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Cristofer Scarboro, Diana Mincytė, Zsuzsa Gille, eds. *The Socialist Good Life: Desire, Development, and Standards of Living in Eastern Europe.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 256 pp. $80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-04776-2.

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Consumption in Eastern Europe

What consumption looked like in the socialist states of Eastern Europe is a question that has been getting increasingly nuanced attention in recent scholarship. Originally concentrated on Yugoslavia and its seemingly more developed consumer culture, the field has moved well beyond this to take in every other Eastern European state. This edited volume adds to this not just a few excellent case studies but also a more theoretical engagement with the questions of backwardness and pleasure, or as the caption on the back cover asks: "What does the good life mean in a 'backward' state?" Socialism supposedly neither overcame backwardness nor delivered the happiness promised by proponents of modern life.

The Socialist Good Life: Desire, Development, and Standards of Living in Eastern Europe, edited by Cristofer Scarboro, Diana Mincytė, and Zsuzsa Gille, argues that contrary to this view, the states under consideration participated in Europe's miracle years just as fully as the West, and goes beyond that to delve deeper into the very meaning of what pleasure means and how it is measured. Western measures of consumption excluded collective goods—subsidized rent, health care, education, and cultural and tourist activities—that socialist citizens had access to. Despite the varying quality of these goods, the volume's authors argue, socialism created a very real middle class with its own demands, needs, and desires, both at the top—by the parties pushing their own forms of socialist consumerism—and at the bottom. The introduction stresses that socialism must not be seen in either geographic or chronological isolation. The socialist states participated in the global economy, although the transfer of commodities must be viewed within the local contexts in which it was embedded. Likewise, the regimes' failures often hide—and are blamed for—other, preexisting differences in the region: in essence, is the East backward due to socialism, or because it had always been when it measured itself against the West?

More so, the volume explores how these constructed desires helped to produce specific political subjectivities. This included the use of Western goods as part of private and countercultural rebellions, and Václav Havel's critique of both socialism and capitalism as creating "plastic people." This volume thus asks us to consider socialism's debates about the differences between objective and

subjective needs—issues taken up by both the parties and the citizens of Eastern Europe—as historically specific but also embedded in the wider world of global consumption.

The Socialist Good Life includes three conceptualizing and contextualizing chapters, three in-depth case studies, and two concluding chapters that further draw out the theoretical implications of this approach. Mary Neuburger's chapter is a long-durée exploration of Bulgarian consumption and consumers, who have always participated in what she calls "global consuming dialogues" (p. 26). Bulgarians emerge as active participants, often critiquing what groups, ranging from the mystical followers of Leo Tolstoy and Petar Dunov to national revolutionaries like Hristo Botev, saw as the excesses of Western consumption and its Eastern admirers. Consuming the "right way" is key to the whole affair, even under socialism, which Neuburger shows actually provided a decent modicum of plenty (p. 41). Ultimately, no one went to the barricades of 1989 in the name of Western-style consumption; and she provocatively points out that it was in fact the Marxists who were the first ideologues to come to Eastern Europe with a program of state-driven consumption.

Patrick Patterson's essay takes up a similar theme in terms of the relationship between socialism and consumption: did Yugoslav citizens accept a Faustian bargain of improved living conditions in exchange of an acquiescence that prevented them from seeking political freedom? Or maybe, as the essay is titled, these were "just rewards" for hard work (p. 65). He highlights that it is not a cliché to consider the negotiated quality of social interactions and thus restores the "people" to the "people's republics" (p. 74). There is a repeated, ongoing, ratification of an elusive but meaningful social contract and consent to being governed, even if there is no identification with that government. Patterson rejects the harsh view of Yugoslavs being simply "bought off," and instead looks at the relationship between citizen and state as best explored through contractual and transactional terms.

Capping off this section is Brian Porter-Szűcs's contribution on the role of consumption and desire in Polish economic planning. In a provocative but well-backed-up thesis, he shows us how professional economists became supply-side proponents, converging with their Western colleagues. Debates about how to create the "rational" consumer ultimately failed to resolve the struggle of raising living standards but succeeded in preparing the grounds for the ascent of neoliberalism. This final essay is thus a great contribution to the debates about Eastern Europe as an "economic laboratory" developed by such scholars as Johanna Bockman (p. 83).

The following three essays develop these and other themes through focused case studies of particular countries and issues. Anne Dietrich turns to the German Democratic Republic's (East Germany) attempts to provide its population with goods that were seen as luxurious but staple: the infamous green orange and coffee. East German citizens' rising living standards, and comparison to their Western neighbors, prompted new and expanded demands for such goods. As the state tried to operate within the logics of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) (for example, having to take in Cuban oranges and convince its population that their color was no mark against their quality), citizens turned to a variety of tactics to voice their displeasure: hoarding and writing official complaints. Calling on us to see these as not acts of resistance but petty insubordination, the essay shows that there was indeed a social contract ***to be broken.***

Patryk Wasiak investigates the Polish VCR odyssey. These electronic goods symbolized luxury and upward mobility for many workers, costing as much as a year's salary. Only those with party connections or access to hard currency due to work abroad could purchase such status symbols. Wasiak traces another failure of socialist import

substitution—the inability of Polish industry to create a Polish VCR—which only associated the item even more with the West. Wasiak investigates the general "consumption space" through which Polish citizens constructed identities and social belonging (p. 135).

Finally, Tania Bulakh pursues another construction of belonging in contemporary Ukraine for an aspiring middle class and the country's sense of place within Europe. Through interviews, she explores Ukrainians' shopping habits, especially in the realm of clothing: the absence of an H&M signaled a failed transition to both capitalism and Europe. Clothing brands were more important than the cuts themselves, as the economy developed around those who traveled West (to Italy, but also Prague) and resold the goods back home. Exploring the obstacles, such as corruption, that prevented Western clothing brands from opening stores in the Ukraine, Bulakh argues that wearing a particular brand was about belonging to a system, a future, that can fulfill satisfactions and aspirations. Unable to buy such things in Kiev or Odessa was not just a nuisance but a reflection of Ukrainian backwardness and exclusion from the West.

The last two chapters return to the grander questions of modernity, backwardness, and pleasure, showcasing the volume's editors' own thoughts on the matter. Scarboro delves into the questions of the middle class as it existed on both sides of the Iron Curtain. He shows that the Bulgarian middle class—and writ large, the socialist world's middle class—was similar to the Western one in its acquiescence and retreat into simple consumer pleasures. Bulgarian leaders struggled to make cultured consumers, even when Lyudmila Zhivkova's campaign drove home the concept of beauty and party manuals taught one how to correctly relate to the home, one's body, and the family. It was not just the failure of the state to provide the goods that mattered in the ultimate collapse of the regime but also the general dissatisfaction. As Scarboro poetically puts it, those who achieved modernity found it underwhelming, and children refused to inherit the world of their parents. Scarboro's essay is a useful way for us to think about the writing involved, general histories of Europe's late twentieth century, collapsing the importance of the Iron Curtain.

In the final essay, Gille and Mincytė again criticize the teleological view of modernization that posits Eastern Europe as backward. They playfully but accurately point out that the signs of socialist backwardness—the resorting of citizens to DIY, reuse and recycling of goods (especially if they were Western!), and a general collective form of consumption—are now in the avant-garde of ethical consumption and maybe one of the few roads forward. Socialist consumption always had a different aim: a less materialist, less alienating goal. While the authors do not argue that the failure of socialism is because it actually succeeded in achieving that goal, socialist citizens, as the volume's essays show, were anything but post-materialist. They ask us to see what this type of consumption can teach us about these societies and our own world today.

The volume admirably succeeds in its grand aim: to broaden our understandings of development and consumption, and their relation to the formation of political subjects in state socialism (but also possibly beyond). Upon opening this volume, I had expected a typical case-study approach, a synoptic view of Eastern Europe. However, while each essay—even the theoretical-oriented ones—are based solidly in particular country-focused case studies, the general weight given to conceptualizing new ways forward is extremely welcoming. The volume is a useful study of Eastern European consumption during socialism and an invaluable tool with which to think about writing the histories of consumerism and state socialism in general. The provocative conclusions regarding socialism's failures as reverse echoes of our world today, with its own tortured relation to

consumption, should, one hopes, resonate beyond the confines of the fields of Eastern European and socialist history.

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