

**“SHOPAHOLIC” IN EASTERN EUROPE:
A GUEST EDITOR’S FOREWORD¹**

*Kristen Ghodsee
Bowdoin College*

The idea for this special issue on “Cultures of Consumerism” did not arise from a purely scholarly interest, but rather from a personal one. My fascination with how consumption patterns and practices have changed in the former socialist countries since the early 1990s arose because I have lived through the radical changes that have dramatically reshaped consumerism since Bulgaria’s insertion into the global capitalist economy in 1989. In short, it is not as a researcher of consumerism that I proposed this special issue, but rather as a participant:² I am a shopper. And I have watched Bulgaria evolve from a veritable retail wasteland where procuring essential goods and services was a Himalayan feat requiring all of the perseverance and tracking skills of a Louisiana bloodhound into a country brimming with luxurious retail oases where opulent, new shopping malls spring forth from the earth like magic beanstalks, and compact orgies of consumerism are surrounded by deserts of abject poverty. It is therefore from my own ambivalence about the development of modern capitalist consumer societies in Eastern Europe that this volume has sprung, and each of the contributions in some way speaks to these tensions and contradictions. Since Daphne Berdahl, one of the pioneers of ethnographic research on consumerism in the postsocialist context, generously agreed to write the introduction to the fascinating pieces that comprise this special issue, I will use this brief forward to reflect informally on the topic in order to evoke the myriad of complexities for those who are not already specialists in the region.

In 1997, when I first started researching Bulgaria, the country had just experienced a total economic meltdown that precipitated a sudden change of government as disenchanted voters demanded immediate new elections in what amounted to a people’s coup. During my first few months of fieldwork in 1998, I was happy to subsist on the fresh fruits and vegetables that are so abundant in the summer months in a largely agricultural county. I lived with a family in a furnished apartment and had no need of procuring any essential household items. It was only when I returned for the fourteen months of dissertation fieldwork in 1999-2000 that I began to understand

the difficulties one faced in the acquisition of almost anything beyond the bare Bulgarian basics of bread, beer and white and yellow cheese.

It did not matter if you had the money to spend, there was very little to buy. The choice of most goods was miserably limited, and the price points were either ridiculously expensive or embarrassingly cheap as mobsters and the nouveaux riche glutted themselves on pricey, Western European designer imports while the rest of Bulgarians made do with whatever random goods were shuttle-traded or smuggled into the country from Turkey and sold in large outdoor markets. The concept of “one-stop shopping” was as elusive an idea as the Unified Force Theory. Stores were segregated by the type of goods they sold; only in the smaller villages were there single shops that sold bread, *rakiya* (Bulgarian brandy), nails and fertilizers over the same counter. In most “Food Stock” stores, you were not allowed to examine any of the goods before purchasing them. Instead, you waited behind a counter and pointed at the things you thought you wanted while the grouchiest grandmother in the country reluctantly took them down from the shelves and decided (using some unknown criteria) whether you were worthy enough to have these crackers and tea bags sold to you. Even *TZUM* (*Tzentralen Universalen Magazin*), the “Central Universal Store” in the capital city Sofia, was full of random booths selling a sparse selection of inferior goods. The strangest thing about all of this, however, was that most people I spoke to seemed to think that the shopping scene was pretty good, at least compared to what it had been before.

Although I never lived in Bulgaria during the communist period, I felt I needed to understand how shopping had worked during that time if only in order to make sense of how difficult it was for me to get used to the relative deprivations of post-communist consumerism. In fact, it was through my own hopeless search for a bottle of Calvin Klein “Eternity” Eau de Toilette in 1999 that I began to understand the consumer past of Bulgaria during the command economic period. After the many conversations with women selling cosmetics during my quest for my “signature scent” (which, by the way, turned out to be as successful as the

search for the Holy Grail), I thought I began to understand the process of producing consumer goods under Bulgarian communism, and the many pitfalls of having central planners make cologne. I imagined a committee of communist central planners who used advanced statistical methods that included the square root of the number of gray hairs on Stalin's mustache in 1951 to determine the precise number of bottles of rose perfume which would be produced in a given year. After arriving at the scientifically socialist figure and coordinating with all of the necessary production enterprises, they would set aside at least a fifth of the bottles for their own families and friends and would allow the rest to be haphazardly distributed to women throughout the country who would hate having to wear only rose perfume but would buy it anyway because there was nothing else available.

I realized then that it was absurd for me to be picky about which type of perfume I bought in Bulgaria. I was lucky to have a choice at all. A nice middle-aged woman with orange hair in TZUM convinced me to buy Anais Anais by Cacharel instead, a perfume I did not even like very much. It was only later that I realized that most Bulgarians still "ordered" goods such as perfume from friends and relatives who traveled abroad. Most women just stuck with the familiar rose scents that they were used to and which were still readily available and relatively inexpensive. Eventually, that enigmatic bottle of "Eternity" perfume became a metaphor for the many frustrated shopping experiences that I was to be subjected to in the course of my fieldwork.

Part of the problem was that Bulgaria was slow to develop out of its central planning past compared to its socialist brother countries to the northwest. The Bulgarians democratically reelected the communists back into power in 1990, and it was not until 1997 after the economic collapse that the state began to dismantle its almost total control of the domestic economy. In 1999, when Metro, the first German "Cash and Carry" opened in Sofia, it was like a small consumer revolution even though there was a whole panoply of rules that had to be followed in order to shop there: you had to be a member (which seemed to require blood samples and the proof of a recent liver biopsy from your maternal grandmother), had to spend a minimum amount of money on each visit, were not allowed to shop with children under the age of seven, etc. Slowly, other foreign stores entered the market and miraculously you could then buy fresh fruits and vegetables in the winter months and there were

more than two types of cheese available in the store.

If you had the money.

The new plethora of retail opportunities in Bulgaria threw into sharp relief the economic disparities arising in the country. In particular, there emerged a vast rural-urban divide. It is a sad irony that at the exact moment when Bulgaria actually began to have a functioning market economy, there were many families who removed themselves from the market altogether – returning to subsistence agriculture as a strategy to survive the desperate consequences of high rural un- and underemployment. The growing choice of new goods was always contrasted to the shrinking number of people in the country that could afford to buy them. Furthermore, consumerism had become acutely gendered, and society's ideals of successful masculinity and femininity were increasingly being defined by ownership of the right material accoutrements for your given sex (cars, watches, laptops and cell phones for men; clothes, purses, jewelry, high-end cosmetics and silicone implants for women).

Fast forward now to 2005-2006 when new research on international Islamic aid and Bulgarian Muslims brought me back to the country for eight more months of fieldwork. The capital had become a consumer wonderland. In the spring of 2006, two huge new shopping malls opened in the capital: The Mall of Sofia and Sofia City Center. In addition, TZUM had been completely remodeled and they were all full of relatively expensive Western brands such as Stephanel, Triumph, Palmers, Nike, and Sisley. In these stores one bra costs the equivalent of a month's salary for most Bulgarians. Many visitors are empty-pocketed window shoppers who stroll around inside for the air conditioning during the oppressive Sofia summer heat. In early August 2006, as I meandered through the Sofia City Center I could hardly believe that this was the same country I had lived in, in the late 1990s. There were shoes and clothes and cell phones and MP3s and TVs and stereos and household appliances and imported foods and the latest Hollywood movies and even an IMAX theatre showing a 3-D dinosaur film. Curious about the new retail possibilities, I wandered into a cosmetics shop.

Having just spent the last few months living in a tiny town in the most rural parts of the Rhodopi mountains where many families of six or seven somehow manage to survive on 60 leva (\$40) a month, I was initially shocked by the prices

of the seemingly endless variety of Western facial creams, nail polishes, lipsticks, blushes, eyeliners, mascaras and perfumes even though I desperately wanted to buy something. I could live in the Rhodopi for a month for the price of one Clarins self-tanning sunscreen. I felt a sudden rush of revulsion as I watched two young Bulgarian girls obviously from the upper-middle class spend close to \$300 on cosmetics when the average monthly per capita salary in the country was still about \$155. I turned to leave, feeling the leftist righteousness of a Berkeley graduate swell up in my chest with pride as I abandoned the temptation to purchase something new and expensive just because I had the money and had been deprived of real shopping opportunities for the last 90 days.

And then I saw it.

There on the shelf across from me, like a monument to a past wish that had long remained unfulfilled, sat a 100ml bottle of "Eternity Summer." Long after I had abandoned the original scent as too heavy and far too 1990s, good old Calvin had redesigned the fragrance as something lighter and more airy, something more appropriate for the mid-naughties and for my new, more "serious" identity as an academic and a mom. After one generous test spray against the inside of my wrist, I grabbed a box and went straight to the counter to pay. After all these years, I finally had my "Eternity" perfume in Bulgaria – as if somehow the history of the country had conspired to meet my basest consumer desires. I left the store feeling that familiar rush of instant gratification, but there was still a voice inside me that wondered if Bulgaria and Bulgarians were really that much better off because the five percent of the population that could afford to shop in that store and acquisitive American researchers like me could now purchase expensive Western perfumes in Sofia.

As I walked out into the bright and burning sunshine, I thought I heard whispered curses of communist central planners condemning me to a capitalist purgatory where I would swim in a stew of my own terrible hypocrisy of privilege. And although I had the smug assurance that they were equally as guilty as I, something about that bottle of "Eternity" perfume has never quite smelled right.

Kristen Ghodsee
Sofia, Bulgaria, August 2006

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Barbara West, Julie Hemment and Krista Harper for all of their work in putting this issue together, and Daphne Berdahl for agreeing to write the introduction. In particular, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to Genevieve Creedon, my wonderful intern at the Woodrow Wilson Center, who in many ways was a silent co-editor of this volume. She was an invaluable assistant throughout the whole editorial process.

² Although this interest has also compelled me to seek out the scholarship on consumption in the former socialist world, for instance: Adele Marie Barker, *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society Since Gorbachev*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999; by Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*: Oxford, New York: Berg, 2000; David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002; Jennifer Patino and Melissa Caldwell, "Consumers Exiting Socialism: Ethnographic Perspectives on Daily Life in Post-Communist Europe," in *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 67, no. 3, (2002) 285-295; Susan E. Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review*, vol. 61, no. 2 (2002), 211-252; Krisztina Fehervary, "American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a 'Normal' Life in Post-Socialist Hungary," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2002, 369-400; David Crowley "Warsaw's Shops, Stalinism and the Thaw" in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture*, 25-48; Jennifer Patino, "Chocolate and Cognac: Gifts and the Recognition of Social Worlds in Post-Soviet Russia," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 67, no. 3, (2002) 345-369; Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland*, Berkeley: UC Press, 1999; Gerald Creed, (Consumer) Paradise Lost: Capitalist Dynamics and Disenchantment in Rural Bulgaria, *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, Vol. 20. No. 2, Autumn 2002; Kristen Ghodsee, "Potions, Lotions and Lipstick: The Gendered Consumption of Cosmetics and Perfumery in Socialist and Postsocialist Urban Bulgaria," forthcoming in *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 30 No. 1, 2007.