From Saver Society to Consumer Society: the Case of the East European Consumer

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Since the changes in 1989, East European consumers have experienced an unprecedented move to a market economy. Because the market economy is seen as being a basis for the emergence of a consumer society, this paper tries to understand whether East European consumers will also embrace full fledged consumer society. Based on observations in Bulgaria and Romania, and the literature on consumer behavior in Eastern Europe, we examine the state of consumer society in this region and introduce the notion of the “Saver Society” as a starting point for understanding East European consumers more generally.

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During the last nineteen years, the world has witnessed an important transition in Central and Eastern Europe, unprecedented in contemporary history—the move from a centrally planned to a market economy. In this short period of time, East European consumers have faced a new environment with changes in all spheres of their lives as well as an influx of new goods, services, media, and market institutions. The prior poor selection of products with shabby packaging, displayed in drab places with a lack of information was rapidly replaced by a wide choice of new products and brands from new countries-of-origin. These new goods came with attractive packaging, modern retailing, and clever and exciting advertising.

The East European consumer has now been amply exposed to marketing that is quite like that of the West. They have had enough time to become accustomed to the novelty of the market economy, but the communism of the past is not forgotten. Based on ethnographic participant observation and interviews in Bulgaria and Romania, we consider whether a market economy necessarily leads to a consumer society or whether some of the practices of earlier consumption patterns continue. At a macro level there is some evidence of nostalgia for communism seen in manifestations as diverse as the re-emergence of East German rock music, the Trabi automobile, and Cultural Revolution restaurants (Berdahl 1999; Yang 2003). But we are interested in the more micro-level and perhaps deeper imprints of communism on the Eastern European consumer. Just as those raised in the Great Depression often evidenced cautious consumption and parsimony for many years after the Depression (Cohen 2003), it is possible that East Europeans may show similar traces of their prior ingenuity in surviving communism (Drakulić 1991). Although there is some consumer research on East European consumers after communism (e.g. Axelova 2004 and 2005; Belk 1997; Coulter, Price, and Feick 2003; Etenson 1993; Feick, Coulter, and Price 1995; Ger, Belk, and Lascu 1993; Lofman 1993; Shama 1992; Shultz, Belk, and Ger 1994; Witkowski 1993), there is little that explores the persistence of old consumption habits, such as those we discovered in Bulgaria and label the “Saver Society.”

**What is the “Saver Society”?**

The Bulgarian proverb “Prepare for winter and if summer comes say: ‘Welcome!’” shows the cautious character of the Bulgarian people. At the heart of the Saver Society is a notion of “Saving,” while the heart of Consumer Society lies consuming and spending. Saving was necessary under communism where credit did not exist. To buy a major appliance or an automobile, could take years of savings and patience. Thrift was necessary in daily life to allow any savings. Consumers were also frugal in using things. An old nylon stocking could become a fan belt, bottles for cooking oil or beer were returned to the store to be refilled. Vegetables, rabbits, and chickens were raised for food where possible. Sharing with relatives was another means of making do. Nothing went to waste. But besides thrift, there was also a cultural value placed on modesty. Another Bulgarian proverb says “Modesty makes the person beautiful, impertinence makes him ugly.”

When everyone was poor during the communist years it was also dangerous to stand out through even a small amount of conspicuous consumption. But savings patterns were no doubt easier in a time of scarcity and income parity when there were no stores full of attractive merchandise, glittering advertising, and nouveau riche consumers displaying alternative consumption models. So what has happened since 1989?

After defining the Saver Society and its characteristics, we describe how each characteristic has been transformed in light of the changes since communism. The initial conditions for the emergence of a Consumer Society in Eastern Europe now exist. These conditions include an attractive array of goods including Western brand names, media and tourists displaying the external world, plus feelings of deservingness (Belk, 1997) among local consumers, many of whom believe that after years of thrift and modesty, they have been earned the right to a better life.

Another change in Eastern Europe after 1989 has been new social stratification. Disparities that have arisen in income and class have provided new incentives for displaying wealth. Emphasis for many has shifted from hiding signs of wealth so as not to provoke others' envy, to openly displaying wealth and inviting envy.

Two extremes reactions toward Consumer Society in Eastern Europe have emerged. One is the case of the privileged consumers with high incomes and more cosmopolitan lifestyles. They can travel abroad, buy expensive foreign brands, and acquire a knowledge of lifestyle trends elsewhere. They have easy access to the consumer credit and the Internet. These favoured consumers are already part of the Consumer Society.