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# Urban lifestyle as an element of consumption ideal and economic wellbeing: meaning-changing transformation from Soviet period to modernity

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## Abstract

A consumer society and consumption ideal had been developing in the USSR since the 1970s. The special features of this process were illustrated by the famous triad: "a car, an apartment and a country-house". However, this model of Soviet consumer ideal was obviously not universal. The villagers had no need to build a summer cottage or reserve a place in an accommodation waiting list. The Soviet rural consumer ideal, which include a wide range of material, social and cultural requirements, is underexplored in historical science. The objective of the research was to examine interdependence of urbanization processes and the formation of the Soviet consumer society. In addition, the author's task was to determine the main elements of Soviet rural consumer ideal. The study proved that the migration from rural to urban area was caused not only by objective differences between city and countryside infrastructure and provision of amenities. First and foremost, kolkhozniks' consumption ideal was concerned primarily with living and working in the city because of the subjective perceptions of the stigma attached to plough-tail and rural way of life, urban high wages, a jests about littleness of mind, primitive habits of peasants. The results of the study show that the attitude of Russian villagers to the urban lifestyle were significantly transformed in the 1990s: socio-cultural components of consumer ideal were replaced by purely economic needs, which could be realized only by living in a city.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumer society is a type of social relations based on individual consumption of material and social benefits, which becomes widespread value priority. Categories of material and social benefits vary with the consumption culture and economic development level of a country, welfare of society. During the 1960s – 1970s consumption ideal was developing in the USSR. That period was dominated by the well-known triad "a car, an apartment and

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a country-house" which illustrated essential components of the Soviet consumer ideal (Schepanskaya, 1993, p.70). However, this model of Soviet consumer ideal based on the everyday perceptions, belles-lettres and journalistic overviews (The Soviet formula of happiness, 2007; Psoi Korolenko, 2007), still have not been the subject of a scientific research. In particular, there have not been identified the differences between urban and rural consumer ideals. It is obvious that the villagers had no need to build a summer cottage or reserve a place in an accommodation waiting list. Both that and another were substitute by built, inherited or purchased house. Did this mean that the villagers were more prosperous or comfortably off? Whether their consumer ideal included another components or not?

Consumer society formation in the Soviet Union followed by increased migration from the countrysides to the cities. That process was characterized by the sequent wave of Soviet urbanization, which led to a shortage of workers in many rural areas of the USSR and to a rural blight in the north of European Russia. The objective of the research was to examine interdependence of urbanization processes and the formation of the Soviet consumer society. In addition, the author's task was to determine the main elements of Soviet and Post-Soviet rural consumer ideal and to retrace its transformation caused by economic changes in the 1990s – 2000s.

The phenomenon of the consumer society in the USSR has hardly been studied. Sources for this article are studies of Soviet geographers and sociologists, modern scientific and journalistic Russian publications on population consumerism issues. Searching for the Soviet consumption ideal was started relatively recently. The theoretical works of V.I. Ilyin (2008, 2005) and several other research studies are concerned with the Russian consumer society. A lot more articles are devoted to the process and consequences of urbanization (Economic and geographical aspects of urbanization, 1987), however reasons for rural workers' decision to resettle from village to city are not elucidated. Soviet sociologists wrote about rural depopulation as much as to conceal this facts under the veil of great positive results from the countryside urbanization (Korel, 1982).

## **2. Terms and theoretical framework**

The essential terms in this study are "urban lifestyle" and "consumption".

Lifestyle is the type of social relations specific to historical and living conditions, forms of individual and group human activities. Lifestyle is manifested in features of relationships, behaviour and thinking in different situations. Urban lifestyle is a set of individual and group forms of life activities, which are implemented in cities and are often contrasted with the rural way of life. This "better or worse" opposition is held by people in the towns and villages. It is based on the subjective assessments of urban and rural living quality, first of all for potential satisfaction of consumption needs. "Consumption" means the use of material and social benefits to meet the needs by generating revenue or dissaving.

In this article the relocation to the city is considered as an action related to the consumption sphere. Functions of cities are important and extremely varied (Lappo, 1987). At all times Russian cities were the centres of business activity and economic progress. Peasants of the Russian Empire went to the towns with the aim of buying or selling their products, conclusion of transaction or hearing the news (Mironov, 2012). Soviet cities preserved all above mentioned functions. By the 1970s, amplification of social and economic relations, consumer market development and severization of requirements for quality and variety of goods have led not only to extension of contacts between Soviet town and countryside, but also to the formation of the consumer society in rural areas. Since that time kolkhozniks went to the town to buy a radio set or TV set, to find a serviceman for repairing these devices, to be medically examined or to enrol at an institute.

Inclusion of the peasants in the urban daily life trends contributed to development of specific attitude to a city. Soviet cities were transformed from a business communication platform into unique product provided large number of opportunities for personal growth. Purchase of such "goods" was not easy in the USSR taking into account the absence of free market for urban houses. However deficiency of this "goods" intensified customer engagement. Wherever there is a desire to buy a product, there is consumption.

### 3. Results and discussion

In the XX century as a result of urbanization more than 70 percent of Russia's population have become residents of urban settlements. De facto urban lifestyle is far more widespread. The origins of Soviet urbanization are dated to the period of socialist industrial construction. Violent uprooting of peasants to great building socialist projects have changed them into city people. Provision of rural amenities led to the fact that Soviet villagers could live "like in the city", albeit at higher costs.

Economists and sociologists suggest that urbanization is not identical to the movement of population from the countryside to the city. Evidence of urbanization completion is the formation of an urban lifestyle. It is a fair assumption to say that the urban lifestyle was not characteristic of the "new" residents of Soviet towns in the 1930s - 1940s. Urbanization of that period was dependent on industrialization. Immigrants were being attached to the plant and not to the city; they were marginalized in the urban society (Pivovarov, 2001; Trubnikova, 2013). Urban lifestyle of migrants from the countryside began to develop actively in the next generation. In the 1960s and 1970s the attitude toward spare time and public activities was changed. The person has ceased to regard the city housing as "a cage" which deprived him of fulfilling life and householding.

Since all things connected with the "city" was no longer associated with a poverty at a high price kolkhozniks have begun voluntarily and massively to move in cities with a view to improve their financial situation and to facilitate working conditions. Intensive shaping ideas about the city, its capabilities and urban lifestyle contributed to the fact that villagers made an informed decision about moving to the city. Urban lifestyle has become one of the ways to self-determination for youth, the living standard for middle-aged people, deserved reward for elderly people equal to their merit.

Based on the assumption that the city is a consumer product, consider the basic customer appeal of this product which was attractive to villagers. To become a consumer of urban life, it was necessary to abandon his previous analogue that is rural way of life. Prospective migrant was not satisfied with the rural lifestyle for a number of objective and subjective reasons.

The objective reasons include:

- Absence of state retirement benefits for collective farmers until 1957;
- Deficiency of housing improvements;
- Absence of the highest stages of schooling and low quality of education;
- Shortness of professional education; the ability to choose only from occupations that were in demand in the locality; limited opportunities for professional development;
- Limited access to art education (one or two Schools of Art in the rural district which were available only to residents of the nearest villages);
- Low quality of health services (hospitals were only in the district centres, fast medical help was absent);
- Poor cultural and public awareness activities (at the best there was "culture home", amateur-talent group and library with old books in the village);
- The need for householding encroached upon free time;
- Poor transport accessibility.

Subjective reasons for resettlement in the city are:

- The static pace of rural life;
- The notion that agricultural labour is churlish (low purchasing prices for agricultural goods, restrictive regulations of householding, obligatory free of charge deliveries of agricultural production in profit of the state);
- The view that agricultural labour is not prestigious and high-skilled (engagement of townspeople in agricultural labor duties, for example "na kartoshku");

- Ideas that salaries of villagers and townspeople for the same work differs in favour of the latter (“*shabashniki*”, “*tsehoviki*”);
- Disparaging attitude towards the villagers when they were in the town (“*kolkhoznik*” or “*derevenschina*”).

Whether the Soviet scientists have paid attention to mentioned problems or not? Soviet sociologists, geographers and political economists have endorsed the ambiguous opinion: they stated that resettlement was significant process, put into comparison the living conditions between urban and rural areas (Lifestyle change, 1983). However Soviet researchers did not problematize this tendency, did not try to explain the reasons for specific waves of relocation and to give recommendations regarding its termination. The most neutral explanation of rural depopulation was the development of agricultural mechanization. The scientists argued that some rural areas had a manpower problem in consequence of which redundancy of workers went to towns though other rural areas need for working hands and qualified professionals (Kovalev, 1980). However the statement about dissatisfaction with the rural lifestyle as the main reason for migration have not been found nowhere on the pages of Soviet studies. In the majority of cases Soviet researchers have tried to demonstrate Karl Marx’s proposition that the differences between urban and rural areas will gradually fade away, and therefore should be no reasons to move (Marashkina, 1976; Murniek, 1982).

Soviet government implemented activities to reduce dissatisfaction with the rural way of life, however this measures were limited and insufficiently intensive. Due to the fact that infrastructure development of a few hundred thousand villages was seen as an expensive and long-term development project, government-sponsored scheme of countryside urbanization provided differentiation of villages with respect to “perspective” and “nonperspective”. “Perspective” villages have received funding for the infrastructure development and large-scale house building, have concentrated population from the surrounding “nonperspective” villages. Unpromising rural settlements which had logistically inconvenient location and deteriorated industrial base were usually absorbed by urban development or were flooded by reservoirs (Kovalev, 1980).

New settlers of perspective villages lived in conditions comparable with urban areas in some respects: comfortable housing, rising quality of education, medicine and cultural activity. However general occupation of the population continued to be agriculture, as well as new settlers remained rural mentality. This fact put them to a lot of trouble. Countryside life in an apartment building was unbearable for a natural born peasant: there were no land of their own, no possibility to have a part-time farm or to excavate a cellar for vegetables. Residents of *agrorod* considered buying food at the store for money as the height of stupidity and mindlessness. Ancestors of this urbanized peasants did not spend money on food. Concept of *agrorod* has failed. Peasants who took an opportunity to move, as a general rule have resettled not to proposed *agrorod* but to the nearest real city.

It is reasonable to suggest that Soviet sociological model of urban and rural lifestyles convergence (rurbanization) was erroneous. Villagers did not agree with the agitational statement that living and working conditions were equal in rural and city areas because of “socialistic equality of rights”, “socialistic type of ownership” and “workers and peasants union” (Murniek, 1982, p.2). Actual material and cultural needs of villagers were far enough from Soviet ideology. *Agrorod* didn’t provide such advantages as higher education or professional growth. Therefore villagers moved to settlements where cultural and technical achievements were readily available. Accelerator of this social process was overall issuance of passports to rural people without obligations in 1974. Restricting free movement and choice of residence were lifted.

What are the expectations of peasants from movement to city?

Objective expectations are:

- Wide range of occupations and workplaces, wide field for higher education, creative work and career;
- Access to the achievements of professional culture, a great opportunity to expand the horizons and social ties;
- Access to a wide range of industrial products and consumer goods.

Subjective expectations are:

- Realization of personal ambitions which were formed on the basis of the Soviet educational model of “active citizenship”;
- Absence of hand-labor or at the least low its intensity (attractive stories and prosper appearance of business travelers, students and vacationers);
- Affluence of high-quality food products in the city.

Radical economic reforms have led to a meaning-changing transformation of the urban lifestyle as a basis of a consumer standard. In 1990s transition toward a market economy and liberty of external trade caused critical depopulation and pauperization of Russian rural areas (Depopulation, 2012). However temporary increasing of interest in the countryside was quickly replaced traditional movement to the cities under conditions of rural unemployment (Nefedova, 2001). Therefore, the priority needs of the migrants in the city have changed from the sociocultural to the purely material necessities.

#### 4. Conclusion

Analysis of expectations that Soviet villagers put on an urban lifestyle revealed significance of social and cultural requirements. Due to false urbanization villagers did not perceive cities as a stranger social and physical space (“life is easier in city”). Urban lifestyle in the representations of potential rural consumers was divisible into the material (objective) and intangible (subjective) opportunities for life improvement. Spiritual needs were priorities in this set because ideas about urban food supply have been exaggerated, and gradual provision of rural amenities reduced material reasons for resettlement to city (Korel, 1982). Extrinsic stimulus to the relocation was Soviet government policy served to optimize the countryside. A side effect of that urbanization wave was rural blight, disappearance of villages or its transformation into summer communities. Now Russian urban saturation is sufficiently high. Cities are constrained by consumer activities that leads to the standing out from the crowd rather than to personal and overall productivity. Consequences are traffic jams, inefficient use of urban spaces and environmental problems. City have held variety of consumption opportunities, however city has almost ceased to be an object of consumption. Contemporary Russian city is not a desirable place to settle for each one. Is it possible the return movement from urban quarter to farmstead? Absolutely right, and it is probable without leaving the city, by way of suburbanization. The concept of a consumer society says that the object of consumption can be any social phenomenon, even the village according as it offer something that is not in the city, such as clear air and water. Development of ecotowns and cottage-villages in the suburbs lends an evidence.

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