

**Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class.
By Jennifer Patico. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center
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What do the price of bananas or a rushing Mercedes tell us about post-Soviet citizens and social change? Asking such questions, Jennifer Patico takes us on a journey through the social, material, and moral landscape of St. Petersburg. Her major informants—the teachers from two schools—tell stories about their experiences and lives in the city during the financial crisis of 1998–99. The main questions in the book concern changing relations of persons to objects; transforming perceptions of self; conceptualizations of value, social difference, dignity, and respect; interconnections between the moral and the material; and relations between consumption and social change.

The book starts with the premise that consumption is central to post-Soviet middle-class identity. Consumption is also an important window into post-Soviet transformations. In the early 1980s teachers were considered part of the “mass intelligentsia,” along with doctors, engineers, and cultural workers (p. 62). Teachers shared a similar, relatively “dignified,” “middle-class” lifestyle even if their salaries were lower than the elites’ earnings (p. 63). Their middle-class identity was interconnected with the values of productive labor, education, professionalism, and culturedness. In post-Soviet St. Petersburg most teachers experience downward mobility and disintegration of their former middle-class identities. The values of productive labor, education, professionalism, and culturedness still inform teachers’ actions and deliberations. Consumption, however, increasingly becomes central to perceptions of self and the other. Minimization of consumption and suppression of desires signal teachers’ social insignificance. Patico notes that teachers perceive their relative material impoverishment as an assault on their very personhood, in an intimate and embodied way (p. 168). They expect material standards of living and social or moral attributes such as culturedness and professionalism to be fundamentally interconnected, and even reflections of one another (p. 76). This way they transform themselves into the new post-Soviet middle-class and articulate new social and moral values of those in the “middle.”

Teachers’ everyday experiences are a lens to post-Soviet historical and geopolitical transformations. People use racially inflected terms of “development” and “civilization” both to decry and to laugh about some of the things they find most stressful and humiliating about post-Soviet life (p. 137). Like in Soviet times they invoke “Western” standards as superior and complain about the “uncivilized” Russian state of things. As Patico shows, although “West” and “Europe” in general are interconnected with positive values and the notion of civilization, food

purchases show a different relation to Western or European goods. Most food from Europe is considered to be of lower quality and not as safe as domestic products. Like the cargo cults, as Patico claims, post-Soviet consumer practices are the product of a shifting awareness of the world outside Russia and the changing structures of power and privilege (p.137). To get sick from the “foreign products” is to experience the global order of things. Russians, thus, feel like “white people” subjected to “African conditions” by outside as well as local powers.

The author notes that during her subsequent visit in 2003, life looked a bit more normal for the teachers, which was connected not only with consumer improvements, but also with a process of normalization that has dulled their earlier lives of social critique and made those critiques less convincing (p. 216). The author reminds us that although Russia is increasingly integrated into the global market with supermarkets and foreign shops, this should not be taken as a sign of Russia’s Westernization.

Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class resonates with other studies on Russia and Eastern Europe. Here, however, we do not meet suffering individuals lamenting about their hard life, but rather a thrifty middle class in the making. Although teachers express negativity towards the post-Soviet social life as well as their changing social status and increasing inequalities, they eagerly embrace new opportunities and strive to change their lives.

Patico’s study is an important contribution to our understanding of post-Soviet subjectivity and personhood, consumption, and social change. The author’s exploration of how social change occurs at the level of people’s emotions, through the feelings of dignity, social worth, and respect, and through the mundane practices of shopping and socializing, are relevant for understanding social history beyond post-Soviet contexts. Moreover, through the exploration of minute details of teachers’ everyday lives, the book tells a broader story about global neoliberal transformations.