

(Consumer) Paradise Lost: Capitalist Dynamics And Disenchantment In Rural Bulgaria

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Consumption is emerging as a major research focus in the anthropology of eastern Europe. This is understandable given the discipline's productive use of consumption elsewhere in the world to grasp the slippery relationship between capitalism and culture. As the newest shoppers in the global marketplace, east Europeans are perfect specimens to study the nature of capitalist consumption practices, which conversely, provide a likely place to look for changes in the everyday lives of people previously deprived of consumer choice. Unfortunately, levels of consumption have not kept pace with analytical interest. The Bulgarian villagers I know best have stopped purchasing consumer goods and services altogether; instead they struggle for subsistence and actively seek to minimize market participation. I began this short analysis as a polemical critique of the theoretical fascination with market consumption under such circumstance, but came to realize consumption may be as significant in the breach as it is in practice. For many Bulgarian villagers, the world of goods continues to be significant precisely because it has not materialized. It serves as an important lens through which understandings of the current situation are discerned and (negatively) evaluated. Thus, my more constructive objective is to encourage the burgeoning research on east European consumption to reverse the common analytical formula that assumes socialist limitation and capitalist opportunity, and instead situate contemporary consumption practices vis-à-vis their socialist predecessors and capitalist restrictions.¹

Despite national economic difficulties, for residents in Bulgaria's economically advantaged villages the last years of socialism constituted an economic boom time with contract farming and diverse income options offering significant cash returns. Moreover, the ready availability of inexpensive (because subsidized) consumer necessities, such as bread, sunflower

oil and sugar, allowed villagers to spend money on more discretionary items/activities. In south central Bulgaria the wealth of market gardeners with small greenhouse operations was proverbial. The village of *Hristo Milevo*, for example, was referred to jokingly as *Hristo Millionari*. Its privilege was evident in the condition and quality of house and yard constructions as well as municipal buildings and village infrastructure. The wealth of the northeastern "bread basket", *Dobrudzha*, was also notorious. Economic possibilities were not always actualized because many families lacked the labor power and social relations needed to take advantage of these options, but also because the actual utility of cash in an economy of shortage with few consumer options was limited. Still, ritual festivities and house construction provided important avenues of expenditure.

In the northwest village where I have spent more time residents were less advantaged than those in the south central region. Modern house construction and renovation were less universal, but still provided a clear indication of a family's economic success, unless there were only daughters in the house, in which case most excess was channeled instead to wedding celebrations. Neither ritual nor house construction, however, were completely commoditized, so extravagance in either did not necessarily reflect a consumer identity. Both processes depended heavily on individual labor and connections, as such they attested to one's personal abilities and his/her wealth in social relations, which was more important than money in the limited consumer arena. Money was no object. Not that villagers were rich, but it was literally no object in the sense that it had not become completely objectified or divorced from the social relations that gave money its ultimate value by providing the opportunities to actually make an important purchase. Money might not grow on trees, but it could usually be acquired for particularly desirable goods, either through

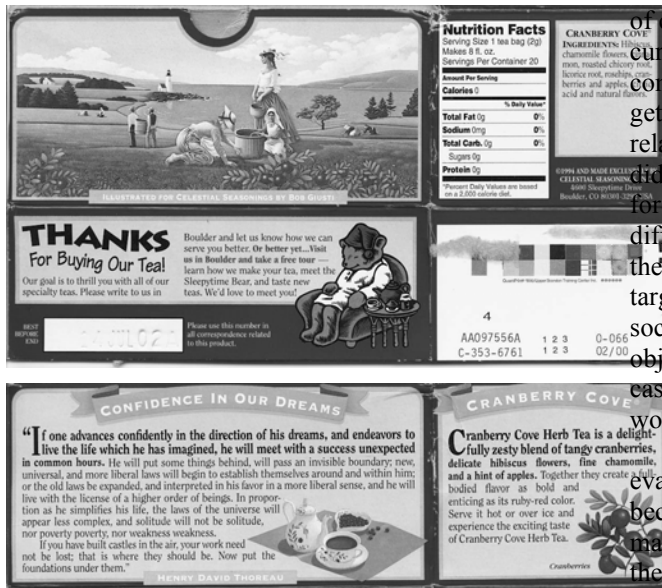
saving and work, or through mobilizing social relations. Villagers did express themselves through consumption, but the goods themselves had not come to fully define the consumer because the representation was mediated by social relations and connections or some other experience, such as work abroad that made it possible to get to the point of purchase.

Working abroad, of course, was a major way to collect “hard”/western currency with which one could seemingly buy anything in the hard currency stores throughout the country, that is for those who had the requisite documentation of having acquired their currency legally. Everyone else could and did visit these stores to see what the capitalist world had to offer. Several villagers I knew in the late 1980s had, in fact, worked abroad, primarily in the Middle East, and as a result they and their extended families had highly valued products, especially VCRs. Others had acquired desirable radio/tape players (boom boxes), or small garden tillers through children who had migrated to town and established relations with suppliers or people who had the right to hard currency and could “launder” money exchanged illegally in Bulgaria. Romania was also an important destination for villagers on trader-tourism junkets where they sold Kent cigarettes and bought goods not available in Bulgaria. Needless to say, the attraction of such trips had reduced dramatically with the economic crisis in Romania in the late 1980s, but villagers had many household items, mostly china and tea/coffee services as well as tools, they reported getting in Romania during in previous years. Thus, while far from universal, with extensive kinship connections across the village, many villagers were able to participate (if somewhat vicariously) in a limited capitalist consumer world that geographer Cindy Katz (2001) has characterized in Africa as “rural cosmopolitanism.”

When they acquired unusual or notable items such as whiskey or western clothing, their evocation included the social relations that made it possible, or the special activity (such as working abroad or individual skill) that produced it. In short, the commodity was not completely fetishized. Production and social relations were part of the perception and meaning of consumer goods. This is why packaging and containers were as important as the contents of valued goods. In a nice illustration of what Michel de Certeau (1984) calls “uses,” the packages of fancy candy boxes and whiskey bottles were

recycled to hold homemade items. This was not done in an effort to deceive, although hosts nearly always joked about homemade brandy being vodka or whiskey when it was offered in such bottles, often qualified as “our” or “Bulgarian.” Certainly, this use was a way of appropriating the foreign (usually western) goods and turning them into their own. It denied the isolation/separation of socialist economy from the world but in a way that maintained distinction. More importantly, the packages were kept, reused and displayed because the past acquisition of valued goods referenced social relations and valuable connections or resources that transcended the time or period of consumption.

The fascination with boxes and bottles also reflected an appreciation of the significant differences in capitalist and socialist economies. This was brought home to me in a very mundane event. My landlord had been advised by neighbors to treat his kidney ailments by drinking bergamot- and cranberry-flavored teas, which of course were unavailable anywhere near the village, so upon my return to the village from a trip to the US in 1987 I brought boxes of both. The Twinings Earl Grey tea evoked little comment, but the Celestial Seasonings Cranberry Cove caused a sensation. It was displayed in the house and even taken around to other houses to show. The recurrent discussion, however, was not about the product or my landlord’s good luck in getting it. Living in the foothills of the Balkan Mountains these villagers were specialists in herbs, collecting them for both their own use and for sale to the state, so herbal tea was standard fare (cranberries were unusual, but several of the other ingredients, such as rose hips, were widely available both in the hills around the village and in stores). The fascination focused on the packaging, which awed everyone. They handled it, admired it and extolled its virtues. I was pressed into translating the print, which included quotations by Marcus Aurelius, Louisa May Alcott and Henry David Thoreau, as well as more usual product descriptions. Even my butchering of Thoreau did not seem to diminish their fascination.



The fact that something so similar to their local production was so elaborately packaged provoked nothing short of an epiphany. The prescient conclusion—which I wish I had paid more attention to at the time—was that their economy was doomed, that they could never compete with this sort of packaging. “We can produce good quality produce, but the packaging is no comparison, and you cannot compete with western goods without it. We can never do that.” This celestial encounter with the gods of marketing shows that socialist villagers had a rather sophisticated understanding of capitalist dynamics, but that they too were vulnerable to the very marketing tactics they criticized. They talked about the added expense and cost of such packaging and the fact that there was no necessary link between packaging and content quality, but they still concluded that it was beautiful and attractive and that anyone would understandably rather buy Celestial Seasonings than their own boring Bulgarian version, even if the former was more expensive and no better. They analyzed the appeal and strategy of the packaging, but were convinced alternative logics would never succeed because of how they themselves reacted to this package. Their own reaction to this box became their evidence of why they had to move toward the capitalist world. The packaging of Cranberry Cove herbal tea also bespoke an economy of excess in which unnecessary extravagance characterized even the wrappings of the most mundane items.

These experiences provided many Bulgarians the raw material for a utopian image

of capitalist transition in which a convertible currency and available goods would be combined with socialist resourcefulness in getting money and the manipulation of social relations to radically improve their lives. They did not expect to get everything they dreamed of, for they had a visceral appreciation of class differences in capitalism, but they did expect they would be able to acquire the priorities they targeted for purchase, much as they had under socialism, only now with many more desirable objects available. From the vantage point of cash availability and limited choice the capitalist world of goods seemed like a paradise.

Unfortunately, the ability to get money evaporated just as quickly as the goods appeared because production activity ceased. To make matters worse, many villagers had identified themselves closely with their productive activity. Given the limited nature of consumption under socialism most villagers did not define themselves by what they consumed as much as by what they produced, or more specifically their official occupation. A new, more intimate relationship to goods was the promise of transition. By the late 1990s, however, they were doing little production or consumption beyond basic subsistence. Their socialist identity as producers was taken away and their anticipated capitalist identity as consumers was unavailable. From this background position, subsistence production was not interpreted as evidence of their adaptability, or as a way to facilitate consumption, but rather as the failed promise of consumption. It was the expectations of capitalist consumption in relation to the socialist context of their imagining that made the transition so devastating and shocking. This in turn fueled second thoughts and solidified socialist political allegiance in much of the countryside. The inability to consume or acquire goods has greater potential significance than just austerity.

The inability to buy goods is especially consequential in light of the newly explicit political role of consumption whereby shopping has become a measure of national allegiance and engagement with modern [read, “western”] civilization. This has been increasingly evident analytically for some time, but it was made explicit and popular by the economic aftershocks of Sept. 11th in which shopping and consuming became a national, patriotic obligation for Americans, and by extension, “westerners” and all would-be citizens of the world (after all, “you’re either with us or against us”). In New

York City banners on Sixth Avenue entreated traumatized New Yorkers to “Fight back, Go shopping.” In a show of support, foreigners made shopping trips to the city. Global citizenship was recast as an anti-terrorist stance, and for the average man and woman represented by shopping. Thus, the cosmopolitanism to which many Bulgarian villagers aspired, and had achieved previously in a circumscribed way, was now almost entirely beyond their reach even as it became more explicitly necessary. In such a world, the inability to consume renders one irrelevant and redundant. In some ways the impact mirrors the consequence of being unconnected from the new information network as described by Castells (1996)--if you're not buying, you're nobody.

The link between consumption and national allegiance reversed the prior rhetoric of socialist sacrifice, but at the same time a currency board following IMF/World Bank structural adjustment policies insisted on continued austerity. Villagers were caught between a definition of modern *global* citizenship increasingly focused on consumption and a prohibition on these very activities by *global* financial institutions. The contradictions fueled conspiracy theories about the West's interest in the country. In addition, the emergence of “consumers as patriots” displaced one of the small consolations rural Bulgarians had retained under socialism—their identification as the nucleus of the “nation” in the form of the peasant or “folk.” In the new cosmopolitan nation the peasant is no longer the cynosure. So just as some peasant economic qualities were revived in the countryside, and rural cosmopolitanism eroded, the peasant image was supplanted by the avid consumer as the exemplar of national and global citizenship. In short, as they became more like peasants, the national value of the peasantry was displaced.

Even those who have profited in the years since 1989 are not necessarily embracing conspicuous consumption with the zeal they did under socialism because in the current situation any substantial economic success is attributed to criminal activity. Under socialist planning, where consumers were purposely neglected by socialist logic and power, consumption could also suggest illicit activities, but at the same time it testified to villagers' ability to circumvent the state and challenge the rational planning mechanism. Consumption took on a quality of resistance (Scott 1985:296). The crimes of post-1989—from gasoline running to embargoed

Serbia, to drug dealing, to extortion of other Bulgarians—have a more thoroughly negative connotation with no redeeming message. So the potential respect and status benefits of conspicuous consumption are negated by the negative suspicions accompanying any economic success.² One village family, which got rich selling gasoline to Serbia during the embargo, used its resources to open a small store. Given the limited shopping taking place in the village this was not a very secure investment, but it was preferable to more explicit statements of wealth such as fixing their rundown house.

Consumer goods are suspect not only because the source of the cash is questionable, but also because the source of the goods themselves hardly bespeaks a modern Bulgarian or cosmopolitan identity. While socialist hard currency stores provided limited access to west European and Japanese goods, the plethora of goods now offered in markets and bazaars throughout the country are primarily Turkish and Chinese, many brought to the market through the lucrative “trader tourism” network operated predominantly by Roma (Konstantinov 1996; Konstantinov, Kressel and Thuen 1998). Most villagers assume these items are of inferior quality, or to use their more descriptive term, “garbage.” Bourdieu's (1984) “choice of the necessary” does not seem to be operative here. Inferior quality is a result of the fact that there is limited purchasing power, forcing small-scale traders to specialize in cheap products they can actually sell. Higher quality merchandise is theoretically available, but generally cost prohibitive. So, if you are what you consume in the capitalist world, the current profile of goods available to Bulgarian villagers is an indictment: cheap products from marginal countries peddled by social inferiors. Downward mobility would seem to be an understatement! The alternative is self-provisioning and barter (Cellarius 2000), which many practice, but it has its own unhappy connotation—the return to peasant status (Creed 1995).

Of course, poor quality was a complaint repeatedly registered against *Bulgarian* goods prior to 1989 (evident in the phrase, “Bulgarian work”), but hard currency or connections could generate quality merchandise; even those rare potentialities seem more obtainable in retrospect than the cash currently required for quality purchases. Thus, Bulgarians of all stripes commonly characterize the “transition” as the change from having money and no goods, to having goods and no money. When asked which

they prefer, they always hesitate, indicating the difficulty of the (non)choice, and then answer begrudgingly to convey their disappointment that the promised changes have come to such an apparent finale.

Disappointment with the quality of the new market could potentially apply to the urban context as well as villages, and I met similar, although more subtle and ambivalent, attitudes in towns and cities. Colleagues and friends in Sofia, for example, bragged about the variety of goods and stores available in 2002, but were then amazed I spent so much time shopping and curious about what I (an American?) could find so appealing. Unconvinced that such an activity could be research, they interpreted my limited purchases as a negative evaluation of the market. A compelling parallel is found in Julian Watts' (2002) analysis of media commentaries from the northern Russian city of Arkhangelsk. There the dominant image of the market seems to be a collection of "petty traders, intermittently bullied by minor Mafiosi...selling cheap foreign clothes, cigarettes and chewing gum" (Watts 2002:64). As in Bulgaria, he suggests this interpretation can only be understood in relation to the hopes and idealistic images of a market inherited from pre-socialist times and nurtured by its absence during the Soviet period. In a sense Deema Kaneff (2002) makes a similar point in insisting that the Bulgarian notion of "market" is tied to domestic production and locality, and thus not synonymous with the market economy.³ As in Arkhangelsk, the expectation that elements of such a "market" should logically inform a "market economy" is a likely source of current discontent. Clearly, east European consumers evaluate market proliferation and expanding consumer choice in the context of expectations developed under socialism—but these expectations are extremely complex, they incorporate elements of socialist practice into a framework defined by socialism's antithesis, shaped by both images of western capitalism and ideas of local pre-socialist practice.

Many rural Bulgarians see their only hope in the commodification of their abject position via the tourist market for folklore and rurality. Given their negative evaluation of the market and its products their willingness to place their own culture and identity in the mix could be self-deprecating, but the tourist market is distinguished by the fact that it caters primarily to (western) foreigners and is not totally constrained and defined by the problems in Bulgaria. Thus, in the late 1990s, villages I

visited throughout the country saw tourism as the only possible route to escape the dilemmas described above. If you can't consume, then you must be consumed. Nearly every village mayor had elaborate ideas about the tourist potential of their village and implored me to spread the word to get other westerners interested. The limited tourism I actually witnessed in such places certainly did not transfer many resources to the village(r)s tourists visited, although it did revive a sense of rural cosmopolitanism. The desperation with which villagers nonetheless embraced this possibility speaks volumes about their exclusion from the global consumer economy and modern world. I believe this relationship to goods has contributed to socialist nostalgia and support for the Socialist Party among rural Bulgarians over the last decade, and perhaps their recent willingness to completely reverse earlier attitudes and embrace the former king.

Notes

1. Hopefully we are far enough removed from cold-war logic (temporally and mentally) to make such an analytical strategy politically palatable.
2. Pine's (2002) study of Poland suggests that the source of cash is always a potentially important element in how the purchase of consumer goods is evaluated.
3. I agree with her interpretation, but during fieldwork in 2002 I noticed an increasing use of the term "market" as shorthand for "market economy."

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