobilized to oppose the cultures of circulation of which they are part. Here the semiotic oppositions that distinguish between branded commodities are redeployed to condense a whole space and time, a kind of 'brand totemism' in which the differentiation of human second nature, products and brands, is used to classify human space-times. Such brands stand not for the product or the imagined consumer, they stand for whole social totalities, times and spaces.

**The Epoch of Magna.** The arrival of Western brands in mass quantities in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, was an epochal event. At least, the arrival of one brand, MAGNA cigarettes, was. In 1992 all of Tbilisi smoked Magna, and Magna, in turn, became a symbol not of a product, but a symbol of the times, the place, the people, the whole post-socialist predicament of Georgia. In Aka Morchiladze's novel, 'the Dogs of Paliashvili

Street’, set in the gloom, poverty, violence and chaos of this period, only the search for an affordable pack of Magna cigarettes connect the musings of a character named Zaza, who finds Magna as good to think as they would be to smoke, if he could afford a pack. Magna cigarettes, a commodity, stand as a problematic signifier for Zaza in two discrete ways, for on the one hand, Magna seems to encapsulate metaphorically the arrival of a new epoch, ‘the epoch of Magna’, tying together and condensing a series of metaphoric relations between a time, a place, and a people. On the other hand, Magna dominates his thoughts because Magna is a real commodity, a real use-value that he desires. The two series, metaphoric and metonymic, type and token, are always connected. At the token level, there is the concrete problem of obtaining a single actual pack of Magna with the ‘dead money’, Georgian hyper-inflationary coupons, in his pocket. At the type level, there is the metaphoric symbolism of brand, Magna, exhibited in myriad unattainable packs along every street, by which Magna comes to stand as a meta-symbol for the times and the place. He 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”

For this character, Magna stands for a time, the end of communism heralded by the arrival of Magna in Tbilisi; it also stands for a place, Zaza musing that Magna is so ubiquitous in the city that the coat of arms of the city should be replaced with a pack of Magna; lastly, it stands for a people, the Georgians, who have woken up from the dream of communism and find themselves reaching for a brand of cigarettes which Zaza knows is associated with Puerto-Ricans in the United States. But he reasons, that is appropriate, because ‘But we Georgians too are Latinos and we are even more Latino than Latinos in our Latino-ness. Who would deny this?’

On the one hand, the proliferation of this brand of western cigarettes works as a ‘meta-symbol’ for the transition standing for the arrival of new times and the transformation of a city into a post-socialist space. On the other hand, the metonymic transition from socialist to post-socialist time and place marked by the advent of western brands like Magna is also a metaphoric translation, for the knowledge that this same brand circulates in the West and is consumed by puerto-ricans *there* brings Georgians into the framework of ethnic hierarchies of a world system. Because Georgians smoke Magna, they must be Latinos, because Magna is a brand for Latinos. Either way, a kind of brand totemism is at work in which the differentiation of human second nature, products and brands, is used to classify social differentiation of people, space and time. Magna, the most visible of all the brands that attended the transition, comes to stand for brand as such, the most obvious visible diacritic that divides the capitalist from the socialist commodity form, and from there, it comes to stand for all the ways that the post-socialist time and space of Tbilisi differs from the socialist one: the epoch of Magna.

But this is no narrative of the triumph of brand. Magna, which became the meta-symbol of capitalist brands in general in the early days of post-socialism, a handy symbol for the times, disappeared just as suddenly from the post-socialist landscape. By the late 90s, a rumor spread in Tbilisi by which Georgians became convinced that Magna, and Magna alone, caused cancer. Magna disappeared from the stores and from the imagination. Magna was possibly the first victim of a new attitude towards brand observable in the later 90s, a general suspicion directed at all products that underlying the shiny packaging might be concealed products that were somehow unwholesome, or even deadly, or merely that the packaging was a false exterior of a product other than the one advertised in the package.

**Brand totemism: Laghidze's and Coca-cola.** But what about socialist brands? Socialist products were not uniformly bad, in fact, some were quite good. Moreover, there were socialist brands, of a sort, what was their fate? I turn now to the example of the Georgian socialist soft-drink par excellence, Laghidze's waters. The first time I came to Tbilisi in 1992, like many visitors, I fell in love with the Laghidze's waters store in downtown Tbilisi on Rustaveli prospect. **[pics]** In addition to their 'waters', soft-drinks mixed in front of you to your specification from one of several natural fruit syrups and carbonated water, at Laghidze's you they also served the Georgian fast food, xachapuri, cheese-bread. Laghidze's had several entrances, each leading to a different eating area where they served a different regional variety of cheese bread. But all these different stores were united by the Georgian soft drink, Laghidze's. Laghidze's store front operation was something like the Mecca of Socialist Soft Drinks, presiding over a socialist softdrinkscape that stretched across all the Union republics. Their syrups, or rather, aromatics from which syrups could be made, were sent across the whole Soviet Union so that Laghidze's could be made anywhere. Laghidze's was a socialist brand, as salient in socialist space as Coca-Cola is as a capitalist brand.

There are some interesting historical ironies about these two soft drinks, Laghidze's and Coke. The Laghidze's waters process was patented in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1887. The very same year (1887) Coca-Cola was trademarked in the State of Georgia in the United States (patented 1897). Laghidze's was the socialist brand that had a name recognition and extension in space under socialism similar to the capitalist brand par excellence, Coca-Cola. The products are not merely similar on the metaphoric plane of iconism, they are related locally on the metonymic plane of indexicality. When Coca-Cola arrived in Tbilisi in the early nineties, it took over one of the plants and some of the staff that had been used by the socialist firm that had also bottled Laghidze's products. While the heir of the Laghidze softdrink lineage, Torniqe Laghidze, still runs the Laghidze plant in Tbilisi as a labor of love, his grandson, Vakhtang, works in Public Relations at the Coca-Cola plant down the street.

And yet, even as, in the world of production, the two brands were linked by kinship of various kinds, in the world of consumption, the arrival of Coca-Cola was taken as a sign of the new capitalist order, heralding, among other things, the end of the old order whose symbol was Laghidze's. A cartoon from the socialist humour magazine Niangi from the early 1990s summed up the transition to capitalism by showing an animate bottle of Laghidze's sitting on the pavement on a street corner, begging, and a passing animate bottle of Coca-Cola flipping it some small change.

Like the symbolism of Magna, this is an example of what I have been calling Brand Totemism, the mobilization of oppositions on the plane of objects, in this case between brands as figures to organize oppositions along some dimension of the social order. The cartoon of course is really not about Laghidze's and Coca-cola. Laghidze's and Coca-Cola are figures, conveniently opposed Socialist and western brands from the same domain of use-value, mobilized to oppose the products of the socialist period ('our' Laghidze's) over and against the products coming in from the Capitalist west ('their' Coca-Cola). Obviously, the cartoon-writer is not merely commenting on the fate of companies like Laghidze's, but also the fate of socialist production in general in the post-socialist, capitalist period, and the two brands are mobilized as brand totems of a whole series of changes. Those changes are that socialist companies and 'brands' that were once strong are now reduced to begging in the street, and that new companies like Coca-cola are those that are doing well now. Transferred to whole populations, Laghidze's stands for the general dire economic situation of people of the socialist generation as a whole, or even Georgia's transition from socialism (Laghidze's) to post-socialism (Coca-Cola) as a whole.

The opposition between Coca-Cola and this local soft drink also appears as a David-Goliath metaphor to Western commentators in Russia, here, a young American in Moscow writing for the English language ex-pat rag, the Moscow Times. The discourse here is a familiar one from anti-brand activism and the slow food movement, the local drink that can stand up to the homogenization of taste of Coca-Cola and McDonalds must therefore be qualitatively distinctive. Rather than call the drink by its proper name (Laghidze's), in a orientaling moment, the commentator chooses to name the brand after a specific flavor, the most decidedly unfamiliar to western tastes, tarragon flavoured (Russian tarkhun, Georgian tarkhuna). The opposition is not now an opposition between the homogenizing western flavor and brand, Coca-Cola, and the local brand symbolized by its opposition to Western canons of taste. While Laghidze's is primarily known for a long line of sweet drinks made from fruits and not herbs, it is the exoticism of a sweet drink flavoured with a savoury herb, Tarragon, that makes Laghidze's a suitable opponent to the homogenizing western taste of the global soft drink. Our commentator writes:

So what local underdog beverage can topple the Coke global hegemony? My vote is in for the super lightweight contender from Tbilisi, Georgia, the green-colored drink that goes by the name "Tarhoon." And this exotic elixir has a history every bit as interesting as Coca Colas. In 1889, three years after the discovery of Coca Cola, halfway around the world in Georgia the entrepreneur Lagidze was experimenting with different water-based drinks enhanced with herbs. One of these creations employs the herb estragon, together with a few other natural ingredients and a mix of carbonation to give it a fizz. The result is a very pleasant drink that does not carry the high caffeine levels of the heavyweight champion. But just try finding a bottle of Tarhoon in your local supermarket...! If you can make it past the wall of Coke you will be lucky to find a few dusty bottles, aging like wine on some bottle shelf. But this is neither an attack on Coca Cola, nor an endorsement for Tarhoon. Rather, the example of Coke and Tarhoon provides a microcosm for the way the global economy seems to be running these days. The huge transnational corporations have the massive budgets to dump their products across the "global village" with very little consideration for the fate of the small local producers. This subject goes far beyond soda pop. It touches every aspect of our lives and actually defines our society and culture to a large degree.

In 2004 I visited Laghidze's. The factory. The Laghidze's factory seemed to be the inversion of a typical capitalist concern, such as the Tbilisi Coca-Cola company nearby: the building was simply a factory, the entrance unmarked, no provision for visitors, the uniform here amongst the upper echelons of staff was not a suit but a white lab coat, technicians and not businessmen, and these technicians were nearly all women. I wandered through the hallways, trying to find the person with whom I had my appointment. The person was not there, but the technical director, Nana, would come and speak with me in a moment, in the meantime I was directed to wait in an adjacent office. Here an ancient man was seated at his desk, occupying himself drawing various geometric figures with great precision. His current theme was a cone. He looked up and smiled amiably as I came in and explained myself, leaned back, smiled again. He began to talk about the problems of the company, as he said, to pass the time. I pulled out my recording equipment and he smilingly waved them away: "I will tell you a story, but just, as I say, to pass the time. We are talking here just to divert ourselves, just to pass the time." And so we passed the time. I got the impression that similarly, much of the business of Laghidze's consisted of passing the time.

Eventually Nana arrived, a bustling, alert and authoritative woman, and we went to her office. Nana was a technical expert, there was no marketing department at Laghidze's. In the middle of the interview we went into an adjacent room, a laboratory, to acquire some syrup samples. In the room, older women dressed in labcoats wandered listlessly in a laboratory, alembics and other chemical apparatus of mad scientist vintage clashing with the lines of houseplants on the windowsill. Two of the lab-coated scientists were talking. Perhaps as part of a daily conversation about the failure of Laghidze's,

perhaps an involuntary apology to the rare visitor, one of them was saying, “We don’t understand business”.

In fact, everything at Laghidze’s illustrated the same set of themes, the oppositions between a socialist enterprise and a post-socialist, capitalist one, the Coca-Cola company. Socialist productivism faces off with capitalist consumerism. At Coca-cola, business expertise, at Laghidze’s, technical expertise. The two kinds of elites, capitalist business elites and socialist technical elites, were also a gendered opposition: at Coca-cola men in suits, at Laghidze’s, women in lab coats. The metaphoric opposition between coca-cola and Laghidze’s on the market, recurs in a different way within the sphere of production, as the opposition between socialist and capitalist enterprises.

All this insistent metaphoric polarization that would seem to posit Coca-Cola as the international capitalism nemesis of the ailing Laghidze’s concern. But Nana did not blame Coca-Cola, the most successful competitor, nor did she blame Coca-Cola as a ‘metabrand’ symbolic of capitalism, for neither was capitalism, personified in Coca-cola its most successful brand or not, responsible per se for the demise of Laghidze’s. No, the problem, she stressed, is a common problem for all brands, capitalist and socialist, which is the problem of falsification and ‘brandless’ products of unknown origin. And, indeed, all the other manufacturers I interviewed said much the same things. In essence, the problem is the state. Not the absence of state subsidies, but the absence of state controls, leading to problems like falsification of brands, and to generic brands of unknown origin and low price. She noted that under socialism, the penalties for falsification were severe ‘They would shoot you’. Now, of course, there are few if any controls by the state on the competition. The competition takes two forms. One is the outright falsification of brand names, easily accomplished in a country where empty bottles and labels, the sign vehicles of the semiotics of brand, are plentiful and easily detached from their original product and resold with another product. The other is the anonymous brands of soft drinks.

Nana might be suspected of exaggerating the problems and the dangers, after all, we capitalist westerners are taught that the highest form of distinction is the avoidance of brand fetishism. And this, perhaps, is because all the products we consume come with some form of guarantees, brandname or no-name brand, a kind of ‘generalized goodwill’ that, in essence, none of the products we consume is appreciably more dangerous than any of the others. In such an environment of generalized goodwill, the primary function of brand is no longer as a marker of goodwill, a way of associating a product with a known producer in such a way that the name of the producer acts as a promise or guarantee of a certain standard of quality. Rather, brands function more as diacritics within a world of possible consumer identities. To put it bluntly, we live in a world where the problem of goodwill is relatively less urgent, the additives and defects of our products kill us in the long term and not the short term, and after all, in the long term, we are all dead anyway.

By contrast, then, consider the post-socialist softdrink market. One might, as a westerner, not buy Coca-cola, thinking therefore to strike some subtle blow against capitalism by spurning its most successful brand. One might go further, assuming the radical stance of an anti-brand or a Slow Food activist, choosing a no-name tarragon soft drink instead, thus choosing the most local of all drinks (a tarragon flavored softdrink, what could be more characteristically non-western?), and spurning the local brand named products as well. What then, is one drinking?

At 15-20 tetri, about 7 cents, of which 10 is the price of the bottle, one must not expect that one is drinking either real tarragon extract or even real sugar. The only ingredients that can be sold at these prices are the brightly coloured powders at the soft-drink ingredients shop at the local bazaar, an alchemist's shop at the local bazaar where all the things, other than water, can be bought to begin a microfactory. Labels, bottles, powders imported from Russia for flavor, and aspartame. These then are the ingredients. Nana during her interview gestured at the unspeakable and uncontrolled methods of production of these micro-factories. Lest she be accused of exaggeration, I have witnessed the process. In one village, acquaintances showed me the micro-factory from which they supplied their corner store with soft drinks. The water came from the tap, mixed in the household bathtub, and bottled and labeled there.

To conclude, there was indeed an explosion of brandedness in the post-socialist economy. New products flowed in, brand-names that had served as icons of the West before were now encountered as usable, if not affordable, products. At the same time there was also an explosion of brandlessness, as the promisory quality associated with brands, the idea that a brand on a bottle indexes a specific producer and a specific style of product, was undermined on several fronts. The absence of state regulation under 'wild capitalism' allowed the proliferation of all manner of brandless wildlife. Lastly there were the misgivings, suspicion, and paranoia of a population whose socialist expectations had not been domesticated to adopt the category of brand, and who in general doubt the content of any message, especially messages on bottles.