

Nostalgic attachments and heritagization of barter in Andean fairs

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Andean barter fairs were implemented by the Spaniards to supply their new urban and mining settlements. Economic organization of pre-colonial South Andean societies is instead famous for its overall absence of market places (Murra 1999). Economic exchanges derived from the sharp ecological contrasts of this tropical mountainous environment. Each domestic unit had access to a variety of ecozones whose production circulated following parenthood relationships. The present barter system is recognized, by its protagonists and the public at large, as a vestige of these “ancestral” interecological reciprocities, as are the fairs during which most of these transactions are carried out. Nowadays, they are considered as “cultural” activities, emblematic of Andean indigenous identity regardless to their European roots.

In the Argentinean cordillera, governmental and non-governmental organizations alike advocate the safeguarding of these “ancestral encounters” regarded as being jeopardized by a growing participation in capitalist economy. To support the preservation of these fairs, state officials and development agencies invest money in boosting old events and instituting new ones, where they urge peasants to perpetuate this “vanishing traditional practice”. However, further examination teases out discrepancies between peasants and technicians’ perspectives on the very transactions that must be safeguarded.

The paper argues that peasants and technicians’ agreement on the necessity of safeguarding barter originates from a shared structural nostalgia for an ancestral reciprocal system of exchange that would have prevailed in an edenic order “in which the balanced perfection of social relations has not yet suffered the decay that affects everything human” (Herzfeld 2005: 147). Hence, this study of barter heritage process unfolds that, in this Andean region, nostalgia remains at the core of conservation ambitions, despite the postmodern turn in the definition of culture and authentic heritage on the global stage.