

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF POSTSOCIALIST CONSUMPTION

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In the years since the collapse of socialism, the topic of consumption has become a significant object of ethnographic study. There are many possible explanations for this: the ways in which consumption quickly became part of the triumphalist discourses in 1989; the politicized nature of consumption both during and after socialism; its highlighting of differences and disparities between the socialist East and the capitalist West; and its role as a rite of passage into the new society. In other words, consumption can serve as a prism that illuminates a variety of critical social, political, and economic processes.

The essays in this issue of AEER build upon this recent scholarship and contribute new insights into the topic of post-socialist consumption. Rather than addressing each essay individually, I have attempted here to tease out some common threads and themes. Together, I believe the authors have pointed to some relatively new and exciting possibilities for further study.

Bodies

Like many studies of consumption, several of these essays focus on the topic of gender. The authors in this volume, however, pay particular attention to the question of women's bodies: body types, fitness, fashion, make-up, etc. Mîndruț's study of changing images of women's bodies in post-socialist Romania brings this issue into particularly bold relief. Arguing that the backwardness of the socialist system—which had its own ways of disciplining women's bodies as workers, mothers and reproducers of Romanian citizens—was projected onto the bodies of middle-aged and older women, Mîndruț shows how new disciplinary technologies of capitalism impact women's ideals of femininity and body-types. In contrast to socialism's attempt to erase "natural" differences between men and women, the new images of women's bodies tend to affirm and naturalize these distinctions. She argues that aerobics has become a process of feminization and bodily discipline, different from the socialist emphasis on female bodies as perfected through sports. The new feminine body ideal, visible in glossy magazines or billboard and television advertisements is perceived to be a requirement for acceptance and belonging in the new society. Many women, she argues, have discovered and deployed their appearance as social capital.

Ranova's essay similarly calls attention to personal appearance and new ideals of femininity in her discussion of fashion and style among urban elites in Bulgaria. Focussing on women's consumption practices, including clothing, media, and make-up, she shows how new categories and definitions of womanhood are inscribed upon the bodies of post-socialist Bulgarian women. There are many more options for the expression of particular identities and identifications: the *maitrizi*, who represent the new ideal of femininity through their style and fashion sense but are most often perceived as deriving their wealth from men; the professional woman, like those associated with a group Ranova studies called United Colors; and women who value family and motherhood above all else and welcome the opportunity to devote themselves to this work rather than having to work outside the home, as during socialism. This upgrading of motherhood and domesticity, Ranova argues, has also naturalized gender differences, similar to what Mîndruț describes in her essay.

In Ventsel's essay on the spread of popular music and mass culture in the Republic of Sakha, he also points to an emerging consciousness of the relationship between consumption and prestige. The local elite, he argues, feels pressured to dress fashionably. Like Ranova, he identifies the role of different forms of capital underlying social distinctions, suggesting in particular the ways in which fashion can function as cultural capital that can then be converted into social capital. We also see in Ventsel's contribution the familiar theme of the effects of western media – in the form of music styles, music videos, and glossy magazines – on local populations. It is apparent here that "westernizing" and globalizing processes become localized in culturally specific ways.

Social Inequalities

Another major theme emerging from these essays is the reflection and constitution of new social inequalities through practices of consumption. One could argue that this observation is nothing new, of course, given the long tradition of viewing consumption in relation to status or class. However, in the post-socialist context the large (one could even say huge) disparities in wealth that emerged between Central and Eastern European citizens after socialism's

collapse has been glaringly obvious to people on both sides of the unequal divide. Whether termed the “New Russians” (Humphrey 2002) or *mutri* Ranova (this volume), this new class of urban elites is most frequently defined by—and defines itself through—its consumption practices. In addition, this new class is often associated with corruption and, occasionally, crime. As Humphrey has put it, the New Russians “can be imagined as a cultural entity with a shiny face and shadowy underside” (Humphrey 2002: 174). In stark contrast to this wealth are the majority of the postsocialist populations, ranging from a small middle class who struggles for its survival to the desperately poor, who have lost their guarantees of employment, housing and health care provided by the state—as well as, occasionally, their dignity. In the former Soviet Union and several of its former republics, forty percent of the population lives beneath the poverty line.

Ranova portrays a society of urban elites, for example, that define themselves through taste and consumption. What seems noteworthy here is that unlike Bourdieu’s complex cartographies of social class based on the *habitus* and the accumulation of different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1984), the distinctions reflected by taste here appear to be fairly superficial—relying primarily on a dynamic of imitation and resistance through different fashion styles.

Botoeva describes how the looting and destruction of supermarkets during a political protest in 2005 in Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, was transformed into an attack on the city’s opulent malls and department stores. According to Botoeva, the looting and destruction of these “supermarkets” expressed a heightened consciousness and anger about the social inequalities represented by these new consumer spaces. Funded by foreign capital or by former Communist Party leaders who were able to convert their social capital into economic capital, the protests were also about opposing the beneficiaries of the new system. These malls, full of elite boutiques with brand-name clothing and other expensive goods, were inaccessible to the majority of Bishkek residents because they could not afford to shop there.

Ideologies of the Market, Neo-Liberalism and the State

While addressing the reasons for citizens’ resentment of the Bishkek supermarkets, Botoeva considers the issue from another angle as well, arguing that supermarkets also represent Kyrgyzstan’s development along a new path

toward “civilization,” modernity and a market economy. Even residents who cannot afford to shop at these elite and expensive stores are proud of their presence because of what they symbolize. Underlying the simultaneous and seemingly contradictory feelings of pride and resentment, it seems to me, is an ongoing struggle between citizens and the state that has involved the politicization of consumption in both the socialist past and the capitalist presence. Unlike the politicization of consumption under socialism, however, where consuming western products could also be viewed as resistance to state prohibitions, Botoeva argues that the politicization of consumption today is related to the political legitimacy of the new post-Soviet state, which rests in large part upon its ability to provide access to consumer goods.

This is a critical point, especially when one considers the triumphalist discourses of western capitalist societies following socialism’s collapse. The failure of socialism to “deliver the goods” (quite literally) was perceived to be the main cause of its downfall. As Ferhervary points out in this volume, the quaint and outdated products made during socialism came to symbolize the backwardness of the socialist system in Hungary as well as throughout much of the former Soviet satellites. This was particularly true in Germany, where the relationship between national legitimacy and mass consumption was especially pronounced (Berdahl 2005).

Like the naturalization of gender differences discussed by Mîndruț, ideologies of neo-liberal capitalism appear to be increasingly naturalized through contemporary post-socialist consumption practices. Mîndruț, for example, describes the ways in which a slim and fit body has come to represent new values of self-discipline and individual responsibility—many of the core values underlying the ideals of capitalism. According to Mîndruț’s argument, then, these ideals become, quite literally, embodied.

Ranova’s essay also highlights values of the new system in her discussion of the group, United Colors. Underlying these women’s resistant consumption practices and harsh criticisms of the *maitrizei* for their wealth, styles, and dependence on men is the liberal notion of the relationship between hard work and success as well as a sense of individual responsibility that counters the ideals of socialism.

Ferhervary’s analysis of a blockbuster musical comedy released in 1996 reflects Hungarians’ ongoing identification of consumer

goods with either western market economies or socialist systems. The popularity of the film, set in the 1960's, can only be understood in the postsocialist present, she argues, because it both reflects the current younger generation's preoccupation with western consumer goods and challenges western perceptions of socialist society's backward products and empty store shelves. A coming of age story, the film also echoes discourses of the early 1990's about the transition as a passage to adulthood. The film achieves these multiple meanings by depicting this period as one of relative prosperity and portraying socialist citizens as savvy and fashionable consumers. According to Ferhervary, the film capitalizes on post-socialist nostalgia in Hungary, which, like other forms of nostalgia, recalls a past that never existed. In this sense, the film reminds viewers of an imagined "golden West" and the disillusionment following the transition. Furthermore, Ferhervary argues, the film's focus on consumption and consumer goods offers a parallel history of material culture, thereby both contesting and affirming a neo-liberal consumer-based market economy.

This is a very significant point, it seems to me, because it highlights the complex and contradictory processes, experiences, and effects of

these transitions. To what extent do post-socialist consumption practices both challenge and reinforce a new order? What kinds of continuities with socialism can we observe here? Indeed, as Humphrey has asked, does the category of post-socialism remain useful or presentative (Humphrey 2002)? Seventeen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, these essays suggest that it is.

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